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Jim Snyder critiques CNN, FOX Cable News and MSNBC •

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FOR THE AVERAGE VIEWER???

Fritz Jacobi provides another of his continuing updates on digital television •

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Ben Bagdikian

calls for action in a provocative chapter from the

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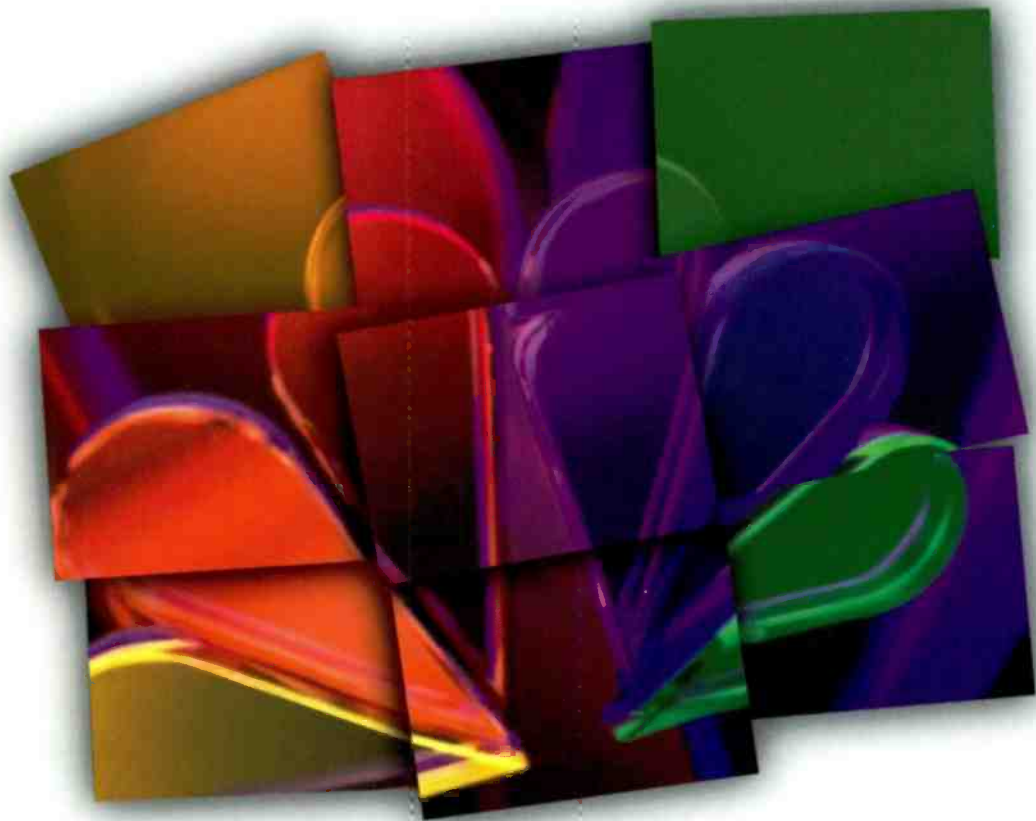
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THE GOLDEN AGE



IT'S RIGHT HERE.
IT'S RIGHT NOW.
IT'S MUST SEE.



High Definition Television: We've Come a Long Way

By Fritz Jacobi

On Christmas Eve 1996 the Federal Communications Commission voted unanimously to approve the standard for the next generation of television. This event marked not only the formal launching of the nation's transition to digital, high-definition television, the first fundamental change in television service in almost 50 years, but also the culmination of a 10-year battle featuring more perils than ever beset Pauline in her wildest dreams. The pitfalls were particu-

larly political, but, of course, technological as well. And as in all wars, there were heroes and villains, facilitators and foot-draggers, planners and plotters and plodders.

Ten years ago the Association for Maximum Service Television (MSTV), a station-supported organization whose mission is to maximize the technical quality and reach of television signals, and 57 other broadcast organizations filed the petition that persuaded the FCC to initiate its advanced television proceeding.

"Back then, with my children still in school, I know I would have been astounded at the very thought that I would be a grandmother before the FCC would even finish its proceedings," MSTV President Margita White, one of the heroes, said recently.

In his deliciously gossipy and lethally accurate new book, *Defining Vision: The Battle for the Future of Television* (Harcourt Brace & Company 1997), Joel Brinkley says that the effort to develop American high-definition television started the moment the National Association of Broadcasters cleverly thwarted an attempt by the mobile communications industry to persuade the FCC to transfer unused broadcasting channels from television to two-way radio. The NAB arranged for a demonstration to Congress of Japan's glorious new analog HDTV and then argued that all available American broadcasting channels must be reserved for high-definition television. Brinkley insists that the NAB at the time wasn't really interested in HDTV. He is very persuasive.

The Grand Alliance

Five years ago several high-powered electronics giants were competing with each other for the approval of the FCC for a single HDTV system. They included the Advanced Television Research Consortium, consisting of the David Sarnoff Research Center (which Brinkley calls "the Sarnoff Shrine"), Thomson Consumer Electronics, Philips Consumer Electronics and Compression Labs; a partnership of General Instrument Corporation and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and Zenith Electronics Corporation with AT&T.

In the spring of 1993 Richard Wiley, a former FCC chairman then heading the FCC's Advisory Committee on Advanced Television Service, invited the contenders

to form a "Grand Alliance." Despite initial skepticism about the feasibility of such disparate and competitive organizations being able to work together in a productive manner, the fruits of their (often unharmonious and strident) efforts were delivered less than two years later to the Advanced Television Test Center, a state-of-the-art, industry-sponsored laboratory under contract to the FCC, in Alexandria, Virginia. Clearly one of the most important heroes of the campaign, Wiley would have several battles to fight before the struggle was over.

One of the roadblocks was labeled, harmlessly enough, "flexibility." To avoid immediate obsolescence of the estimated 250 million receivers currently in use, the FCC had indicated its preference for a "simulcast" system, which would transmit the new signal on a new channel while NTSC would continue to operate for a transition period on its current channel (NTSC stands for National Television System Committee, which established the current standard over 50 years ago).

This two-pronged approach means that each television station would have two channels, one to transmit an NTSC signal and one for digital broadcasting. However, digital permits multiple programs on a single channel, which means that auxiliary use of the channel could include a variety of services, such as non-HDTV programs, and data that have nothing to do with high-definition.

For example, in the 6 megahertz bandwidth, it is possible to transmit simultaneously one high-definition program and five additional digital, non-HDTV programs like talk shows, a volleyball game, or such data as stock-market tables and other financial information. Another logical application: while a 60-second car commercial is being transmitted, a brochure with data about the car can be sent out at the same time for later viewing. For a time, it looked as if the NAB was

more interested in flexibility, because of its potential profitability, than in HDTV. Recently Margita White's MSTV committed itself enthusiastically to high definition, and *that* roadblock was removed.

Testing, Testing . . .

When there were any number of technological problems. Key components in the Grand Alliance's prototypical equipment misbehaved at the Test Center. Members of the Grand Alliance—dubbed the “Not-So-Grand Alliance” by one wag—misbehaved with each other away from the Test Center. The acrimony festering between the egos of Zenith and Bell Labs, nominally one unit of the Alliance, is spotlighted by Joel Brinkley, whose book is subtitled “How cunning, conceit, and creative genius collided in the race to invent digital, high-definition TV.”

Eventually these technological glitches were solved, in part through the diplomatic skills of another principal hero of this saga, Peter Fannon. A breathtakingly verbal non-engineer who directed the Test Center through the successful completion of its assignment, Fannon joined a new organization that became crucial to winning the war just as more trouble loomed.

Microsoft's monkey wrench

Last summer the FCC came close to adopting the Grand Alliance standard. But the computer industry, led by the Microsoft Corporation, mounted a powerful last-minute lobbying campaign to derail that proposal, contending that it would favor broadcasters and television set makers and hinder the convergence of computers and TV. The computer industry's objection was based on the issue of how video images are “scanned” onto a

television screen. Computers use a format called progressive scanning, while broadcasters and television set manufacturers have used a format called interlacing.

In interlacing a television receives one picture every 30th of a second—made up of two half-pictures every 60th of a second—which are then reassembled, or interlaced, for viewing. Progressive scanning draws 60 pictures a second, all in a single scan. That's what computer screens do. The computer industry had been nattering about this issue for at least three years—Brinkley characterized one Apple staffer as a “rabble rouser”—but when Microsoft intensified its monkey-wrenching last summer, an extraordinary congeries of labor unions, consumer and senior citizens groups, manufacturing associations and electronics dealers formed the Citizens for HDTV Coalition because they were worried that the FCC was not acting on the standard recommended by the FCC-appointed committee. They selected Peter Fannon as their chairman.

At the height of the controversy Fannon told me that “if the FCC fails to act, it will have scuttled ten years of work and turned its back on the most consumer-friendly, most computer-friendly and most future-oriented digital transmission scheme of any in the world. Microsoft is making suggestions that are essentially anticonsumer and anticompetitive, adding complexity and confusion to the proposed technology.”

Just when the computer folk were making their own brand of trouble, the motion-picture industry chimed in with an uninformed “me-too” objection. “They totally misunderstood the standard,” Fannon told me. “They supported an approach that would never have given them what they wanted, a specific aspect ratio. The cinematographers had the wrong issue at the wrong table at the wrong time, because the basic technical standard has no impact on their concerns.”

Going, going . . .

As if all of these last-minute tribulations weren't enough to discourage even the most Candide-like optimist, the auctioning of the airwaves to the highest bidders was a perennial political issue. This, too, heated up during the 1996 Presidential campaign, when Bob Dole took up the cudgels. The idea had been to lend broadcasters the second channel so that they might simultaneously broadcast in NTSC and high definition for a finite number of years, at the end of which they would give their first channel back to the government. Some very key Senators looked askance at this project, suggesting instead that the second channel be placed on the auction block. This notion was recently supported by *New York Times* columnist William Safire. He wrote that "Fat-cat broadcasters, who get the daddy channel free from the public, want to keep all the valuable progeny of that gift. Those digital channels are worth tens of billions . . ."

Clearly Safire knows a lot more about etymology, as evidenced by his Sunday *Times* magazine column "On Language," than he does about electronics.

"Broadcasters have a legitimate claim to borrow the second channel and to make the transition to the only technology that gives free, over-the-air broadcasting the chance to survive and perhaps to thrive," Peter Fannon told me. "If they don't succeed, life is like that and the market moves on and other services will arise. Our view is that an auction now is the wrong approach."

While the issue isn't dead in the Senate—Commerce Committee Chairman John McCain is still listening—accepted wisdom is that an auction of airwaves will create a hardship for the smaller stations who will have to bid against Safire's "fat cats."

To add to the protagonists' general

malaise there was the apparent indifference to HDTV on the part of FCC Chairman Reed Hundt. While three FCC commissioners were eager to adopt the standard, Hundt sat on his hands, listened to the computer and film folk and temporarily drove everybody crazy.

Broadcasters' trepidations

But the FCC had no monopoly on foot dragging. Over the years many broadcasters viewed with alarm the cost of converting all of their equipment—cameras, pass-through gear, transmitters—to digital high-definition TV. They questioned the potential returns from the new technology. And there were the logical skeptics who wondered if the consumer public would be willing to invest in digital HDTV receivers which will cost so much more than today's conventional sets, at least at the outset. *Television Quarterly* has been tracking all of this for several years, asking questions and receiving few answers, certainly very few encouraging answers. Now, suddenly, we are getting some surprising answers.

"Change breeds concern because there are so many unknowns," MSTV Chairman Jim Keelor told me recently. President of Cosmos Broadcasting, which owns eight television stations, all network affiliates, Keelor added: "Change is viewed with great concern by the television industry but broadcasters now see an opportunity to compete with cable, telephone companies and direct broadcasting. If you're going to be in this business you have to step up to the plate and be competitive. Everyone needs to realize that the digital television era is here. We will be participants even though some of us will be dragged in screaming and kicking."

Keelor noted that the transition will be a gradual and orderly evolution rather than a revolution, and predicted that the cost to

the stations of effecting the transition will come down.

Five years ago one TV station executive predicted direly that he was going to be forced to spend between \$5 and \$10 million on new studio and transmitting equipment, with little or no opportunity to recoup that investment for a long time. "And 15 years from now we will be back where we started, with one channel in an increasingly multichannel environment, but with an enormous debt load."

Not so, says Chuck Sherman of the National Association of Broadcasters. Sherman, who heads the NAB's television department, recently predicted that stations will be able to put a digital signal on the air for \$1 million or less. Speaking at the Association of Local Television Stations (ALTV) conference in New Orleans, he anticipated that stations will build HDTV facilities in stages, beginning with a simple network signal "pass-through" facility and ending with a station capable of producing, editing and transmitting its own digital TV programming, later moving to full HDTV capability. He suggested, as have other station executives, that the overall costs of the new production equipment can be amortized over several years.

At the same meeting James McKinney, project director for the Model HDTV Station Project in Washington, cited a Sony prediction that its digital broadcasting equipment will not carry more than a 15 percent premium over comparable contemporary NTSC equipment developed under the standard set 50 years ago by the National Television System Committee.

Other manufacturers of station equipment agree. Comark Communications, part of the French-owned Thomson CSF, which makes high-powered transmitters, is about to launch a new division involved in studio pass-through gear that will provide stations with the ability to acquire a major digital program stream from a network

supplier and get it to the transmitter. Mark Aitken, an engineer who heads Comark's marketing, says that Sherman's predictions are accurate, adding, however, that "original production is a lot of money." He predicts that within 18 months the networks will be providing their O&O's and affiliates with high-definition content.

"For manufacturers like ourselves there will be a flood of requirements for new equipment that we're not yet geared up for," Aitken told me. "But large station groups and networks are already signing deals with us to make sure the equipment is there when they need it." Comark, incidentally, won an engineering achievement Emmy not long ago for developing a transmitter that has saved broadcasters 75 percent of their electrical bills.

How about the consumer?

But will the home viewer want to spend the kind of money a prototypical HDTV receiver will cost? Gary Shapiro, president of the Consumer Electronic Manufacturers Association, claims that there is already a tremendous pent-up demand for HDTV receivers, which will go on the market in late 1998 for about \$1,500 (not the \$3,000-\$5,000 estimated only a few years ago). Shapiro anticipates that the price will be reduced dramatically within a year and that by the year 2000 the difference between HDTV-capable and analog receivers will be negligible.

This prognosis is supported by a leading CEMA member, Thomson Consumer Electronics, which builds RCA televisions, among other name brands. Bruce Allan, Thomson's Washington vice-president, says that the technical standard adopted by the FCC permits a range of prices for TVs capable of receiving all formats.

"We'll provide the consumer with options," Allan states. "The ATSC standard

is set up so that the consumer can go from conventional reception to high definition.” Allan noted that there has been a sudden surge of interest in large-screen televisions—a recent 30 percent annual increase in penetration to about 15 percent of all U.S. set owners—and that “the biggest benefit in HDTV is the large screen size where the performance improvement is most noticeable.”

Five years ago sociologist Russell Neuman predicted that the transition from NTSC to high definition will not be so psychologically important as the transition from black-and-white to color TV, hence he didn't anticipate such a dramatic growth curve. Today most experts disagree.

Both Shapiro and Allan say that the transition to HDTV will be more significant even than the transition from black-and-white to color TV. Shapiro insists that the transition is more fundamental, like going from radio to television, both because of the movie-theater-like clarity and shape of the picture but also because of the broadcaster's ability to supplement the picture with data. Allan adds that “with color there was one manufacturer, RCA, and one network, NBC, pushing it, and then everybody fell in line. With high-definition TV everybody is in it and it will take a much shorter time to get 80 percent household penetration than it did with color.”

Miracle of omission

At the end of last November the scanning problem was resolved by a miracle of omission: the broadcasters and manufacturers agreed to drop the scanning parameters contested by the computer industry from the HDTV standard and a few weeks later the FCC issued its stamp of approval. Much remains to be done, however, before the home viewer

gets to see that brilliantly clear television picture.

By April 1 the FCC is supposed to act on channel allotment and an allocation plan. There is likely to be tremendous friction among television stations within certain communities. “Changing assumptions about broadcast-interference conditions lead to a ripple effect requiring a two-week computer run to adjust the channel allotments and assignments,” Peter Fannon says. “Conventional service is the goose that lays the golden egg, the mechanism by which broadcasters are going to pay for the transition. Conventional service often will have to finance the new system and that's what concerns some stations.”

An effort will have to be made to give each station operator the chance to manage his second channel best without making problems for other operators in the same market, Fannon said, adding that his Coalition will remain active through the final FCC rule-makings.

At press time a battle was brewing between the broadcasters and the set manufacturers, who disagreed on the schedule of implementation: the broadcasters said they couldn't get ready as quickly as the manufacturers—and the FCC's Reed Hundt—wanted them to.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the mindset of broadcasters has changed dramatically over the past two years, and especially in the past two months. From an attitude of apprehension about, and hostility to, HDTV they have come to the realization that going digital is their only future, a necessity for survival. By Christmas Eve 1996 we had traveled a long way. ■

Fritz Jacobi was at NBC when Eisenhower was President and television was blurry and black-and-white. He also worked for Random House, *The New Yorker* magazine, New York's public TV station WNET and Columbia Business School. He keeps a 1936 Corona portable typewriter next to his personal computer to address envelopes.



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Law & Order Creator/Executive Producer
Dick Wolf:

**“It’s the
Writing,
Stupid!”**

*One of television’s most respected producers tells TVQ that while his shows are more than mere cop shows they are still not a cure for cancer. He reveals some of the secrets which have made *Law & Order* the longest-running drama series on television today.*

By Arthur Unger

Dick Wolf wants to be interviewed over lunch at E.A.T., a quintessential upper-Eastside-meets-upper-Westside, down-scale deli-restaurant. It's a place that New York might think is very Los Angeles, but which L.A. might think is very N.Y. . . . a pastrami-on-rye-with-mayonnaise sort of place.

Symbolically E.A.T. is a proper venue for Wolf, who commutes from coast to coast as Executive Producer of his three drama series—*Law & Order*, *New York Undercover* and *Feds*. Mostly they are written in L.A. with N.Y.-oriented writers, then shot in New York with theater-type actors.

But the restaurant proves to be too

noisy for my tape recorder, so we walk over to Fifth Avenue and find a quiet bench in Central Park just beyond the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Wolf is dressed in a casual brown leather jacket and a checked shirt with a surprising white button-down collar.

Almost embarrassedly, he explains, "It's terrible but I always wear a tie during the day. I grew up doing that."

"On the West Coast, too?" I ask. "You must be one of the few."

"I am," he says. "In a strange way, although it's not a uniform, I think it reassures people. Somebody wears a tie and it's like 'oh, okay, he's in charge.'"

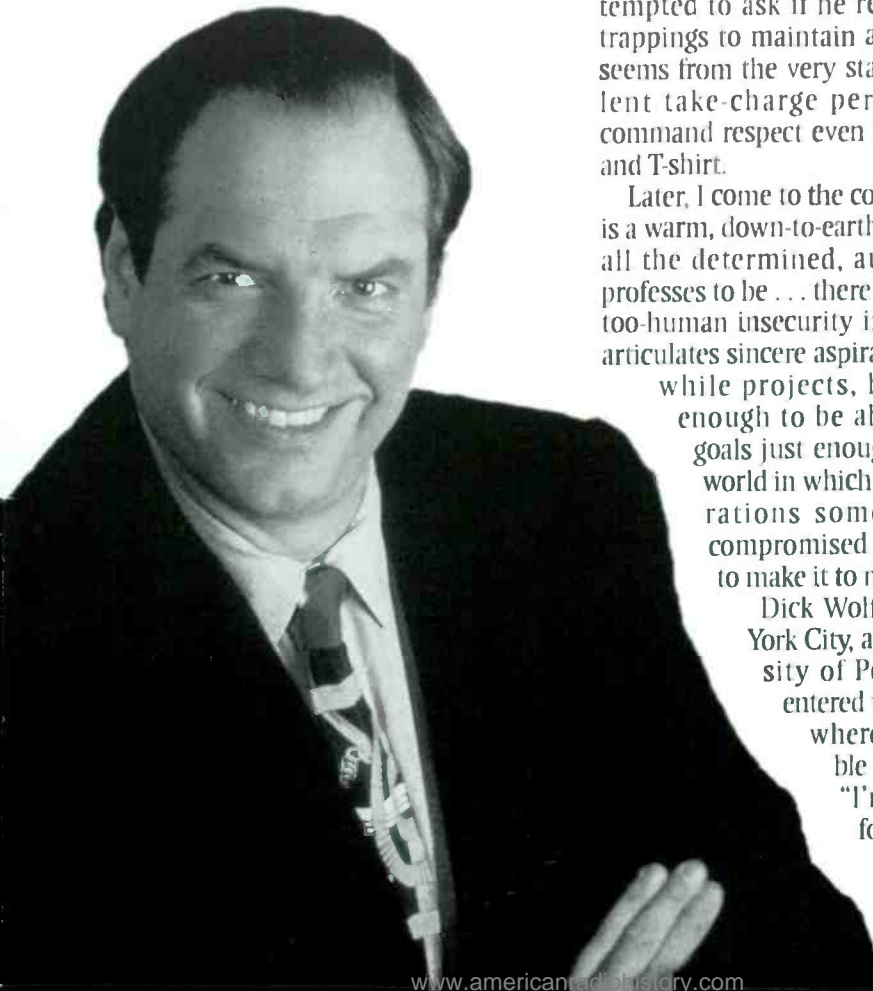
"You should wear a dark blue suit," I joke.

"I do that, too," he says quite seriously.

I drop the subject, although I am tempted to ask if he really needs those trappings to maintain authority since he seems from the very start to be a benevolent take-charge person who would command respect even if dressed in jeans and T-shirt.

Later, I come to the conclusion that Wolf is a warm, down-to-earth guy, who is not at all the determined, autocratic boss he professes to be . . . there is just a hint of all-too-human insecurity in his make-up. He articulates sincere aspirations to do worthwhile projects, but is pragmatic enough to be able to modify his goals just enough to succeed in a world in which "highfalutin" aspirations sometimes must be compromised just a bit in order to make it to market at all.

Dick Wolf was born in New York City, attended the University of Pennsylvania, and entered the advertising field where he was responsible for such slogans as "I'm Cheryl, Fly Me" for National Airlines and "You can't



beat Crest for fighting cavities,” until he turned his focus on film and television.

He joined the writing staff of *Hill Street Blues* in 1985 where he won both Emmy and Writer’s Guild nominations for his first TV script. The following season he moved over to *Miami Vice* as co-producer from 1986-88. From there, he created and executive-produced a varied selection of interesting but not outstandingly successful series such as *I.E.L.P.* and *South Beach* until he came up with *Law & Order*, on NBC, *New York Undercover*, on FOX and the new *Feds*. Currently, he also has numerous feature films and television projects in various stages of development.

Wolf is one of the most outspoken top figures on the L.A. television scene. He does not hesitate to make his wide-ranging, sometimes controversial opinions known. For instance, he feels that most of the black sitcoms on TV today are “more like minstrel shows than anything else.

“It’s a disturbing trend,” he told me. “The most disturbing trend was last spring when I saw the direction in which WB and UPN were going. I think this is terrible . . . a further ghetto-ization of television. *Home Boys From Outer Space* was not designed to get a lot of white viewers into the room. What I’m afraid of is a situation arising—and it has already arisen to a degree—where there are certain blocks of programming that the sign out front says ‘This for blacks, not for whites.’”

He does not feel that *New York Undercover* is guilty of the same thing. “It is one of the few shows that reflects the makeup of the country. We have a sort of rainbow coalition of cops in the squad room. That allows us to explore racial conflict in a way that few shows can. We did one show that explored the racial clichés that bug Irish cops and African-American cops. When you can get into those issues in a way that is not preachy, it can do a lot of good. I am not claiming that we are curing cancer, but I think we really can have an effect on that

core audience which is young, inner-city urban and must deal with these issues.”

Wolf has also been outspoken about what he calls “the virus of actors’ salary demands.” He is most incensed about actors who do not honor their contractual commitments. “The syndrome never changes: the actors get a job, they are thrilled down to their toes, they come in the first day and are thankful to be there and then, all of a sudden they feel they’re at a slave labor camp and they’re being underpaid. The reality is they signed a contract . . . We don’t go back to actors on unsuccessful shows and say, ‘How about if we paid you less?’”

Wolf gets a bit excited about this issue since he still remembers the battle he had with *New York Undercover* cast members who stayed off the set trying to get their salaries renegotiated while the show’s Nielsen position was around 77 (a good number for FOX, but not exactly an astounding position in the overall ratings picture; *Law & Order* usually ranks around 25). He stood firm and threatened to replace them. The actors returned.

“Look, if an actor wants to go into performance clauses where his salary goes down if the show falls below a certain level and goes up if it’s above a certain level, that’s a negotiation that I’m sure some business affairs departments would be happy to have.

“I am not against renegotiation—it happens all the time, but renegotiation means that you show up for work and the agents and managers go into the studio and sit down with lawyers and business people and say ‘You’re making this much; we are only making this much; there should be an adjustment.’ That’s fine but not in a public forum.”

Official restrictions are anathema to Wolf—he is vehemently against the V-chip, which he feels parents cannot operate and which kids can overcome with their greater technical know-how. He calls

it “a politically expedient wand that could obliterate intelligent adult drama.” He is only a bit less opposed to the industry ratings system recently adopted, because he approves of its non-specific labeling.

“A more specific content-based system would have been an unmitigated disaster,” he insists, because “it would have been destructive to the creative ability of producers.”

Wolf believes that American television is going through a new Golden Age. “There has never been another period on television that I can remember where you had such superbly written shows as *Law & Order*, *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, *Chicago Hope*, *ER*, *X-Files* . . . all at the same time.”

Several times during the interview, Wolf stresses the importance of his writers in the success of his shows. “It’s the writers, stupid!” is his paraphrase of the Clinton motto: “It’s the economy, stupid!”

Wolf says that he believes good writers stick with his shows because the shows provide them with a bully pulpit . . . offering the writers an opportunity to address important issues. But according to Wolf, this bully pulpit brings with it a responsibility to deal with the issues honestly and carefully.

Towards the end of the interview, we play the adjective game: I quote descriptions of Wolf from various sources and he reacts. The only adjective that seems to disturb him is “overbearing.”

Finally, we shake hands as Wolf heads toward Chelsea Pier where *Law & Order* is shooting and 85 Tenth Ave., where *New York Undercover* is shooting.

He throws his arm around my shoulder, looks me in the eye and asks earnestly: “Who said I was overbearing?”

What follows is the conversation with Dick Wolf. Although some chronology has been changed here and there for reasons of continuity and some cuts have been made for reasons of space, all answers are verbatim.



Unger: *You have said that New York Undercover is not a cure for cancer; it's just a cop show. What did you mean by that?*

Wolf: Well, the bottom line is, it is a cop show. But the wonderful part is that you set off to do a cop show that's going to work and this show specifically has matured into something more than a cop show, even though it's still not a cure for cancer. It does manage on a weekly basis, I think, to deal with issues and subject matter that no other show basically has the franchise to be able to do.

Unger: *You also said it is one of the few shows that reflects the makeup of the country.*

Wolf: Well, I think that's increasingly true—even more so this year with the addition of Jonathan LaPaglia as MacNamara—and now we really do have sort of a rainbow coalition of cops in the squad room. I think one of the more interesting aspects of it is that it allows us to explore racial conflict in a way that very few shows can. There's one scene in an episode of *New York Undercover* about church burnings, obviously fictitious, but obviously something that is of great concern to both the black and the white communities. And there is a scene where Malik looks over at Jonathan LaPaglia and says, “Are you from a cop family?” And LaPaglia says: “Just two uncles, a father, and a brother. Why? Don't you have any family traditions—basketball, dancing?” Malik looks at him, and says: “I don't think that's funny.” And he says: “I do.”

It was realistic, but it said a lot about cliches, how people think about each other. And when you can get into those issues in a way that is not preachy, not standing on a soap box, it's not claiming that we are curing cancer. But I think it really can have an effect on that core audience that is young, inner-city urban and

that is dealing with these issues.

Unger: *I gather that the show is the top-rated show among minorities.*

Wolf: I just saw figures that show it is No. One in black households. I think it's No. Five in Hispanic.

Unger: *Would you like to see it cross over to white audiences?*

Wolf: I would. And I think we are succeeding in that. The numbers are up this year in the demographics which means that we are getting more kids and younger viewers. I mean, it's not nuclear physics. The reason that the show succeeds is that our opposition, *Seinfeld*, is the lowest rated comedy in black households. Our show is the only kind of programming that appeals to a younger urban audience. The people who are watching *New York Undercover* are not going to watch *Murder One* for the most part.

Now, this is never going to be a Top Ten show. I don't have any illusions about that, especially against the juggernaut of NBC, but we are consistently Number Two in all pre-adult demos and have been, basically, for the past two years. So, on that basis, the show is quite strong and very well supported by FOX.

NBC has supported *Law & Order* from the very beginning, from Brandon Tartikoff's regime on in a way that nobody else would have. And FOX has really turned up the juice this year even more than they have in the past. So, I'm lucky in that area.

Unger: *A couple questions more on New York Undercover, then we can go to Law & Order and Feds. You have also said that most of the black sitcoms on TV today were more like minstrel shows than anything else. Do you think that's still true?*

Wolf: I still stand by that comment, and it's a disturbing trend to me.

Television is the most marvelously effective way of communicating ideas that has ever been invented, certainly since the printing press. And what we should be striving for, without again claiming that we're curing cancer, is to make television as all-inclusive and as all-encompassing as it can be made. So that you're getting this diversity of points of view and discussion of various points of view in an entertainment format.

Look, the bulk of the *New York Undercover* audience doesn't sit up and watch the local news at night. I don't think they read *The New York Times*. I think that this show is a major source of real information for them on a wide variety of subjects.

Unger: *I also want to ask you about your attacks on "the virus of actors' salary demands and not honoring commitment."*

Wolf: This is a virus that can kill specific shows, but it can really, really devastate the business if it continues going in this direction, ruining the ability of producers to rationally make shows on a businesslike basis.

Unger: *Do you envision New York Undercover going for the eight years of Law & Order?*

Wolf: I certainly hope so. I think there is the potential to do that. If we keep refreshing it. It's one of the things that I've learned from *Law & Order* which may sound very strange, but I think the reason that *Law & Order* has succeeded is that it has been refreshed.

Unger: *How?*

Wolf: First of all, *Law & Order* is a totally story-driven show. And it is a show where the play is the thing. The reason our cast changes succeeded is because every time we made a cast change, we created a different character. We're not trying to replace the person who left. We're trying to go in a new direction. I think the ability to do that

exists on ensemble shows, and that's one of the things that *New York Undercover* has turned into—a true ensemble show, much more than when it went on the air, where it was basically the lieutenant sitting there, which was the format of *Hunter* and the format of a lot of other cop shows. They go back in history with that format. We broadened the base now, we're up to essentially a five-man ensemble, almost the same size as the ensemble of *Law & Order*, so I can see maybe next year adding another character. I think that the richness of the story-telling increases the more people you have and the more options you have.

Unger: *So will you use cameos as you do on Law & Order?*

Wolf: Major cameos, top actors, and hopefully get really great people in for two or three episodes.

Unger: *I was looking at the list of cameos in Law & Order: Samuel L. Jackson, Eli Wallach, Elaine Stritch, James Earl Jones, Patti Lupone, etc. How do you get them to do these cameos?*

Wolf: First of all, we're enormously fortunate because Ed Sherin is the executive producer of the show in New York who has done something like 30 Broadway productions over the years, and has a wonderful network system of actors that goes back years and years and years. And the wonderful thing that happened with *Law & Order* I think in the first season was that (A) it was the only show shooting in New York, and (B) the great critical response to the show. All of a sudden, if you show up on *Law & Order*, you're not an episodic television actor. Everybody does *Law & Order*.

Unger: *There is some prestige involved in doing it?*

Wolf: Whether it's prestige, or the ability to do it without getting labeled, "Well, he's

now doing guest shots on TV shows," is an enormous advantage.

Unger: *Would you say that maybe it's a little bit like the British system whereby major important actors don't hesitate to do a role on television?*

Wolf: I would hope so. I think that the other things that obviously attract them: the relationship with Ed, then it's the writing. That's what makes any great show great.

The writers have been the unsung heroes of *Law & Order* over the years. Some of the best writers in the business have worked on the show, and have gone on to bigger and better things.

Unger: *But your writers are mostly West Coast writers.*

Wolf: Well, they're West Coast writers, but they're mostly New York transplants—the bulk of them come from New York either originally or spent a great deal of time here.

Unger: *How do you account for the fact that there have been so few Emmys?*

Wolf: Well, there have been a couple of Emmys, but in none of the major categories.

There is a West Coast/East Coast dichotomy in television. This is an East Coast show. The bulk of the membership of the American Academy—95% of it is centered in Los Angeles—and that, I think, has a major effect certainly on Emmy awards. We got nominated this year for best sound editing, or something.

Everybody on the show is world class. Almost everybody on that crew has been (A) there a long time, and (B) before they were doing this show would work only on major features.

In terms of the writing, in California, for the most part there's almost an inability to understand how hard it is because it's so story-driven. I think the writing has

always been superb and not too personal. It doesn't go into the emotional arenas that *Picket Fences* went into with people.

Unger: *When you say "personal", you mean their personal lives...?*

Wolf: If you look at the shows that win the writing awards consistently, it is the shows where people bare their souls on camera and talk about their innermost feelings, and that is decidedly not what *Law & Order* does. And there's sort of a blind spot when it comes to the difficulty of doing what these writers have done superbly now for 6-1/2 years. If you did either side of the show as a normal television show with people getting in and out of their cars and going in and out of buildings, each half hour of *Law & Order* would be enough for an hour cop show or an hour legal drama, especially if you throw in some of their personal lives into that mix. The fact that you're going, as I put it, from meat-to-meat in each scene—there are not transitions, no drive-ups, none of that ease of flow that a lot of people are used to.

Unger: *I understand what you're saying, but yet you also say that Law & Order writing is in the tradition of Playhouse 90.*

Wolf: I think the level of writing is as good as anything on television. I would say that the writing on *Law & Order* is at the same level as the platinum level of television writing.

Unger: *The Golden Age...?*

Wolf: I just did a very interesting seminar the day before yesterday at the Museum of Television and Radio in Los Angeles, and on the panel was Abby Mann. He said something about going back to the Golden Age of Television.

I said, "You know, Abby, I'm going to take great exception to that right now, because I think the best writing that's ever been on television in terms of a collective

number of shows is being done right now. There has never been another period on television that I can remember where you had such shows as *Law & Order*, *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, *Feds*, *Chicago Hope*, *X-Files*...

Unger: *So, you think we may be going through a new Golden Age?*

Wolf: Every night of the week at 10 o'clock, there is a superb show on. Everybody talks about the heydays, and I was there with *Hill Street Blues*. But what other great shows were on during the heyday of *Hill Street*? If you had one or two good dramas, it was a banner season. And here we have five, or six, or seven that I think are absolutely world-class and as good as anything that's ever been on.

Unger: *Now, when you say Law & Order, which is the Law and what is the Order? The court or the cops?*

Wolf: Oh, I think the cops are the Law. I mean, that's "here comes the law," and then there's "here comes the judge," the order. The legal system puts things back in order after there has been a moral or legal disruption. And that's the ideal way for the system to work.

Unger: *Do you think that Court TV and the large numbers of people who watch actual court procedures for the first time has affected how courts are done on cop shows these days? Has it affected, say, court scenes in Law & Order?*

Wolf: No. I think if anything, it has reinforced us to believe we do it pretty damn well. I mean, if you watch Court TV, it's a lot more interesting to watch *Law & Order*. As wonderful as it is to hear it, when critics say *Law & Order* is an absolutely realistic look at the criminal justice system, it ain't. The cops don't catch 'em in 24 minutes, and the crooks don't confess in 24 minutes.

Unger: *But is it accurate, do you think in*

the overall impression?

Wolf: Yes . . . and I am sure you will get letters, but in seven years, we have gotten one letter from one assistant district attorney in Brooklyn saying we made a mistake on the law. We don't make legal mistakes as far as I know. The show has lawyers both on the writing staff and as technical advisors. And we are very, very careful that we don't do something that is either legally impossible or disrupts or changes the way the actual flow of events would happen. But it is not reality. It is a heightened reality and a compressed reality.

Unger: *How about the benefits of New York production and L.A. writing? Do you think they might ever come together in either place?*

Wolf: Let me put it this way: The bulk of the writers are either New Yorkers by birth or by having lived here for a long period of time. But most are in Los Angeles. Now, to have a writing staff in New York and one in California would seem to be somewhat counterproductive. I don't mind having certain people here, but I think that one of the other things is that you want the centralized control of the writing to be in one place. And this will sound blasphemous, but I think there is also a certain advantage to have a little bit of distance between the writing and the production. It keeps some perspective; the time difference can be a terrible burden, but it can also be a boon.

Unger: *Are you the only one who is involved in both the East and the West coasts?*

Wolf: Oh, no. When Sherin came into the show in the fourth season, he instituted a more theatrical way of doing things which is every script has a read-through, where the cast sits down. Usually the cops have a read-through. And the writer/producer who is in charge of that script, sits at the table, listens to the actors' concerns,

desires, and then makes the changes.

Unger: *How about New York actors vs. L.A. actors?*

Wolf: Ah! One of my favorite subjects! That's why I'm here in New York.

Unger: *Many of our readers, by the way, are New York actors.*

Wolf: The reality is—and this will probably anger some people in Los Angeles—but I honestly believe it, if you search the acting population of Los Angeles and the acting population in New York, and this is a horrible generality, but percentage-wise the bulk of New York actors has extensive stage training; they have grown up in an environment where because of their stage training and because of the Dramatists Guild, they are not allowed to change words. They don't walk on to a set and say, "I'm not going to say that; I'm going to say this!" When you take the Los Angeles acting population, the majority of those actors have only done film or television work. That's what they came to Hollywood to be—television stars or movie stars, not stage actors. And stage actors, again, by their very nature seem to have a lot more respect for the written word than their counterparts in Los Angeles. I mean, I hate to use a writer's words against actors, but in one of the classic scenes in *My Favorite Year*, Peter O'Toole, when he is about to go on stage, said, "I'm not an actor, I'm a movie star." And there's a lot of truth to that statement.

Unger: *How about dealing with New York unions?*

Wolf: It was an impossible situation when we started, but it's gotten to be a very mutually respectful working relationship. Realistically, after the second season of *Law & Order*, Universal wanted to pull the shows—too expensive. And the reason it was too expensive was the unions and some of the antiquated working rules that

existed. It was costing about \$100,000 more an episode than if we'd shoot exactly the same show in Los Angeles.

Unger: *So, I gather the negotiations with the unions were successful?*

Wolf: Don't forget, the show's in its seventh season. It's not a cheap show to do.

Unger: *And yet it's been renewed for another year.*

Wolf: It's been renewed through '98, and I certainly anticipate it being around through the millennium.

Unger: *You anticipate ever reaching the point where you have shows on all the networks?*

Wolf: Sure hope so.

Unger: *That's now six, I guess.*

Wolf: I certainly would like to have it on the four big guys.

Unger: *What is there to accomplish in cop shows that has not already been accomplished?*

Wolf: When *Law & Order* was first picked up we were asked: "What's the bible for the show?"

I said, "The front page of the *New York Post*."

Stories change every day, so on a show like *Law & Order*, and hopefully, *New York Undercover*, and again, hopefully, *Feds*. Television is the best mirror that's ever been invented. It reflects what is in people's minds, and that's why I think cop shows are an ideal medium to explore that. What goes on on the streets and what's going on internally generally reflects where we are as a society.

Unger: *Do you think that the show would be harmed if the "bible" was more like the *Globe*, rather than the *New York Post*? Do you think that there's a chance that the cop*

genre might slip into mere sensationalism?

Wolf: We take the headline; we don't take the body copy because if you take the body copy, it's a very straight line. Here's the suspect, he's arrested, he's tried, and he's convicted. That's what happens most of the time. The interesting thing is to take that headline, and then use that headline as a platform to explore social issues, to pry the lock away and look at what's really going on underneath and what this thing represents, rather than what the actual facts of any specific case are.

For example, there's an episode of *New York Undercover*, which everybody is going to say "Oh, it's Tupac."

We had decided in June that we were going to do a story about rappers and the violence associated with gangsta rap, shooting each other, and everything else. When Tupac got shot, sure we moved it up, because this is one of the great tragedies of the past 20 years in the black community. I mean, the ad that I wanted FOX to run was, "He's a part of the streets and the streets killed him." And our audience will swear this is the facts of the case, which is a docudrama. I'm not interested in the actual case. What I'm interested in is the Greek tragedy aspect.

That to me is an object lesson that you can show these kids that this may seem glamorous, but you end up dead.

Unger: *You know something very interesting? You keep slipping back into *New York Undercover*. It's almost as if you are more excited about the potential of *New York Undercover*.*

Wolf: Oh, I wouldn't say that. Wait until you see some of the stuff we've got coming up on *Law & Order*. But I guess I keep going back to this "not curing cancer" aspect of it. The reality is that *Law & Order* was the first child. I think the reason I keep slipping back to *New York Undercover* is that I think that we are pushing the show up towards the level of *Law & Order*

in terms of the issues that we're dealing with.

Unger: So, what's in the TV future for you?

Wolf: Our new show, *Feds*, it's an ensemble series set in the U.S. Attorney's office in Manhattan, the Second District, which is considered the most important U.S. Attorney's office in the country. It's been said that actually the U.S. Attorney for the Second District is probably the second most powerful person in the country. As we look at some of the cases that have been tried here, from Michael Milliken to the major Federal cases on down, there is an argument to be made for that. The interesting thing about *Feds*, is that in the entire history of commercial television, nobody has ever done the Federal judicial system, and that's very exciting. We've got a superb cast. It stars Blair Brown, John Slattery, Regina Taylor and Dylan Baker. It's a really a fabulous ensemble.

The reaction is going to be similar to the reaction to *Law & Order*. We're taking a page from a lot of different shows. There are going to be Federal cases every week with one case that's going to go over the entire first season of the show, no matter how long it is, or maybe even into the second season. We're going to be indicting people on matters that may not actually have been Federal cases, such as the criminal case against the tobacco companies.

We will try to maintain the same kind of quality that we've maintained in *Law & Order*.

When you have this kind of cast, they help maintain the quality. After a read-through recently the actors were unhappy. I said: "You know the great thing about this show? It's got smart actors in it. You know the terrible thing about this show? It's got smart actors in it."

There is a point where I would love to be able to say, "Just say the words. They'll be fine." But you can't do that when you're dealing with a Blair Brown. I mean, if she

has a concern, 99% of the time it's not only a legitimate concern, she's dead right.

Unger: Have you had to deal with advertiser interference?

Wolf: People have no idea. It can be a true disaster. I spent eight years in the advertising business, and I know where these people work. Procter & Gamble does not spend \$950 million a year on broadcast advertising to be controversial. Any show that triggers controversy is going to have major problems with advertisers. The chief media buyer for BBD&O, which I guess is the second largest purchaser of advertising time in the world, said when asked about *Feds*, "Oh, I don't anticipate any purchasing problems, unless of course the show becomes a target for politicians with special interest groups."

I know what's going to happen the first time Procter & Gamble goes into a show that's going to trigger controversy. No matter how well intentioned or how high-minded it is, some extremist group takes out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* accusing Procter & Gamble of sponsoring violence. The first call from the chairman to the advertising agency the next morning is: "Get me out of that show." This is not what they're paying big bucks for. And as soon as that type of targeting takes place, those shows are not going to be advertiser-friendly, and anybody who thinks that advertisers will not react this way, well I'm the guy who got burned.

The first year that *Law & Order* was on the air, it was the highest advertiser pull-outs show on television. The cops never fired their guns, there is no sexuality; there is no objectionable material—this was about ideas. Remember the episode about the abortion clinic? That episode had \$800,000 in advertiser pull-outs. Not because it was violent—there is an explosion, but you didn't see anybody killed. We had that show checked by pro-life and pro-choice groups, and everybody hated it,

which meant that it was balanced. It didn't matter. It was an area that made our advertisers uncomfortable; the show never reran on NBC. It's only been rerun on A&E. And even A&E made some excisions of language.

Unger: *How about the physical or mechanical interference—like V-chips and ratings?*

Wolf: Well, the one thing that I'm not so worried about is V-chips—since how many people do you know who can even program their VCR? The jokes have already started with the father yelling up the stairs, "Johnny, how do I disconnect the V-chip?" That's what's going to happen. I mean, look, I have a three-and-a-half-year old who is more at ease with a computer mouse than either my wife or I am. That's the reality. I don't care what they plug in, these kids will be able to disempower almost at will. If parents can get a code to do it, they'll figure out how to undo it.

My greatest hope is that we will have a rating system that is going to essentially say that everything at 10 o'clock should have a warning.

I think at 10 o'clock at night, a banner should appear on every television set, on every channel, cable, everywhere, that says: "It is now 10 p.m. Younger children should not be watching television unsupervised."

One of the big questions I've asked is, "Who do we think we will protect at 10 o'clock on a Wednesday night?" Kids shouldn't be watching television at 10 o'clock on a Wednesday night. They should either be in bed or doing their homework.

Unger: *Speaking of kids, could I have a little bit about your personal life? You have how many kids?*

Wolf: Three.

Unger: *The ages?*

Wolf: Twelve, nine and three.

Unger: *And you live . . .*

Wolf: In Santa Barbara.

Unger: *And you have an apartment in the city which you use when you're here?*

Wolf: Yeah, I have a place where I hang my hat.

Unger: *How about things like hobbies?*

Wolf: That's a good question. I don't think I have any hobbies. I'd love to have a hobby. Unfortunately, my wife would probably verify it—I think my vocation and avocation are the same. The problem is, I don't really want to develop any other projects, but we've got these other ideas all of which could be terrific. I've got bad knees from football, so I can't ski anymore, but basically . . . I love reading.

Unger: *You like television?*

Wolf: I love television. I love the *X-Files*. I love *NYPD Blue*. I love Gary Shandling. There's a lot of good stuff on television.

Unger: *Is there an area that has not been covered on television that needs to be?*

Wolf: I've had this discussion many, many times. There used to be Westerns—I don't know why they died out, because I love Westerns, too. I was desperate to do a Western, and I almost got one done at ABC about four years ago with Lorne Greene. This was a quality Western. That's a genre that I think is underrepresented, but the bulk of the television audience, or the younger television audience, which is what the advertisers want, aren't comfortable with Westerns. But the reason that there have been so many cop shows, lawyer shows and medical shows, is that drama is conflict and the higher the stakes, the better the conflict, the better the drama. And the highest stakes of all are life and death, which is what you get from cop shows, legal shows, and medical

shows. I don't know if there's another arena that would supply you with that kind of necessary conflict.

Unger: *Now, the name game . . . what do you think of David Kelley?*

Wolf: Enormously bright, enormously talented, a nice guy and married to a movie star. He's made himself over. A golden boy.

Unger: *Steven Bochco.*

Wolf: A guy that we all have to tip our hat to. He did it first.

Unger: *Steven Cannell.*

Wolf: One of my favorite people personally. My favorite hour show of all time, the *Rockford Files*. Wish he would do another *Rockford Files*.

Unger: *Norman Lear.*

Wolf: Steven Bochco is the Norman Lear of drama.

Unger: *ER.*

Wolf: Too fast for me.

Unger: *Chicago Hope.*

Wolf: Unfortunately, I'm not a big fan of medical dramas because I'm not a big fan of hospitals.

Unger: *N.Y.P.D. Blue.*

Wolf: Ah! Great show. Also has one of my three favorite actors on the planet, and what I consider one of my best friends as an actor/producer, Dennis Franz.

Unger: *Homicide.*

Wolf: Boy, you're hitting all my favorite shows. I love the show. Obviously, you don't do a crossover with a show that you don't really respect and like.

I'm going to go backwards for one second here. Getting back to the Emmys? One of the shameful things about the Emmys is that every year for the past three

years Ed Sherin has not been nominated. To do both sides of that crossover and not get an Emmy nomination is baffling and discouraging, and something that causes me actual rage.

Unger: *Do you think it's because he's considered an East Coaster?*

Wolf: I can't imagine any other reason. I mean, how can you have the highest ratings of both shows ever, and episodes that the critics fell all over themselves, and the man doesn't get nominated?

Unger: *Murder One.*

Wolf: A disappointment.

Unger: *Seinfeld.*

Wolf: My competition? Love it.

Unger: *Melrose Place.*

Wolf: A prime-time soap, and obviously, nobody has ever done it better. They're not shows I watch. It's not that I dislike them, it just doesn't call to me.

Unger: *Steven Spielberg on TV.*

Wolf: I think that Mr. Spielberg is the greatest movie director of all time, and that his sensibility is better geared to the big screen.

Unger: *Court TV.*

Wolf: I watch it.

Unger: *Let's now go to adjectives used to refer to you . . . "Overbearing."*

Wolf: Yeaow! That's my reaction. Really? I guess it depends who you've been talking to.

Unger: *"A demanding boss. A tough taskmaster." They're the same basically.*

Wolf: I think that the guy at the top is responsible for keeping the quality level up, and at various times, that's going to ruffle people's feathers. But I try never to

make it personal.

Unger: *That answers the next one: "Fixated upon quality."*

Wolf: Oh, it was drilled into me, from the time I was three years old, that the only thing that my parents ever asked of me was to do my best. And that's all I ever ask . . .

Unger: *"Really appreciates actors."*

Wolf: Yes! I can't imagine doing what good actors do, which is tell the truth and to bare their soul in a way that I could never do. The good ones are artists. They can universalize personal emotions, and that to me is something unique. I don't know how they do it, but I sure thank God they can do it.

Unger: *"May be the first producer that has a show on all networks."*

Wolf: I sure hope so. I'd love it. I'd love nothing better. Somebody once said, "What would be your ultimate goal?" I said, "There are 22 hours of prime time. I'd like to have 22 shows all in non-competitive time slots."

Unger: *And the last one: "A gentle giant."*

Wolf: I like that a lot more than "over-bearing."

I want to add one thing because it goes back to what I said about "it's the writing, stupid!" For example, we're trying to do something on NBC that will be on soon. It's going to be very, very different from the standard *Law & Order*—a four-episode arc—a huge case. Four episodes linked in a row. I can't reveal the programming stunt, but it's gonna really surprise people.

One reporter last year said, "How do you do three shows?"

I said, "Well, you know, it's really amazing. I write them all. I only direct about 85% of them. I write some of the music, but

I really write all the reviews too."

And he looks at me puzzled. I said, "You know, that is ridiculous. There are so many talented people involved in these shows, the top of their game, many people who have been through the company that have gone on to bigger and better things. The excitement is working with great writers. That's how I do it—with top people involved at every level."

Unger: *If you decided to throw it all away and go to live in Bali, what would happen to Law & Order?*

Wolf: It would hopefully roll on unencumbered past the millennium, because when you've got people like Ed Sherin who is running the show on a day-to-day basis, it can maintain its excellence. There are very creative people who are at the top of their game, and who are constantly trying to steal away from me. There is the feeling, especially with writers, that eventually, you will lose them. These people go on to bigger and better things. The hardest thing to do is to keep the writers, because there is such enormous competition for the good ones.

Unger: *Do you think that there's good satisfaction, though, in doing Law & Order?*

Wolf: I would hope so. I think that's one of the reasons that writers have stayed around as long as they have, because it is a bully pulpit. It really is.

Unger: *You think that Law & Order is a bully pulpit?*

Wolf: I think *Law & Order* is, I think *New York Undercover* is, and I think *Feds* will become one if hopefully it survives, because they're cop shows, they're law shows, but they do deal with ideas.

Unger: *Since they are bully pulpits do you feel that there is a greater responsibility to the public?*

Wolf: Absolutely.

Unger: *I'm putting words in your mouth.*

Wolf: No, no. I think you have to have a sense of responsibility when you're dealing with issues that really are explosive. We've said things on *Law & Order* that no other shows has said. And NBC allows us to do that because they know we are doing it responsibly. This is not done to inflame. It's done to hold the mirror up and say, "Look, this is what is going on."

Unger: *What you're saying is that besides entertaining, besides a good cry, you feel you owe the public more.*

Wolf: Absolutely. I don't know whether it's owing the public more, but they have come to expect more. And that's the reason the show has been on and is now the longest running drama show on television. They know that as long as we can keep the writing level up to where it's been, there is no reason the show should

go off the air. It can run forever. There has been 100% cast turnover since the pilot. And I honestly believe that the cast changes have refreshed the show. I want this show to run as long as *Gunsmoke*. And there is no reason it can't.

Unger: *How long did Gunsmoke run?*

Wolf: Twenty-two years.

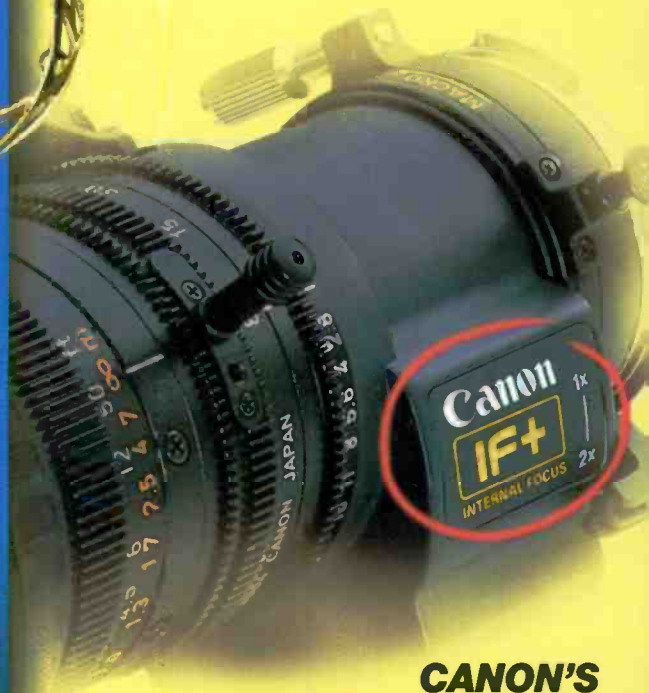
Unger: *Well, you're into the next millennium for sure.* ■

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In many years of covering television for *The Christian Science Monitor*, Arthur Unger won national recognition as one of the medium's most influential critics. He is also known for his revealing interviews with TV, theatre and film personalities. In addition to functioning now as *TV Quarterly's* Special Correspondent, he is preparing a book of memoirs and organizing more than 1,200 audio tapes of interviews for an academic archive.



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Blood on the Highway: A Cautionary Tale

A newsman remembers an assignment that changed him as a reporter and as a person.

By Greg Cergol

"I got some blood," chortled my somewhat overzealous photographer. "I shot some video of a bloody towel next to one of the smashed cars."

The comment didn't seem particularly strange as I arrived on the scene of a wild, seventeen car pile-up on a normally quiet Long Island road in the town of Cold Spring Harbor. But, as I realized later, my photographer's words set the tone for my entry into a sort of reporter's "Twilight Zone." On this day, I would become more than an observer of another tragedy.

An out-of-control dump truck, loaded with dirt, had caused the crash. As the truck was maneuvering down a steep hill, the driver was unable to stop it. The truck plowed into a line of cars waiting at a stop light. One car, a station wagon with a single driver, became lodged under the front of the truck and was turned into a



Greg Cergol

sort of battering ram as the truck crashed into more than a dozen cars.

Six people were hurt; but no one was killed. That amazing fact struck me as I stood in front of the crushed shell of that lead station wagon. I uttered

out loud what many others were thinking: "I can't believe that driver of this car wasn't killed."

After my comment, I swung into action, collecting facts and conducting interviews before heading to my satellite truck to prepare a noon report. It was there that my nightmare truly began.

As I looked at video my photographer

had taped before I arrived, I was stunned by the sight of a familiar face. It was my own godfather. Richard LaRocco, seated on the ground near the accident scene, talking to some ambulance workers. His car had apparently been one of those hit by the truck. I quickly realized he wasn't injured. I could hear him saying that to the rescuers on the videotape.

Relieved, I continued with my work, completing the taped segment I would introduce from the scene during my live report. Five minutes before the broadcast, I walked outside the truck and immediately spotted my godfather and his wife. As I found out later, he had returned to the scene after a quick trip to the hospital.

I rushed to his side. "Are you okay?" I asked. He quickly assured me he was fine. Then, his wife dropped a bombshell. "Did you hear from your mom?" she asked.

"Why?" I countered. A pained look fell across both their faces. Almost as one, they pointed to the crumpled station wagon and said, "Your dad was in that car."

I was shocked. I was numb. A million thoughts flashed through my mind. How was my dad? Would the accident damage the heart bypass he underwent a year before? Why didn't I recognize the car? Somehow, I remembered to look at my watch and realized it was three minutes to air.

What should I do? Rush to the hospital? Call my family? For some reason, I decided to file my live report. Only my photographer knew what was happening as I went on the air. What I said remains a blur; but, at the last second, I did decide not to mention my father's involvement.

When my report was complete, I headed immediately for the hospital. There, I found my mom and three brothers, Gary, Chris and Mark, all as shaken as I was. But the news was good. My father's injuries weren't life-threatening. The priest who had been called to issue last rites was sent home.

So, the story had a happy ending. My dad survived. But professional questions remained for me. Was my decision not to detail my personal involvement in the story wrong or even hypocritical? After all, hadn't I tried to cajole others to spill their private stories and emotions for the camera at difficult times in their lives?

I also wondered about how I had treated victims and their families during my years as a reporter. I thought I had always tried to display sensitivity and compassion toward them—but always?

Being "on the other side" made me realize how difficult it is to truly understand what victims and their families go through. The gamut of emotions is astounding—disbelief, anger, sadness. You want to lash out at those responsible. You feel vulnerable and violated, ready to cry out for help and crawl into a private cocoon all at the same time. Even the most insignificant word or image can spark rage in your gut or bring tears to your eyes.

Feeling those emotions is imperative, if we are to succeed as reporters. It's a fine line we walk: striving to get close to our subjects while at the same time maintaining enough distance to remain objective. This trip into the "Twilight Zone" taught me to work harder at that, and take nothing for granted. Worry less about the competition for an exclusive sound bite or picture, and be more concerned with the effect that sound bite or picture will have on the victims in our stories. It's not easy.

In fact, in this case, I failed the test. In my piece about the accident, I chose to use a disturbing sound bite from the truck driver.

"I cut through those cars like a knife through butter," he had said, without remorse. At the time (before I learned of my father's involvement), it seemed like "great television." But, in the end, the driver's words and uncaring smirk added to my family's pain and frustration. The

effect of that sound bite was something I had never even considered as I wrote my report and voiced it.

I think now a lot more about the responsibilities of a TV reporter's job, and of the sights and sounds we cover. Sometimes, I try to put myself in the position of the viewer at home who tunes in for the local news, and I wonder as I watch, do we really need to see all those body bags, and the chalkmark outlines of corpses on the pavement, and so many shots of bodies being shoved into ambulances?...

From time to time, I also remember my photographer's comment about the blood—my father's blood. And I see our casual "gallows" humor in a new light. ■

Greg Cergol is a reporter and anchor at NEWS 12, the Long Island all-news cable channel. Prior to that, he was an editor at the NBC Radio Network, and news director, anchor and reporter at radio stations in Milwaukee and Omaha. He was recently nominated for a Cable Ace Award for his series, "Vietnam: The Second Tour," the story of six local vets' return to Vietnam. Last year, he was nominated for two Emmy awards.

“Quote...

Non-Commercial “Commercials”?

“A movement among big-market stations to accept 30-second underwriting spots is turning up the heat on PBS to resolve longstanding discrepancies between national underwriting policies and more permissive practices at local stations. Some say six of the top ten stations are accepting longer spots; others count 19 of the top 20. Among the stations now accepting 30-second underwriting messages are WNET, New York; KCEI, Los Angeles; KQED, San Francisco; WCET, Cincinnati; WTVS, Detroit, and KRMA, Denver.

“The national underwriting that directly supports production of national programs has slipped in recent years, while local stations' spot sales have grown . . .

“We can reach 80 percent of the U.S. population with 30-second messages on public television today,” said Keith Thompson, president of Public Broadcast Marketing, a firm that specializes in spot sales on public radio and TV stations. He contends—although others are skeptical—that even longer 60-second spots are available on stations reaching 40 percent of the nation . . .

“Underwriting standards have been a contentious issue within the fractious public TV ‘family’ since the 1980’s, when a limited experiment with advertising promoted the FCC to allow ‘enhanced underwriting’ on public TV stations seeking corporate aid. But PBS and most of its member stations retained stricter standards, and a philosophical rift deepened within the industry.”

—Karen Everhart Bedford,
Current, The Public Telecommunications Newspaper.
February 17, 1997.

...Unquote”

CBS



Keep your eye on us.

The Media Monopoly

By **Ben H. Bagdikian**

In the last five years, a small number of the country's largest industrial corporations has acquired more public communications power, including ownership of the news, than any private businesses have ever before possessed in world history.

Nothing in earlier history matches this corporate group's power to penetrate the social landscape. Using both old and new technology, by owning each other's shares, engaging in joint ventures as partners, and other forms of cooperation, this handful of giants has created what is, in effect, a new communications cartel within the United States.

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At issue is not just a financial statistic, like production numbers or ordinary industrial products like refrigerators or clothing. At issue is the possession of power to surround almost every man, woman, and child in the country with controlled images and words, to socialize each new generation of Americans, to alter the political agenda of the country. And with that power comes the ability to exert influence that in many ways is greater than that of schools, religion, parents and even government itself.

Aided by the digital revolution and the acquisition of subsidiaries that operate at every step in the mass communications process, from the creation of content to its delivery into the home, the communications cartel has exercised stunning influence over national legislation and government agencies, an influence whose scope

and power would have been considered scandalous or illegal twenty years ago.

The new communications cartel has been made possible by the withdrawal of earlier government intervention that once aspired to protect consumers and move toward the ideal of diversity of content and ownership in the mass media. Government's passivity has emboldened the new giants to boast openly of monopoly and their ability to project news, commercial messages, and graphic images into the consciousness and subconscious of almost every American.

Strict control of public information is not new in the world, but historical dictatorships lacked the late twentieth century's digital multimedia and distribution technology. As the country approaches the millennium, the new cartel exercises a more complex and subtle kind of control.

Michael Eisner, chairman and chief executive officer of the second largest media firm in the world, Disney/ABC/Cap Cities, put it succinctly:

"It doesn't matter whether it comes in by cable, telephone lines, computer, or satellite. Everyone's going to have to deal with Disney."

In his imperial euphoria, Eisner neglected to mention what for centuries used to be the only mass medium, words printed on paper, as in newspapers, books and magazines, though these, too, are an important part of the Disney empire.

Even though the new interlocked system of giants is entirely private, it promotes itself as a triumph of patriotic national power. The editor of *Vanity Fair*, a magazine owned by one of the large media corporations (Advance), wrote with evident pride:

"The power center of America . . . has moved from its role as military-industrial giant to a new supremacy as the world's entertainment-information superpower."

It is not an idle boast. By almost every measure of public reach—financial power, political influence, and multiple techniques—the new conglomerates have more influence over what Americans see and hear than private firms have ever before possessed.

Because each of the dominant firms has adopted a strategy of creating its own closed system of control over every step in the national media process, from creation of content to its delivery, no content—news, entertainment, or other public messages—will reach the public unless a handful of corporate decision-makers decide that it will. Smaller independents have always helped provide an alternative and still do, but they have become ever more vulnerable to the power of the super-giants. As the size and financial power of the new dominant firms has escalated, so has their coercive power to offer a bothersome smaller competitor a choice of either selling out at once or slowly facing ruin as the larger firm uses its greater financial resources to undercut the independent competitor on price and promotion. In the process, consumers have become less influential than ever.

Financial news still is full of the sounds of clashes between giants. But the new media leaders compete only over marginal matters: their imperial borders, their courtship of new allies, and their acquisitions of smaller firms. Underneath these skirmishes, they are interlocked in shared financial ownership and a complex of joint ventures. With minor exceptions, they share highly conservative political and economic values. Most also own interests in other industries—defense, consumer products and services; firms like General Electric, Westinghouse, and the country's cash-rich telephone companies—and have shown little hesitation in using their control of the news to support the fortunes of their other subsidiaries.

The new cyberspace revolution typified

by the Internet and the World Wide Web has been held out as offering the promise of altering our definition of "mass" in the phrase "mass media." Individuals operating from their own home computers connected to telephone lines can communicate with other individual computers. But by the mid-1990s fewer than 15 percent of American households were equipped with modems that connect computers to phone lines. That number will undoubtedly grow, but even now, in the Internet's infancy, concerted corporate efforts are turning the Internet into the most direct mass merchandising vehicle ever invented, with much of the sales promotion directed at children.

An IBM executive in charge of computer networking has said that by the year 2000 he expects that the Internet will be "the world's largest, deepest, fastest and most secure marketplace . . . worth \$1 trillion annually."

Perhaps the most troubling power of the new cartel is its control of the main body of news and public affairs information. The reporting of news has always been a commercial enterprise and this has always created conflicts of interest. But the behavior of the new corporate controllers of public information has produced a higher level of manipulation of news to pursue the owners' other financial and political goals. In the process, there has been a parallel shrinkage of any sense of obligation to serve the noncommercial information needs of public citizenship.

The idea of government interceding to protect consumers is contrary to the ideology of most of the media cartel's leaders, who, with few exceptions, pursue the conservative political and economic notion of an uninhibited free market that operates without social or moral obligations.

But today some of the leading members of the media cartel openly order their journalists to report news with an eye to help-

ing advertisers and promoting their owners' other nonjournalistic goals. In a speech at the 1995 convention of the Newspaper Association of America, the publishers invited a major advertiser to make a speech criticizing the country's reporters for being reluctant to redefine news as part entertainment and an aid to advertisers.

Emergence of the new cartel does not change the basic impact of media conglomeration on society as described in earlier editions of this book. Chapters 1 through 13, which have not been changed from the last edition, still illustrate the basic process by which the present media power emerged. But earlier, it was possible to describe the dominant firms in each separate medium—daily newspapers, magazines, radio, television, books and movies. With each passing year and each new edition of this book, the number of controlling firms in all these media has shrunk: from fifty corporations in 1984 to twenty-six in 1987, followed by twenty-three in 1990, and then, as the borders between the different media began to blur, to less than twenty in 1993. In 1996 the number of media corporations with dominant power in society is closer to ten. In terms of media possessions and resources, the newest dominant ten are Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, News Corporation Limited (Murdoch), Sony, Tele-Communications, Inc. Seagram (TV, movies, cable, books, music), Westinghouse, Gannett, and General Electric.

Ironically, some of the American media giants that have cowed our own government are restrained in their foreign operations by the governments of other democratic nations more serious than the United States about preventing monopolies.

Some of the firms powerful within the United States are based outside the

country, like Murdoch's News Corporation (Australia), Thomson (Canada), and Bertelsmann (Germany). Some must meet more stringent rules against monopoly in their own countries than those imposed upon their United States operations.

The warning expressed in the first edition of *The Media Monopoly*—"media power is political power"—has come to pass to a degree once considered unthinkable.

The magnitude of the new media cartel's power is reflected in the simple dollar size of recent transactions that produced it.

At the time of the first edition of this book, in 1983, the biggest media merger in history was a \$340-million matter, when the Gannett Company, a newspaper chain, bought Combined Communications Corporation, an owner of billboards, newspapers, and broadcast stations. In 1996, when Disney merged with ABC/Cap Cities, it was a \$19-billion deal—fifty-six times larger. This union produced a conglomerate that is powerful in every major mass medium: newspapers, magazines, books, radio, broadcast television, cable systems and programming, movies, recordings, video cassettes, and, through alliances and joint ventures, growing control of the golden wires into the American home—telephone and cable.

But the quantity of money involved is the least disturbing measure of events. More ominous is how this degree of concentrated control translates into the power to shape the country's political and economic agendas, to create models of behavior for each generation, and to achieve ever more aggressive, self-serving access to every level of government.

A prime exhibit of the cartel's new political power is the Telecommunications Act of 1996. This act was billed as a transformation of sixty-two years of federal communications law for the purpose of

"increasing competition." It was, with some exceptions, largely described as much by most of the major news media. But its most dramatic immediate result has been to reduce competition and open the path to cooperation among the giants.

The new law opened the media field to new competitors, like the large regional telephone companies, on the theory that cable and telephone companies would compete for customers within the same community. In practice, the power of one company in television was enlarged to permit a single firm to reach 35 percent of all American households. The act made it possible, for the first time, for a single company to own more than one radio station in the same market. A single owner was not permitted to own both TV stations and cable systems in the same market. License periods for broadcasters were expanded.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 swept away even the minimal consumer and diversity protections of the 1934 act that preceded it. Though this was an intricate bill of 280 pages that would transform the American media landscape, its preparation and passage did not meet the standards of study and public participation that ordinarily would precede an historic transformation of a major influence on society.

While most of the media, especially broadcasters, gave the public little useful information on the depth of the change involved, a few newspapers tried.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported very early on how directly the 1994 Congress had become a partner with the media industry: "House Republicans are planning a closed-door meeting this week with top communications executives to learn how Congress can help their companies become more 'successful' as legislators overhaul laws regulating the industry." The paper also reported that Donald Jones, a cable operator, was a volunteer in House Speaker Newt Gingrich's office and

attended meetings as an "advisor" while the bill was being written.

The *New York Times* editorialized, "Forty million dollars' worth of lobbying bought telecommunications companies a piece of Senate legislation they could relish."

After late filings of campaign contributions became available, *Common Cause Magazine* reported that major media companies had given political candidates and lawmakers more than \$4 million in contributions in the years leading up to passage of the new act. The Consumer Federation of America said, "If you look at the legislation, there is something for absolutely everyone—except the consumer." Jeff Chester and Kathryn Montgomery of the Center for Media Education warned that American culture for the twenty-first century was at stake. But these were not warnings that most Americans saw.

The new law permitted some of the country's largest industries, previously not active in creating content, like telephone companies, to enter the fields of television, radio, and cable. The official rationale was that this would offer consumers new choices because the new entries into the mass media industry would compete independently and thereby force down prices and increase the quality of services. In most instances, the opposite has happened. The new industries entering the media field quickly joined the older ones in shared stock, joint ventures, and the creation of closed systems to produce interlocks that make them partners in the cartel rather than independent and serious competitors.

Even the meaning of the word "competition" has become blurred by reality. Of the 1,500 daily newspapers in the country, 99 percent are the only daily in their cities. Of the 11,800 cable systems, all but a handful are monopolies in their cities. Of the 11,000 commercial radio stations, six or eight formats (all-talk, all-

news, variations of rock music, rap, adult contemporary, etc.), with an all but uniform content within each format, dominate programming in every city. The four commercial television networks and their local affiliates carry programs of essentially the same type, with only the meagerly financed public stations offering a genuine alternative. Thus, most of the media meet the tongue-twisting argot of Wall Street in being oligopolies that are collections of local monopolies. This means few choices for citizens looking for genuine differences.

In 1994, a member of the media consulting firm Kagan Associates, commenting on cable companies, told the *New York Times*, "The top twenty are merging themselves, and will turn into five companies." At the time, the two largest cable firms already had 40 percent of all cable subscribers.

Upon passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the presumed new "competitors" (cable and telephone) quickly became partners or merged into even larger firms. These were predictable marriages. It costs an average of \$200,000 a mile to lay down fiber optic telecommunications channels in city streets. It did not take an angel from heaven to whisper to the cable and phone companies planning to dig side by side at \$200,000-a-mile that they could join forces and make more money at less expense without competing. And that is what happened.

Given their local monopolies, cable companies should have been common carriers, like electronic companies, providing the wires and making money by leasing space on their lines to the creators of programs, subject to proving in public that their rates are not exorbitant. The new act has produced a very different result.

Though "competitors" greeted the Telecommunications Act of 1996 by joining hands, telephone carriers continued to

compete, launching noisy advertising promotions. But it was far from clear that the result would mean ultimate savings or conveniences for average telephone users.

Almost all of the media leaders, possibly excepting Ted Turner of Turner Broadcasting, are political conservatives, a factor in the drastic shift in the entire spectrum of national politics to a brand of conservatism once though as an "extreme."

As he has in other countries, Rupert Murdoch unabashedly uses his considerable media power in the United States both to promote conservative politics and to obtain concessions from the federal government that have been denied others. In one case, he was given a discretionary \$30 million tax break when the government forgave the usual levy on a set of mergers and acquisitions. And though Murdoch's controlling firm is Australian, he was granted a waiver from the United States law limiting foreign control of American broadcasting. With that, Murdoch created the powerful FOX network, with major stations throughout the country.

The perpetual conservative claim that the media are "too liberal" was not quieted even by these events. Murdoch, for example, has accused Ted Turner's CNN news service of "liberal bias." The accusation further illuminates what has been clear for many years: most conservatives consider news bias to be any news that departs from the promotion of conservatism and corporate values.

Another zone of new silence has led to ominous signs in the economy and a threat to social peace. In the United States, maldistribution of income—the growing gap between rich and non-rich—is among the worst among developed countries. Years of systematic silence on the matter in the news media has permitted an accumulation of public distrust, anger, and

frustration.

Economist Lester Thurow has said of the widening gap, "Probably no country has ever had as large a shift in the distribution of wealth without having gone through a revolution or losing a major war." But the minimal appearance in the news during the years when the maldistribution was clearly developing has kept both its cause and possible solutions largely invisible—and therefore out of the political arena. As always, the public's lack of good information during a time of duress has led to finding scapegoats, and to increasing domestic rightwing terrorism of a sort once thought limited to the Third World.

Perhaps ignoring average householders helps explain why public trust in the news is dropping steadily. According to Yankelovich Partners Polling, confidence in news dropped from a high of 55 percent in 1988 to 20 percent in 1993.

Advertisers continue to enjoy privileged access to the news. Both the ABC and CBS news staffs were forced by their managements to apologize or censor stories on deceptions and possible perjury by tobacco industry leaders. (Tobacco is no longer advertised on television, but tobacco companies now own major food and other firms that do advertise heavily on television, a connection not lost on broadcast executives.) A Marquette University poll of newspaper editors in 1992 found that 93 percent of them said advertisers tried to influence their news, a majority said their own management condoned the pressure, and 37 percent of the editors polled admitted that they had succumbed. A recent Nielson survey showed that 80 percent of television news directors said they broadcast corporate public relations films as news "several times a month."

In the reign of the new media cartel, the integrity of much of the country's profes-

sional news has become more ambiguous than ever. The role of journalists within news companies has always been an inherent dilemma for reporters and editors. Reporters are expected by the public and by reportorial standards to act like independent, fair-minded professionals. But reporters are also employees of corporations that control their hiring, firing, and daily management—what stories they will cover and what part of their coverage will be used or discarded. It is a harsh newsroom reality that never seems to cause conservative critics to speculate why their corporate colleagues who own the news and have total control over both their reporters' careers and the news that gets into their papers would somehow delight in producing "liberal bias."

The new media conglomerates have exacerbated the traditional problems of professional news. The cartel includes some industries that have never before owned important news outlets. Some of the new owners find it bizarre that anyone would question the propriety of ordering their employee-journalists to produce news coverage designed to promote the owner's corporation.

Seeing their journalists as obedient workers on an assembly line has produced a growing incidence of news corporations demanding unethical acts. There are more instances than ever of management contempt and cruelty toward their journalists.

Letting advertisers influence the news is no novelty but in the past it was usually done by innuendo, or quiet editing reassignment or firing. It has seldom before been so boldly stated and practiced, in ways that typify the new contempt that some news companies feel for the professional independence of their journalists—and for the news audience. The trend typifies a growing attitude that reporting the news is just another business.

Gene Roberts, managing editor of *The New York Times* and former senior vice

president and executive editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (a paper he transformed from one of the least impressive to one of the most successful metropolitan dailies in the country), is one of the most respected and successful editors in the country. In a public lecture at Riverside, California, in February 1996, Roberts recounted the depredations occurring in mainstream newsrooms around the country. He entitled his lecture "Corporatism versus Journalism: Is it Twilight for Press Responsibility?"

Only fifteen years ago, it was possible to cite specific corporations dominant in one communications medium, with only a minority of those corporations similarly dominant in a second medium. Today, as noted, the largest media firms have an aggressive strategy of acquiring dominant positions across every medium of any current or expected future consequence. Known and admired on Wall Street as "synergy," the policy calls for one company subsidiary to be used to complement and promote another. The process has helped produce a quantum leap in the power of a dominant media corporation to create and manipulate popular culture and models of behavior (or misbehavior)—and to use this power for narrow commercial and political purposes.

Opportunities for this kind of information "synergy" have become rampant. The country's second-largest cable company, Time Warner, is a leader in the ownership of magazines, books, and movies, which originate news and entertainment. But the firm also owns video production operations, the leading pay cable network, Home Box Office (HBO), and it has merged with Turner Broadcasting, which in turn owns several popular cable networks, including CNN and TNT.

The most spectacular example of unified multimedia ownership is also the leading

example of acquiring control of every step in the mass-media process, from creation of content to its delivery into the home.

The Disney empire includes—in addition to non-media interests in oil and insurance—interests in interactive TV and the America Online computer network, Buena Vista home video, Hyperion and Chilton book publishing, four movie and TV production studios and a national distribution system for them, four magazine publishing groups (including *Women's Wear Daily* and other garment-trade newspapers), 429 retail stores for selling Disney products, television and cable networks (including part ownership of A&E, Lifetime, and ESPN), a major league baseball team and a National Hockey League team, three record companies, eleven newspapers (including the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and the *Kansas City Star*), and nine theme parks in the United States and other countries.

A major addition to the Disney empire is its ownership of ABC, which owns twenty-one local radio stations, the largest radio network reaching a quarter of all U.S. radio homes, ABC video, and ABC Network News, whose programs include *Prime Time Live*, *Good Morning America*, *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, and *20/20*.

Rupert Murdoch's entry into national network broadcasting, the FOX network, did little to introduce new or different choices for the public. It followed the Murdochian doctrine of increasing sex and violence while using his ownership of *TV Guide* to cover stories and other feature articles in that publication in an attempt to increase ratings of his weather TV and cable shows.

What emerged by the late 1990s was an intertwining of partners in a variety of joint ventures that controlled a rearrangement of the coun-

try's media landscape. Missing was any partner that would protect consumers' needs in that landscape.

Interactive television and high-definition digital television raised visions of a bonanza of future profits among big cable and telephone companies, but they found themselves confronted with the digital revolution's "500-pound gorilla"—Bill Gates's Microsoft.

Gates, with seemingly endless quantities of money and ambition, could add even greater liquid cash to the interlocked complexes. Not only was he the richest man in America and the manufacturer of the operating systems in 80 percent of personal computers, he also announced plans to decide what the public's standards would be for use of the Internet, World Wide Web, and the coming era of digital, interactive television.

Gates has even included still photographs in his empire. His Microsoft bought control of the Bettmann Archives, the most important collection of historic photographs in the world, and has moved to acquire other photo archives worldwide. As a source of images, still photographs continue to be a major product in commercial and editorial illustration in both printed and electronic media.

The Internet and the World Wide Web had been hailed as providing the ultimate freedom of the individual from mass media control. Individuals could use their phone-connected computers to talk to other computers without corporate or governmental intercession. On the Web they could express their opinions on anything—and "anything" was literally interpreted—and establish groups and bulletin boards for digital conversations with like-minded computer users.

However, the supposedly free-form Internet and World Wide Web were quickly exploited as an even more powerful tool of mass merchandising than television. The Internet and Web can generate

millions of impulse purchases made by those “surfing the net” and encountering moving, four-color advertisements for products that can be ordered instantly by a keystroke.

Local newspapers and broadcast stations continued to shrink their news of local civic and community groups, a loss with special meaning in the United States as compared to other developed democracies. Control of political and social institutions in this country—schools, police, land use policy, etc.—is extraordinarily local. That is why, unlike in other countries, every holder of an American broadcast license must own a local studio. Yet, increasingly over the years, broadcasters have been permitted to abandon access to air time by serious local civic groups. In their place, broadcasters have substituted happy-talk, gossipy features. The result is locally broadcast programs that are in fact standardized national ones with no relationship of local civic needs.

In 1987, cancellation of the Fairness Doctrine made another new antidemocratic phenomenon almost predictable. Talk radio has become an overwhelming ultra-conservative political propaganda machine. The most influential propagandist, Rush Limbaugh, has nineteen million listeners, and there is no right of reply to his extraordinary record of lies, libels, and damaging fantasies. (When the extremely conservative new Republicans took control of the House of Representatives in 1994, the keynote speaker for their first private meeting was Limbaugh.)

Most of the national radio talk shows are characterized by deliberately shocking and sexual crudities or rightwing politics. Robert Unmacht, editor of a radio industry newsletter, said:

“I feel sorry for the listeners. Finding a creative and interesting radio station will be harder because the pressure is on to make them very much alike.”

The growth of corporate control and loss

of citizen access reflects the fading of a crucial reality about broadcasting that the standard news outlets seldom mention.

Almost from the start, national communications law has been based on the concept that the public owns the airwaves. For their part, broadcasters insist on government policing and penalties to prevent unlicensed operators from wittingly or unwittingly jamming the frequencies of established stations; otherwise there would be a chaos of static on radio and screens full of “snow” on television. But federal law also mandates that those who hold licenses must maintain local studios and operate “in the public interest,” which, given the local nature of studios, has meant significant access to the airwaves by community groups. Holders of broadcast licenses have no right to licenses beyond their term limits and presumably may renew them only if they have fulfilled their community obligations.

Despite the law, in recent years both the major media operators and the Congress have acted as though its “public ownership” phrases are not there or can be safely ignored. The Congress, the White House, and the Federal Communications Commission have steadily relaxed standards to permit the growing exclusion of community voices on the country’s 11,000 local commercial radio stations, 1,500 television stations, and 11,800 local cable systems.

Meanwhile, the familiar broadcast twins, sex and violence, have maintained their apparently unchangeable hold on American commercial television, notwithstanding decades of complaints by parents, educators, and the Surgeon General of the United States, who has shown that TV violence increases real violence in society. Ironically, the increasing number of broadcast channels has led to even more aggressive sex and violence programming as more channels compete for fixing view-

ers' attention by using the same formula endlessly replicated without the need for talent or creativity.



There are basic measures to be taken if the public is to regain access to its own media and guarantee choices that have some relationship to the varying needs and tastes of the population. Many of these will require mandatory actions: the broadcast industry has an almost unrelieved history of cynicism and evasion in its promises of self-reform.

● It is time for a new, nonpartisan, nongovernmental commission to study the present and desired future status of the country's media. In 1947, Henry Luce donated the money for the influential Commission on Freedom of the Press, headed by Robert Maynard Hutchins. It dealt with the printed press and gave the country a fresh look at modern needs of news and public information in a democracy. It was important following catastrophes of pre-war dictatorships' controlled media. These were still live memories at time when most American news was still strikingly narrow and parochial.

We need a modern commission to examine the more complex and compelling contemporary need—to remind the American public and the media industry itself of the new power of modern media technology and its obligations to democratic life. Such a commission must avoid the flaws of other important study commissions in which industry influence resulted in a final report that was either vague generalities or a watery support of the status quo.

● The National News Council that existed from 1973 to 1984 is needed today more than ever. Supported by foundations, the Council heard serious complaints about

specific cases of national news media performance, studied the known facts with all parties free to be heard, and issued a report in each case. While none of its recommendations were mandatory, it provided the public with a voice and the news media with a forum for the recognition, admitted or not, of existing weaknesses. But when the foundations, after having created the Council and proved its feasibility and need, said it was time for the industry itself to support the idea, as is done in some other democracies, no major media organizations came forward to support the effort, and the Council died. It is worth trying again, now that the public is more aware of problems in the media than it was twenty years ago.

● The Telecommunications Act of 1996 needs to be replaced by a new law that can begin to break up the most egregious conglomerates, reinstate mandatory local community access, and put teeth in the requirement that stations demonstrate their record for public interest programming when they apply for renewal of their licenses. License challenge procedures have to be made more accessible to civic groups dissatisfied with their local radio and TV broadcast stations. (Networks are not regulated, but their local affiliates are.)

● Public broadcasting must be financed through a new, nonpolitical system, as is done for the best systems in other democracies. Today, noncommercial broadcasting depends on appropriations by federal and state legislatures that themselves are heavily beholden to corporate interests. A small surtax on all consumer electronic equipment—computers, VCRs, TV and radio sets, and the like—is minuscule at the individual retail level but could provide funding for a full-fledged multi-channel radio and TV noncommercial system, and for a substantial national

broadcast news and documentary operation.

Ignored for so long that they now sound radical and remote are earlier proposals for funding public, noncommercial broadcasting. In 1967, a Carnegie Commission proposed a tax on television sets to finance non-commercial television. That year the Ford Foundation financed the Public Broadcasting Laboratory, which paid for an historic and popular one-hour program every Sunday that awakened for many Americans the possibilities that commercial broadcasting lacked.

● The Federal Communications Commission has succumbed to what seems to be the natural history of too many consumer protection agencies, which over time has been to shift from their original purpose of protecting consumers against unfair or dangerous industry behavior to an opposite role of protecting industries from their consumers. The agency needs to be reconstituted to include specified representatives from nonpartisan groups like the Parent Teachers Association, as well as presidential appointees. It has been a generation since 1961 when the new chairman of the FCC, Newton Minow, startled the convention of the National Association of Broadcasters with the statement that they operated "a vast wasteland" and were "squandering the public airwaves," and warned, "There's nothing permanent or sacred in a broadcast license."

The Fairness Doctrine and equal time provisions desperately need to be restored. In 1987 broadcasters promised that their repeal would increase serious public affairs programming. In fact, that kind of programming has been largely abandoned in favor of more advertising and violence. The answer to the Rush Limbaughs is not censorship but a restoration of the public right of timely reply on the stations and at the times the Limbaughs and others now broadcast.

From the inception of commercially licensed broadcasting in 1927, the Fairness Doctrine required broadcasters to devote a reasonable amount of time to discussion of controversial issues of public importance, and to permit reasonable opportunities for opposing views to be heard. It included special provisions to oblige stations to provide reasonable time for response by those attacked in discussions. Beginning in 1979 and continuing through the deregulation campaign of President Reagan in early 1980s, broadcasters pushed for repeal of these regulations, and for all practical purposes the broadcasters won. An equal time provision in essence said that in the forty-five days before an election, stations must make time available to opposing candidates on roughly the same basis, whether for paid time or public service campaign discussions.

● End auctioning of broadcast frequencies to stations. The process implies license ownership. The public still owns the airwaves and frequencies should be granted as in the past—on credible promises made and kept of public service. Restore local voting on monopoly cable franchises instead of the present backroom deals. Let the FCC or its replacement do what basic public ownership of the airwaves implies—give stations licenses for a limited time, conditional on their general performance as good citizens in their communities.

Make it routine to notify all citizens of local market broadcast license renewals—all stations in a state have their renewal come up in the same year. As that date approaches, existing holders of licenses asking for renewal should be required to show public evidence of what they have done in the past.

● The country needs easy, inexpensive licensing of low-power, city- and neighborhood-range radio and TV stations. Japan

has them and so can the United States. As it is, local communities and ordinary local businesses have been effectively excluded from the air by national broadcasters and advertisers.

● Paid political advertising should be banned from American broadcasting, as it is in most democracies. In the two months before elections, every station should be required to provide prime time hours for local and national candidates, with fifteen-minute minimums for presentations to avoid the slick sound bites without content that now dominate broadcast election campaigns.

● Teach serious media literacy in the schools, using independently created curricula. Some already are available and others are being developed. The average American child will spend more time in front of TV set than in front of a teacher. The young are targets for slick materialism. They need to know how this important element in their lives operates and how it can be analyzed.

● More citizens need to join and contribute to the various media reform groups like the Cultural Environment Movement, the Center for Media Education, FAIR, and the Institute for Alternative Journalism. There are other groups, but these can lead interested citizens to specific action and to other action groups.



The domination of private money in public politics, which has subverted so much public policy, also prevents legal solutions to problems in the mass media. Most media proprietors show little or no evidence in their programming of any sense of obligation to treat the American audience as citizens of a democracy. Campaign finance reform and media

reform are directed at the same societal sickness—the influence of private money that improperly negates civic need and public choice. Linked to the same problem, they have become linked in the ultimate remedy. At stake is the accountability of politics and with it the media's socialization of American children and the nation's culture. ■

Ben H. Bagdikian has been a Washington bureau chief and foreign correspondent for the *Providence Journal*, an assistant managing editor of the *Washington Post*, and a dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley. He has won many journalism awards, including a Pulitzer Prize. This essay is adapted from the Preface to the recently published Fifth



Edition of his book, *The Media Monopoly*.

Steering the Six O'Clock Report

Four New York City directors discuss the pressures, the challenges, and the skill involved in directing local TV news.

By Brian Rose

TV newsrooms are congested, frantic environments. Reporters dash from their computers to the editing rooms, assignment editors try to juggle three or four phones at the same time, producers scramble from desk to desk preparing for their rundowns, all to the accompaniment of

shrieking police radios, blaring TV sets, and telephones which never stop ringing.

Unlike network news, where on most days there's an orderly progression of activity leading to the climax of the 6:30 newscast, local TV news is far more turbulent and chaotic. One reason is the insistence on "live" television, which means

They're local:
Mark Fetner,
Dan Berg,
Steve Grymes,
and Jon Keller



crews are sent to cover any event which moves, often right up until show time. Another is the expanded nature of "show time" itself, which now means pre-dawn newscasts, noon newscasts, early afternoon newscasts, as well as the perennial 6, 10, and 11 o'clock reports.

In the midst of this whirlwind, sits the director, who must ultimately process all of the incoming information, guide the anchors and technical crew and get it on the air. Though not responsible for the editorial product (that's the job of the producer), the director must skillfully weave the pre-packaged stories, live remotes, graphics, and studio personnel into a seamless whole.

It's a demanding and stressful job, whose pressures and responsibilities have significantly increased over the last decade. New technologies and equipment, ranging from satellite remotes, to helicopters, to powerful computer graphics systems have made local newscasts every bit as sophisticated and slick as their network counterparts. But they've also added an extra technical burden, and, as in the case of robotic cameras, even reduced a measure of creative flexibility.

The reigning mantra of downsizing observed by TV station managements has also affected directors not only through the replacement of their camera operators by robots, but through a growing pressure to do more with less. As the following interviews reveal, the stability and bounty which used to be the hallmark of local news operations, at least in New York City, have largely disappeared. New batches of reporters and producers (and even anchors) seem to move in and out of newsrooms every few years, leaving the director and his reduced technical crew to hold onto the reins.

Nevertheless, the directors interviewed for this article are, as they freely admit, "adrenaline junkies," who love local

news for the continuing excitement and thrill of the unexpected it provides. They're clearly energized by their work, especially during breaking news when the script is thrown out and they're left to pilot the ship on their own skill and resources. Directing a newscast in the number one market provides them with ample opportunities to test their mettle, as New York City regularly careens from one crisis to another every few weeks.

Between them, the four directors for the city's owned-and-operated stations bring nearly forty years of experience to their assignments. Dan Berg of FOX's WNYW started out directing commercials at KKTU in Colorado Springs in the late 1970s, then moved to KOA and KUSA in Denver; in 1982 he began work at WHDH in Boston, staying there until 1991 when he came to WNYW.

Mark Fetner has worked at Disney's WABC-TV throughout his entire career, starting out as a clerk in 1969, then Associate Director in 1972, a weekend news and public affairs director in 1975, and then finally moving to the weekdays, taking on the 11 o'clock news in 1977 and becoming permanent director of the 6 o'clock in 1979. He's still at both tasks.

Steve Grymes came to General Electric's WNBC after working as a director for WJXT in Jacksonville, Florida from 1975-76, and then shifting to WBAL in Baltimore for six more years. He's been directing a variety of weekday newscasts at WNBC since 1983.

Jon Keller has been at Westinghouse's WCBS since 1976, working at a number of positions before becoming the director of their 5 and 11 o'clock newscasts starting in 1990.

Though these four directors work in the largest TV market, their insights on the changes and operations of local news tell us a great deal about the state of news broadcasting around the country.

Local News Directors

Brian Rose: *What changes do you think have had the most impact over the last 10 years in local news?*

Jon Keller: I think robotic cameras were probably the most major change in my career as a director. You can't be spontaneous anymore, at least in terms of shots. You can't say, "quick, get that" now. With one guy operating five cameras, you just don't have the flexibility we once had.

Steve Grymes: And you can only be moving one camera at one time. When we went over to robotics, I was still doing a very spontaneous show called *Live at 5* and part of the charm of the show was the wild interplay between the anchors and weathermen. It was one of the most frustrating times for me as director, because I could no longer capture that feeling without four camera operators searching for reactions. All I could do now is to use a master four-shot, instead of relying on quick reaction cuts.

Dan Berg: I actually like certain aspects of robotics. They can do more than is humanely possible. I can have a camera truck, pan, tilt and zoom, all at the same time; be smooth and stay in focus. It's a little tougher to be spontaneous, and this makes the director work harder in anticipation of what is going to happen next. You also need a good operator to get things quickly when called for.

Keller: I remember when Brian Williams was an anchor for us, and once he and Tyler Mathieson were sitting in what we called the pit—a round, circular part of our set. The robotic cameras have bumpers so they will stop when they bump into each other, but we didn't count on the fact that the teleprompters' mirrors

stick out further than the bumpers do. As we're on the air, one of the cameras begins moving and its prompter mirror hits the set and started moving it and kept moving it. The anchors were hysterical.

Another big change that needs to be mentioned has been the influx of new people. For years and years and years, we had the same people—the same producers, the same writers, the same directors, the same news management. Once we started losing this old guard, the way we covered news changed, the way our news sounded changed. The way I direct the show started to change.

With the old-timers, we would have the show set fifteen minutes before the newscast. Now it's much more fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants. Things have changed drastically for us.

Mark Fetner: One problem with this influx is that we now have a lot of non-New Yorkers who, for example, don't know the layout of the town.

Grymes: We've gone through periods like that, but I've found the inexperienced people tend to get weeded out pretty fast, especially once they end up on the assignment desk or become a producer.

Berg: This situation also happens with the quick turnover of reporters, who come into town and don't know the history of the city, or how to pronounce Houston Street.

Grymes: Among the biggest changes for me over the last decade have been the volume of personnel changes. You have to deal with new situations every day. Producers come and go very rapidly, and that's extremely difficult.

Rose: *Yet as I look around this room, I'm struck by the fact that there seems to be great stability among directors. How do you*

account for that?

Berg: I'd say the reason for this is each station only has one or two directors, compared to the ranks of reporters, producers and writers. I think it's also when ratings are a problem it's usually the on-air personalities that seem to change.

Grymes: You need a few old timers around for some sort of continuity and to be the glue. I've gone through a hellish four or five years recently as new management has taken over, and you have to sit back and say, why did I survive when so many others didn't? And the answer is there has to be some glue in the middle of things to keep it all together, especially when they're throwing new producers and reporters into the mix every few months. You need somebody in the story to keep it together.

Rose: *Local news seems to be far more driven by live events than network news. Is that your impression as well?*

Berg: I would say so. We all have our four or five remote trucks, and our helicopters, and even though they may be used for gratuitous live shots, especially at night, they're all out there and they're being used. I think it's become a breaking news medium. You want to be the first guy out there with a breaking story, no matter what it takes.

Fetner: Even though we may be the only ones out there, who really cares who's got the story first? We're all watching each other.

Grymes: But it's also important to note that there are times when a story comes up that if you're there first, you own it, and viewers will stay with you. This was certainly true for the two big stories for us last year—the "Blizzard of 1996" (as it was dubbed) and the tragedy of TWA Flight 800.

Rose: *Those are two interesting examples, because in both cases your stations were all on the air almost continuously, for hour after hour. What's the pressure like on you as directors in those kind of situations?*

Fetner: Actually, it sometimes lessens the pressure on us, at least in terms of what we get from management. The news director will simply be happy that we got the situation on the air, and isn't as concerned with misspelled chiron. Whereas if it's a lead story that they've been working on all day, they are insistent that it have high-quality and high production values.

Berg: I'm often asked why I'm so calm if it's a breaking news situation, and I say it's because we have a built-in excuse if something goes wrong. You get to throw out the scripts, you sit in a chair for four hours or more, and everything is going crazy. So if something does go wrong there's a certain acceptability about it, and time goes by like that. The next day when you're back to doing straight news packages it seems like a boring job.

Grymes: I'll be frank about it, I'm an adrenaline junkie. I find I thrive in the control room when the heat goes up.

Keller: I find I'm also planning next day's coverage while I'm going live, figuring out how we're going to package what we're showing, what kind of graphics and animation to add.

Rose: *And this is all going on at the same time while you're on the air with it?*

Fetner: In the case of the TWA crash, we had to also concern ourselves with how long our helicopters could stay up there without refueling. How long it would take to find gas at midnight, and what we would do on the air in-between.

Berg: There's something extraordinarily exciting about the live element. Going in

there knowing you're not completely prepared because you can't be. You've got to stay on your toes. It also has a lot to do with working with crews. You've got to watch everybody else and make sure you set them up two steps ahead of time, and yet you still have to stay in the present. It's like a conductor who has to stay two beats ahead of time.

Fetner: Not only that, but you have to worry about whether the person you're setting up two steps ahead can do it, and if not, what can you fall back on.

Rose: *You contrast live directing with your typical days, which involve a great deal of production packaging—putting the best face on the stories in the newscast for that day. Has the degree of packaging changed over the last decade?*

Keller: I think there's more production in the packages now, with less time to do it. We used to have an hour more during the day to get them done.

Grymes: Ten or so years ago, we as directors had a lot more aesthetic control over what the stories looked like. Everything used to come through the control room because we had all the fancy bells and whistles to make news stories more attractive. Now with the way technology has evolved, there are separate graphics rooms that can do a tremendous amount of manipulation. Plus the editing rooms themselves have a lot of technical flexibility. At one point, we had so many different graphic styles in our stories that we were simply all over the place. Now we have a lead director who maintains the look of the station and tries to make the wipes and graphics observe some unity.

Berg: At my station, WNYW, the graphic look of the newscasts is now pretty much the responsibility of the graphics department, and I think it's better this way. They

have the advantage of spending their whole day in a post-production room, developing and working on a graphic look, whereas the director would not have the time to do that. Then the director is usually brought in for a consultation to see how the graphic package can be applied to the newscast.

Fetner: There's not really a power struggle, it's usually a consensus between the art department, news management, and the three main directors of the newscasts to work things out.

Keller: At WCBS, we work essentially the same way by consensus. We try to keep the shows looking similar so people know they're watching our station.

Rose: *Yet when it comes to graphic looks, there's no question in my mind that WNYW, as a FOX station, is the most edgy. Dan, how did this decision to be come about?*

Berg: It was a consortium of opinion to be different and try different things in contrast to what's going on at other stations. Each of our shows makes a deliberate attempt to look different from one another. And each night we try to do things differently within each show—different wipes, etc., all to provide some kind of freshness and edge. This is done because we realize that our audience at FOX, or at least our intended audience, is younger.

Rose: *Do you think that's a direction all stations will be following—to concentrate far more on graphic elements?*

Grymes: I think that's a philosophy that depends on the station. It can change with the general manager. Our last general manager, who's now with CNBC, deliberately wanted a more uniform look, as well as a less ostentatious look, in order to be more network-like.

Rose: *All of you work for owned-and-operated stations. Is there any kind of relationship between the networks and you at the local stations?*

Berg: We don't really have a network look at FOX. There's no national news which drives our graphics.

Fetner: Aside from using stories from the network feeds, we have very little to do with the network news. We do much more with the affiliate feed, but that would be the same relationship any ABC station would have. There's also an O&O feed, but that often leans towards human interest stories.

Keller: We don't have much to do with them either. We pick up packages off the network feeds; we don't share a graphic look, we don't even share a chiron look.

Grymes: We have made an effort to marry our look to the network, so there isn't as much distinction when you look at them and look at us. There's certainly more of a give-and-take between the network and us in local now than there was when I first got there thirteen years ago. Back then, local was clearly looked down upon, and that's changed to a degree.

Keller: Three of the directors at CBS came out of our station, so we get a little more respect for what we do.

Rose: *What do you think are the chief differences between what you do at local vs. your counterparts at network news.*

Fetner: It seems to me at the network there's a very clear and sharp line between what the director does and any editorial decisions. We'll all discuss what to lead with on occasion, and since I've been in New York far longer than many producers have, they'll often consider my input.

Berg: We also vote on leads and story

selection sometimes, though the news director has four votes to our one.

Keller: The director and the producer work so much closer in local news vs. network, both physically and emotionally. You learn to trust each other—you know how they think, and you trust their judgement. It works out very well. I worked at CBS as an A.D., and I know that at that network level you get so much more time to plan your show. Your show is set by the middle of the afternoon. But at local, that's just not the case—the show blows up four times between two o'clock and five o'clock.

Fetner: And twice more after that.

Berg: I think local is willing to take more chances, while national is not. Maybe it's because the audience is so much larger at the network, and risk taking is far too dangerous. Our show may be constantly changing while it is on the air.

Grymes: This is also because so many different things can take over the lead of a local show that wouldn't even be thought of on a national show. I think that's part of the reason. Just look at how many elements we put into our shows vs. the *Nightly News*. I've worked at the network and I know the atmosphere there is much more staid. Everything is pre-ordained about what is done, and the show is set hours before airtime.

At the local level, we're liquid. That's what makes our job so hard, but it's also what makes us, I think, better equipped to handle any situation because we're tried in fire.

Keller: Local stations are willing to go on the air and say, "There's been this car accident, we don't have much information, but we're going to try and get it for you and we'll get it on as soon as we can." The networks would never say that, unless they have video and a great deal of verifi-

able information. They won't go on the air with anything unless it's absolutely set, and we will.

Berg: Doing that on the local level also serves as a hook-and-tease, because it helps hold the audience throughout the newscast.

Rose: *Over the years, there has been a tremendous expansion in local news—newscasts start at 5:30 a.m., pick up again at noon, then at 5. Has this changed the nature of your work?*

Fetner: It's certainly changed mine. Until 1980 we only did an hour-long 6 o'clock news and then an 11 o'clock news, and that was it. Then they decided to add an hour-long 5 o'clock news, and I volunteered to direct that. Next, management asked who would direct the 11? And I said I would do that too.

Keller: So you're the one responsible for our increased workload? *(laughter all around)*.

Grymes: Before I came to New York, I used to direct the two local newscasts at the stations I worked for. But when I was hired at WNBC, it was exclusively for the 6 o'clock news. Each newscast had its own director. But all that changed after the heady times of the mid-1980s went down the toilet.

The hard-times didn't start immediately after GE took over NBC; it was really in the early 1990s. At that point new product was being created, while people were going out the door. So we were literally shouldering more and more responsibility with more and more shows. I'm doing more work now than I did at the start of my career in Jacksonville, Florida.

Rose: *Do all of you agree with that?*

Fetner: Yes, but I also want to add that the adrenaline of the experience makes it

all bearable. When I stop feeling that rush, I'll know it's time to stop working. For example, last night our 11 o'clock newscast was delayed until 12:30 in the morning because of a football game. We were all dragging. But when it got close to air-time, not just me but the whole crew was chipper and alert.

Keller: The down time is the rough time, the time between shows. The hour or so before the show is crucial to get everybody on the crew up and running.

Our job used to be one of finesse—make it look great so that people will remember it. Now it's just get it on the air. We used to be artistic, but that's changed in favor of just keeping it on the air.

Rose: *When did this begin to happen?*

Grymes: There was a phrase that came into operation at our station during the early 1990s—risk management. Risk management is basically we will take this risk lopping off this person, lopping off that person, and cutting here in terms of production costs. And we'll take that risk. What ends up happening to us, is that we don't have enough key backups.

Berg: That happens to us as well. For example, we may have a fill-in technical director who isn't up to speed, and they'll say to us, "Well, in that case, just simplify your show." That really bothers me because this means I have to scale back my show.

Grymes: We don't get that attitude. Even though there's been cutbacks in every area, management still expects us to do business as usual and see the same things.

Rose: *Describe your relationship with the anchors.*

Keller: You want them to look their best, you want them to feel comfortable, you don't want them to be left hanging. We

talk to our anchors a lot. We're in their ears constantly, keeping them posted, letting them know about any changes.

Grymes: I think the relationship between directors and anchors varies a lot, depending on the personalities of the individuals involved. I've been fortunate enough to deal with our anchors over a long period of time.

Berg: There's an important trust factor. The anchors who are the smartest generally have a good rapport with directors. My job is protecting them and making sure they look good.

Rose: *Jon, you once said to me that working in local news is crazy—there's never enough*

time or enough people. Would you all agree?

Fetner: You always feel you could do better if you had a bit more time to get things preproduced. But I have a feeling that's one of those laws that no matter how much time you had, you always want more. You could probably keep tweaking the product forever.

Grymes: I don't think it can ever be improved. We were as pressed for time ten or twelve years ago with twice the number of people as we are today. ■

*Brian Rose is a Professor in the Department of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University. His article on network news directors appeared in Vol. XXVII, No. 4 issue of *Television Quarterly*.*

Viewpoint

Using Hidden Cameras

"What is the truth about hidden cameras and television news magazines? Well, for openers, *60 Minutes*, which all but invented the television news magazine and the hidden camera which unfortunately, these days, too often comes with it, does not go looking for hidden camera stories. Hidden camera stories come looking for us. And maybe, just maybe, one or two a year are worth pursuing...some years none.

"If it's needed to tell the story or is the only way to tell it, by all means use it. Going undercover to report a story that cries to be told is not a sin against journalism. Going undercover as a circulation stunt is.

"'Hey, look at us. We got a camera on the moon!' is a legitimate boast. 'Hey, look at us, we got a hidden camera into a crack house in East St. Louis!' is not. Do it if you must (and 'if you must' are the operative words) but stop crowing about it. It's just another journalistic tool, and the more sparingly it's used, the better."

—Don Hewitt, executive producer of *60 Minutes*,
guest commentary in *Electronic Media*, March 3, 1997

Assignment: The Cable News Battle

By Jim Snyder

I have spent many more hours than most viewers the past seven months watching the 24-hour cable news channel combat between CNN and its two new competitors, MSNBC and FOX Cable News. I liked seeing all that energy and journalistic thought displayed daily by so many talented people on and off camera. It all prompted two big questions, "Is this news glut?" and "Can all three survive?"

As MSNBC debuted in July and FOX Cable News in October, CNN, although profitable, was still struggling with its dilemma of many years. When there's no Gulf War or O.J. criminal trial CNN's ratings take a big dip to surprisingly low levels. That had happened in the spring of 1996; not encouraging for CNN and a message for MSNBC and FOX Cable News that they had to appeal to more than just the loyal CNN viewers.

At this point in its short history MSNBC, when it is reporting the news—as opposed to talking it to death or deviating into broadcasting the Imus 6-to-9 a.m. radio show or the part-infomercial *The Site* at 10 p.m.—is a worthy cousin of NBC News. It figures since its top brass are all creatures of the big three network news world. MSNBC covers the news the way NBC does but is free to devote much more airtime to

breaking stories.

So too with FOX Cable News which has, at times, a more newsy format with less reliance on talk during the day than MSNBC. From 6 to 9 a.m. it does 15-minute "wheels" of the top stories which may appeal more to viewers who can't abide watching one camera staring at Imus and a couple other guys doing a radio show on MSNBC. It fills its afternoon hours in part by reaching out for live interviews with correspondents and newsmakers around the country. FOX Cable News, owned by Rupert Murdoch and directed by Roger Ailes, who is not a creature of the network news world, wants to be more feisty and is more likely to provoke critics into labeling it "tabloidy."

Political conservatives Murdoch and Ailes are on record against "bias and lack of balance" in the mainstream media. The Murdoch/Ailes view could make their cable news product different, and controversial to some. For example, FOX Cable producers were recently reported to be working on a segment which would examine the "lack of creativity" in the big three network nightly newscasts.

CNN after 18 years of being the only cable news service was ripe for some competition. Critics complained of bureaucracy, "robotic anchors," unimaginative



production and downright dullness when there was no blockbuster story to cover. CNN's greatest strength in the new competitive climate is what it has done best for years: gathering the news quickly from anywhere. When a major story breaks at home or abroad, it is difficult to outdo CNN.

In January, when the House Ethics Committee was about to hold its first public hearing on the Newt Gingrich affair, everyone had pool video of people milling around the hearing room. MSNBC had its anchor talking to a correspondent who was ad-libbing as he stood in front of a marble column outside the Capitol Building. CNN was better prepared with their congressional correspondent in a studio voicing over the pool video and doing split screen interviews with two impressive veterans of work in and around the Congress. CNN has spent years building up its Washington savvy, and it shows.

One afternoon in December, fires had broken out in a residential area of Orange County, California. By 1 p.m. CNN had live helicopter coverage and correspondent reports from an area near the burning houses. FOX's coverage was dismal for a couple of hours. They did not have a correspondent report from the scene until about 3:30 and that was poorly done. FOX anchorwoman's ad-libs clanked on my ear when she said "Orange County, that's Los Angeles."

Another CNN strength is its working relationship with scores of local stations, including network affiliates, which buy its news service. This has been going on for about 15 years and gives CNN a powerful news gathering tool.

I remember taking a tour of CNN facilities in Atlanta when it was just starting. After the tour, I talked with Reese Schoenfeld, who ran CNN in its early years. I gave him my mostly favorable impressions. CNN was the first network to produce

news programs from an open control room setup a few feet from the anchor desk. And they were using satellite technology in a way no one else had done to gather news from around the nation and the world.

My only negative impression was prompted by the absence of any well-known news anchors. Ted Turner was opposed to spending large sums on such people. He was critical of what he called "the god-like network anchors." So Schoenfeld hired people who did not have any large market success on their resumes and could not command large salaries.

Things have improved in the last ten years but it is obvious MSNBC and FOX feel there are anchor weaknesses at CNN that they can exploit. Enter Tom Brokaw, Bob Costas, Katie Couric, Jane Pauley and Brian Williams at MSNBC; and Catherine Crier, Bill O'Reilly, Mike Schneider, John Scott, and Washington correspondent Brit Hume at FOX Cable. CNN labels news programs as *The World Tonight* or *Inside Politics*. At its competitors, the shows are named for the star anchor—the *Brian Williams Show* or *Time and Again* with Jane Pauley on MSNBC, *The Mike Schneider Show* and *the Catherine Crier Show* on FOX Cable.

MSNBC, unlike FOX, went on the air offering a striking difference in their on-air look from CNN, which hadn't changed its look in years. I like MSNBC's sets, lighting, graphics and production style. The Brian Williams hour-long news show at 9 p.m. will never be accused of copying CNN.

Williams' easygoing style and sly humor is a welcome break with tradition. The departure from the straight-ahead-shot-of-the-anchor approach makes the newscast distinctive and more enjoyable. CNN has long honored the practice of having the anchors bolted to their chairs to be seen only from the waist up no matter what the design of the desk. Walter Cronkite once remarked that a lot of people thought he had no legs because

they had seen him only on TV behind an anchor desk.

I also give extra points to MSNBC for not insisting that there be two anchors on the program. Williams and his producers appear to be free to try things on the air. CNN anchors could use a little of that.

The MSNBC set is the largest departure from the news set norm any network has made in my memory. Parts of it do look like the walls of a loft somewhere that is in various stages of renovation and decoration with electronic devices. Roger Ailes, Chairman of FOX Cable News and a veteran generator of barbed comment, said of this set, "They have brought back the coffee basements of the 1960s." The FOX Cable News sets break no new ground.

I like the MSNBC set because of its bright lighting and the camera angles available to a show director. *The Brian Williams Show* displays Williams as a whole human being, legs and all, and varies the shots to include, of all things, Brian from the side and back.

I also applaud the practice of making NBC News and FOX network news correspondents available for live shots on the cable news services. It enriches the news shows and reduces the traditional frustration of network reporters having to fight to get painfully brief stories on the nightly news programs. I remember a CBS correspondent who complained to the executive producer in New York that I, as Washington producer for the Cronkite News, was trying to destroy his career by preventing him from appearing on Walter's show more than twice a week.

One recent afternoon, I watched NBC correspondent Andrea Mitchell do a strong live report for MSNBC from its Washington Bureau. Andrea, one of the hardest charging reporters I have ever known, obviously enjoyed the assignment, all 10 minutes of it. It was therapy for her years of fashioning *NBC Nightly News* reports that could not be a few seconds more than

a minute. An appearance a few minutes later by the NBC Pentagon correspondent, Ed Rabel, was another reminder of how the pool of seasoned NBC reporters is invaluable to MSNBC.

For years, as the three major networks became more reluctant to interrupt regular programming for extended live coverage of breaking stories (even Presidential news conferences are routinely passed over by the big three), CNN and sometimes C-SPAN have reaped much audience praise by filling the gap. Now MSNBC and FOX also are happy to provide extensive live coverage whenever possible. That means viewers also have more variety in the analysis included with the live coverage.

The conventional nightly network half-hour news programs deplore the long sound-bite. No one makes extended remarks on the nightly news. But they do on MSNBC and FOX, especially in live interviews. This can be a curse as well as a blessing for the people who must decide how to fill up all that time on a cable news service. The staffers who book the many guests cable news organizations need are as important as their bosses. There is nothing more painful than a booker mistake, putting someone on the air who is boring and incapable of holding anyone's attention past the first 10 seconds.

I give all three cable news services high marks for *covering the news*, staying on top of the daily news flow and reacting quickly when live coverage or interviews anywhere in the country can be used to advance the story. CNN after all these years is best at this. MSNBC, with all the help it gets from NBC News staff, is not far behind CNN now. FOX Cable News managers have the right instincts, but they do not yet have the news organization the other two services have and so are sometimes limited in where they can quickly go

for live coverage. And FOX is also limited because some of its affiliate stations do not have strong news departments to call. MSNBC, however, has many excellent NBC affiliate news operations to turn to.

Whatever their differences in style, formats or talent, all three cable services deserve praise for bringing fast coverage of important, interesting stories that CBS, NBC and ABC prefer to hold till their next scheduled newscast rather than interrupt regular programming. Of course, there are things I don't like about the three cable news services. CNN loses me with its afternoon show *Talk Back Live*. I am allergic to too much interactivity. If I never hear another ludicrous or ill-informed telephone call from a viewer, I'll be happy. Expecting profundities from a studio audience is a hazardous business too. The hour-long *Talk Back Live* was aptly called a "channel changer" by a *Newsweek* critic.

MSNBC bills itself as a "news, information and talk service." The news is fine, but the talk causes trouble. I don't mean talking between anchors and correspondents or program celebrity guests. It's the talk in the daytime when MSNBC tries to save money and appeal to a younger audience. Two or three young guests who are called "contributors" sit around a table with a moderator and discuss various topics in the news.

The ideal "contributor" apparently must be a late twenties or early thirties-something, upward-striving, and meet some hip dress code. Black leather vests and mod hair styles are in vogue. The viewer may fidget when it becomes obvious these folks are not all that smart or knowledgeable about the subject.

I think of it as minor-league punditry. Others have compared it to "the convention at a bad cocktail party." A friend of mine calls it "windbaggery." It all provokes the

question "Why should I stay tuned if these folks don't deserve all this airtime?" I have seen a fair number of "contributors" who qualified as "channel changers."

CNN's biggest rating getter is *Larry King Live*, the nightly interview show. Larry has an industry-wide reputation as a man who rarely asks guests tough questions. But one day I saw a promo with Larry saying "I'll ask anybody anything, I asked President Reagan how it felt to be shot and he said 'it was breathtaking.'" That promo gets my nomination as "bummer of the year" for its effort to get a laugh out of a Presidential assassination attempt.

FOX Cable News irritates many with its practice of regularly inserting information on the left of the screen and to the anchor's right to supplement the information being given vocally by the anchor. Some of these information bits may become collectors' items. One day the video accompanying a story about allergies was a close-up still picture of a nose. That nose stayed on screen forever while the inserted material told you how much money is spent on allergy remedies. Coverage of a President Clinton news conference included an insert that Calvin Coolidge held eight news conferences in his first year in office.

NBC News president Andy Lack, who is credited with designing the MSNBC format, points out that NBC is the first to broadcast news on three platforms—over the air, cable and the Internet. It also is the first news organization to regularly infuriate the managers of its affiliate stations by encouraging viewers to turn away from NBC and go to MSNBC.

Tom Brokaw ends his nightly news with a plug for a prime time MSNBC show. On February 4, he made negative promotion history when he advised those watching NBC for the State of the Union address they could turn away from NBC to MSNBC if they preferred coverage of the O.J. Simpson civil suit verdict!

MSNBC in turn promotes Brokaw's nightly news and many other NBC offerings. Both relentlessly promote their web sites and the Internet. Naturally the web sites promote the other two with equal fervor. The promotion effort by the three cable news services is large and impressive but restricted by the limited reach of all three. CNN is carried on cable channels which reach 70 million viewers but has anemic ratings. MSNBC is carried on cable channels which reach 28 million (which will expand to 55 million in 2000). FOX Cable News is carried on cable channels which reach 17 million people.

Nielsen has not yet measured the MSNBC and FOX Cable News audiences, but you don't need Nielsen to understand that they are reaching only a small sliver of the nation's viewers. They are not having any discernible impact in many major cities, Atlanta, Detroit, Houston and San Francisco for example. In Washington, FOX Cable News is seen only on District of Columbia cable. In Northern Virginia and suburban Maryland, where more than two thirds of the Washington area's viewers live, FOX Cable News is not available on the cable systems.

Despite the barriers of the three services building large audiences, those obstacles may not be major factors in deciding the future of 24-hour cable news. CNN, now part of the Time Warner giant, MSNBC, creation of Microsoft and NBC, and FOX Cable News, just one element of Murdoch's media empire, are being swept along in the concentration of American media power among a few large companies.

In this era of broadcasting, audience ratings may not be as important as "bundling"—that's a popular trade label for describing the work of broadcasting company executives who have recognized the revenue producing advantages of expanding into ownership and operation

of many channels. NBC, ABC, FOX and CNN are bundlers in good standing. CBS News got a late start, but now under new owner Westinghouse is bundling at a brisk pace.

This creates "a bean counter's dream" by spreading manpower, production and marketing costs over more than one company. Moving the NBC assignment desk out of New York and into MSNBC headquarters in Fort Lee, N.J. and building its programming around the heavy hitter NBC anchors and correspondents is an example of the fashionable corporate strategy. The cost of all that talent does not increase as it is absorbed by three or four properties rather than one.

CNN is bundled with its *Headline News* service, CNN International, CNN SI, the new sports channel in partnership with *Sports Illustrated*, and with its Internet news service. FOX cable is linked with the TV network, and FOX news service in Europe and Asia.

The birth of MSNBC and FOX Cable News was more about efficiency and positioning by media giants than responding to a viewer need for more cable news. It was in part a matter of broadcasting companies reaching for lower-overhead, higher-revenue glory. The situation indicates longevity for the cable news services, and many more bundling opportunities to come.

What about "news glut"? It appears to be in the eye of the beholder. Some citizens think we already have it. Millions are looking for more news choices, not fewer, as we move to the 500 channel world. Let us all hope that fairness and accuracy standards survive, whatever cable news clutter engulfs us. ■

Jim Snyder has been a *Television Quarterly* contributor since 1984. He has had a distinguished career in broadcast news as a writer, reporter, CBS News producer and radio and TV news director. He served for 22 years as vice president of news for the Post Newsweek Stations.



Local TV Newscasts Ignore Local Elections

Criticism of national election coverage is frequent. But what about the local campaigns? A revealing survey probes a neglected problem.

By Paul Klite

Every two years, local television stations have the opportunity to showcase another general election cycle. For an industry addicted to sensation, commercials and trivia, the biennial ballot could be a dream come true. There are billions in advertising revenue, vital issues, strong personalities, scandal, sex, waste, fraud, abuse, power, money, winners, losers. Yes!

The locals, with their large staffs and big blocks of news time, are uniquely positioned to do the best job of covering their

hometown and regional campaigns. Stations can even be idealistic good citizens in their reporting. Channel SEVEN serves the community! EIGHT listens! NINE cares! Trust TEN! . . . Right?

Wrong. Local TV news departments opted for a different path in 1996. Stations chose to ignore local election news, cover mostly celebrity candidates and take the advertising bucks. That's the impression from three snapshot surveys across the United States conducted by Rocky Mountain Media Watch.

A volunteer network of concerned citizens, academics and students taped their evening (10 or 11 p.m.) newscasts on three Wednesdays, eight, five and two weeks before the November ballot. The volunteers viewed each taped news show and noted every election news story and political commercial using a standardized form and instruction sheet. A total of 90 different stations from 46 cities were included in at least one survey, and 200 newscasts were viewed in all.

Survey I, eight weeks before election day, contained 102 separate election stories in 59 newscasts. A full 70 percent of those focused on the U.S. Presidential contest. Only nine percent concerned U.S. Senate races and two percent were about U.S. House races. Six percent of election stories discussed statewide contests like governor and state legislatures. Another seven percent were about mayoral and other municipal election issues. Finally two percent of election stories covered ballot propositions.

Sixteen of the 59 stations (27%) had zero election news and 43 stations (73%) broadcast no local, state or municipal election news that day.

For Survey II, five weeks before the election, a similar pattern was noted. Fifty-five of 80 newscasts (69%) monitored in 43 cities across the U.S. contained no news of state, municipal and local election contests.

Only 72 election news stories were noted on the 80 newscasts that evening. Of these, 57% concerned the U.S. presidency, 14% were about U.S. congressional contests, 14% discussed state and municipal races, seven percent were about ballot initiatives and eight percent concerned general election information.

In Survey III, thirteen days before the November ballot, election coverage began to increase. Yet, almost half (45%) of 71 local TV newscasts contained no news of local, state and municipal election

contests. Of the 183 election stories in this sample of local newscasts, 62% were about the national Presidential race.

The remainder of election news was divided between U.S. Congress races, 12%, Governor and State Legislature contests, five percent, municipal races, two percent, ballot propositions, 13% and general election stories, six percent.

When the data from each survey was analyzed by market size, area of the U.S. or network affiliation, the results were the same. The amount of election news was minimal—and mostly concerned the Presidential contest. Stories about local, state or municipal candidates and issues were few and far between.

A very different pattern was noted in our analysis of election advertising in these same newscasts. While the local TV news departments were ignoring the local elections, political advertisers were not. In **Survey I**, 30% of ads were for U.S. Congress races, 21% advertised Governors and other state races, 20% focused on Presidential candidates and nine percent concerned ballot issues. Forty-four election commercials were noted in the 59 newscasts.

Survey II contained more political commercials than election news—one hundred and forty election ads within the

Advertising and news on 200 local TV newscasts

Race	News Stories	Commercials
U.S. President	63%	21%
U.S. Congress	12	40
State races	5	19
Municipal races	5	3
Ballot propositions	9	14
General	6	3
TOTAL	100%	100%

80 newscasts. These were divided between U.S. Congress races, 45%, Presidential candidates, 31%, Governor and other State contests, ten percent, ballot propositions, eight percent. The remaining four percent contained general election information.

In **Survey III**, with 234 political ads in the sample, 39% were for congressional candidates, 26% for Governor and state legislature races, 19% concerned ballot propositions, five percent for municipal and miscellaneous contests and only ten percent were for U.S. President. Six stations had no political ads.

The average number of political commercials per local newscast rose from 0.8 in **Survey I** to 1.8 in **Survey II** and 3.3 in **Survey III**.

Up to 80 million people tune in to local television newscasts each night to connect to the issues of their community and the world. It may be their main news source, and local stations have a responsibility to provide citizens with a healthy and nourishing diet of information. Those still are the public's airwaves (wink, nod).

Our surveys revealed that most news departments simply passed on the 1996 local elections. Old habits are hard to break and, in the weeks leading up to the November ballot, citizens watching local news were treated to the same old same old: murder, mayhem and meatloaf contests; fires, floods and fluff. [And what's-his-name. O-something.] Local television newscasts are notorious for ignoring issues like the environment and education except when there is concomitant disaster or conflict; local elections qualify as another invisible topic.

Post-mortem examinations of the 1996 elections are scrutinizing why voter turnout was the lowest since Bob Dole was born and Warren G. Harding was elected

President. Nationally, audience for the political conventions and the Presidential debates was down by 50%; so was nightly network news coverage of political issues. Polls were stagnant during the campaign, and there was little scent of blood in the air. The media was playing chess; the politicians were playing Go.

All sides of the political spectrum agree that campaign finance reform must be accomplished before the next election cycle. Money was a major corrupting influence in the whole electoral process. A record two billion dollars was spent across the country and politicians went to the ends of the Earth to get it.

Campaign contributions from big spenders buy influence and access and defeat the idea of one person, one vote. The money isn't spent to just buy votes anymore; when used for negative media advertising, money can effectively turn voters off and shrink the electorate. That apparently was the case in 1996. We've all seen the bumper sticker that says: "Don't vote. It only encourages them."

Since most of the campaign money goes directly to television stations for advertising, it's fair to say that campaign finance reform is inseparable from media reform. The low turnout and voter apathy could be a statement of no confidence in both the political and media systems.

Elections should not be about who has the most money for television advertising. If all we know about local issues and candidates comes from thirty-second television ads, our precious vote is cheapened. The ad money buys TV's powerful brand of manipulation and influence; image, not information; spin, not substance; entertainment, not education. And only for those who can afford it.

Modest attempts in Minnesota this year to get candidates to refrain from negative advertising were unsuccessful. There is, however, an emerging voter backlash against negative advertising. Local TV

stations and newscasts have to be part of the media election reform effort. Good election information should have some priority over station profit. All three surveys demonstrated stations big and small turning a blind eye to local elections. Ads, yes. News, no. In the public interest, indeed.

Because TV signals overlap political boundaries, a bad habit has developed within the broadcasting industry: governance issues of local communities rarely get on the air. Local elections crystallize the problem and add urgency for news departments to reconsider how they cover political issues.

Equally in need of reform is TV news' practice of excluding candidates and issues who are not what Ralph Nader calls Dem-Reps and Rep-Dems. Minor parties are relegated to the junkheap of credibility when marginalized on television. Small parties cannot afford significant television advertising, and their ideas do not get heard. Again, the public's interest is ill-served. The nation missed an opportunity to conduct an intelligent discussion about what kind of world lies ahead and how we might prepare for it.

Powerful obstacles to election reform include the institutions with vested interest in the status quo. It may be impossible, for example, for politicians to develop squeaky clean campaign finance rules—rather like asking an alcoholic to just take one drink.

If candidates are forced to limit campaign expenditures, then free television time will be an important component of reform. Citizen attempts in Los Angeles this year to get free air-time for local candidates were rejected by broadcasters. Token amounts of free air-time were granted to major presidential candidates by the TV networks right before election day. The seed for free TV time has been planted.

Spot announcements are not the only way. We could, for example, get to know our local candidates better with a five-minute video résumé, complete with vital stats, education and work history. Serious discussions of candidates' core values and influences would be welcome. Citizens could join journalists as interviewers.

These videos would be absolutely free to candidates who observed campaign spending limits. Groups of video-résumés could be showcased every evening for one hour in prime time, starting a month before the ballot. Television stations could compete to promote this feature—"Coming up, tonight at ten, exclusive interviews with people who will lead this community into the next century. Don't miss it!" Why not turn it into an American art form?

Television news can really make a difference, not just a killing. Major changes are in order as the industry drifts towards Un-News. Thousands of stories about homicides and cuddly animals pollute the public's airwaves daily. But one election cycle every few years? Too much trouble.

The people need wisdom, substance and truth. How refreshing, even revolutionary, that would be. ■

Paul Klite is the Executive Director and a founder of the Rocky Mountain Media Watch, a Colorado non-profit organization dedicated to "Challenging the mass media to better inform and educate the public." He is also a radio producer, research scientist and physician.

LOCAL TV NEWSCASTS INCLUDED IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN MEDIA WATCH ELECTION SURVEYS*

<i>State/City</i>	<i>Station</i>	<i>State/City</i>	<i>Station</i>	<i>State/City</i>	<i>Station</i>
AZ Phoenix	KNXV	IL Champaign	WCIA	OH Cleveland	WJW
CA Los Angeles	KABC	IL Champaign	WICD	OH Cleveland	WUAB
CA Los Angeles	KCOP	IL Chicago	WBBM	OH Youngstown	WKBN
CA Los Angeles	KNBC	IL Chicago	WLS	OH Youngstown	WYTV
CA Los Angeles	KTLA	IL Chicago	WMAQ	OR Eugene	KVAL
CA Los Angeles	KTTV	IN Terre Haute	WTHI	OR Portland	KGW
CA Sacramento	KCRA	IN Terre Haute	WTWO	OR Portland	KOIN
CA Sacramento	KXTV	KY Louisville	WLKY	PA Philadelphia	KYW
CA San Francisco	KGO	LA New Orleans	WWL	PA Philadelphia	WCAU
CA San Francisco	KPIX	LA Shreveport	KTBS	PA Philadelphia	WTFX
CA San Francisco	KRON	MA Boston	WBZ	PA Pittsburgh	KDKA
CA San Francisco	KTVU	MA Boston	WHDH	PA Pittsburgh	WPXI
CO Colorado Springs	KKTU	MA Boston	WSBK	PA Scranton	WNEP
CO Colorado Springs	KOAA	MD Baltimore	WJZ	SD Sioux Falls	KELO
CO Denver	KCNC	MD Baltimore	WMAR	SD Sioux Falls	KSFY
CO Denver	KMGH	ME Bangor	WABI	TN Knoxville	WBIR
CO Denver	KUSA	MN Twin Cities	KTCA	TX Austin	KVUE
CO Denver	KWGN	MN Twin Cities	WCCO	TX Austin	KXAN
CO Grand Junction	KREX	MO Kirksville	KTVO	TX Dallas	WFAA
CT Hartford	WFSB	MO St. Louis	KSDK	TX Houston	KHOU
CT Hartford	WTIC	MS Hattiesburg	WDAM	TX Houston	KNWS
CT Hartford	WVIT	MT Missoula	KECI	TX Houston	KPRC
CT Hartford	WTNH	NC Charlotte	WBTV	TX Houston	KRIV
DC Washington	WJLA	NC Charlotte	WSOC	TX Houston	KTRK
DC Washington	WRC	NY Buffalo	WKBW	VT Burlington	WCAX
FL Miami	WPLG	NY Elmira	WENY	WA Seattle	KING
FL Miami	WSVN	NY New York	WABC	WA Seattle	KIRO
FL Orlando	WCPX	NY New York	WBII	WA Seattle	KOMO
FL Orlando	WESH	NY New York	WWOR	WA Seattle	KSTW
FL Orlando	WFTV	NY Syracuse	WIXT		

*These 90 stations represent 10 of the country's eleven largest markets (top third of TV households), 17 of the 40 mid-sized markets (middle third of TV households) and 18 of the 162 smallest markets (bottom third of TV households). There are 26 affiliates of ABC, 24 of CBS, 22 NBC, 8 FOX, 6 UPN, 2 WB, 1 PBS and 2 independent stations.

The Case for Trials on Television: What's The Verdict?

Our expert witness submits his brief on the history of courtroom journalism, and its problems. He also examines the programming of that unique cable network, COURT TV. The jury may still be out.

By Michael M. Epstein

I. Canon Fire

It was the trial of the century, or so the media claimed. A brutal, tragic crime had been committed involving one of the most famous names in America. Though the legal significance of the case was hardly special, an estimated 20,000 curiosity-seekers camped both inside and outside the packed courthouse. To accommodate the demands of the huge press

contingent, a communication system unprecedented in sophistication and size was set up in the immediate vicinity of the courthouse. Facsimiles of evidence from the trial were created and sold as souvenirs by street hawkers. When the judge discovered that unauthorized photos from the trial had been released to the public, he reacted with fury and banned camera coverage from his courtroom.

This trial did not take place last year in

Los Angeles. The year was 1935 and the locale was a small town courthouse near Trenton, New Jersey. The famous person was Charles A. Lindbergh, and the trial ultimately determined that his infant son had been kidnapped and murdered by a German immigrant named Bruno Richard Hauptmann.

In their frenzy to feed the public's unprecedented appetite for the proceedings, journalists climbed atop witness stands and counsel tables in order to get

television age. Called the 'circus' or 'carnival' atmosphere, the consequences of courtroom photo-journalism became a high priority for the American Bar Association as early as 1937, when it banned courtroom cameras by passing Canon 35. Nonetheless, media excitement and tabloid hype were the hallmark of other notorious spectacles such as the trials of Billie Sol Estes and Dr. Sam Sheppard.

In 1963, Canon 35 was explicitly applied to television cameras, in an



Leslie Abramson, a Menendez trial attorney, and a COURT TV interviewer.

good camera angles. Radio commentator Gabriel Heatter on WOR covered the trial three times a day with live fifteen-minute broadcasts from outside the courtroom. One cameraman even smuggled a newsreel camera into court and sold his footage to theaters.

Like Judge Ito some six decades later, Judge Thomas W. Trenchard found himself presiding over the type of judicial spectacle that has become more common (even if less extreme) in today's media-saturated

attempt to stave off excessive and intrusive coverage by TV reporters. Efforts to keep television cameras out of the courtroom lasted for about 15 years. When the State of Florida allowed TV broadcasts of the 1977 trial of Rodney Zamora, a teenager charged with murdering an elderly neighbor, it was widely regarded as a successful experiment. In the years since then, nearly every state—and even some

Federal courts—have permitted cameras back into the courtroom, to various degrees and with varying results.

By the early 1990s, it was beginning to look as though most Americans were comfortable with live video coverage of high-profile trials—47 states allowed cameras in their trial or appellate courts. Since then, two things have influenced the way many of us feel about cameras in the courtroom: *California v. Simpson*, and the one television network that has become inextricably linked to it, COURT TV.

In a little over five years, the Courtroom Television Network has become a popular attraction on cable TV, redefining the way cable broadcast networks and local stations cover legal trials. Buoyed by its extensive coverage of high-profile, sensational cases, COURT TV has grown into a fixture on many basic cable systems. Begun in 1991 by lawyer and journalist Steven Brill as a network of legal record, COURT TV has also evolved into a significant producer of original legal-oriented programming. Though the channel still focuses considerable air time on live coverage of a few trials each week, COURT TV has become a lot more than a service that transmits trials live via satellite. In its short lifespan, COURT TV has also generated—and inherited—more than its share of controversy as “America’s eye on justice.”

For example, following the experience of “Camp O.J.” and the transgressions of a roving COURT TV camera, many lawyers, pundits and politicians, including California Governor Pete Wilson, and former Los Angeles County Criminal Bar Association president Charles Lindner, came down hard against permitting cameras inside courtrooms. In high-profile murder cases tried in the aftermath of the Simpson case, like those for Susan Smith, the Menendez brothers, and Polly Klaas’s killer, judges

have banned television cameras as disruptive. The judge presiding over O.J. Simpson’s civil trial last winter, Hiroshi Fujisaki, made a point of curbing the media at every stage of the litigation. In a move that shocked even critics of courtroom news coverage, Fujisaki issued a gag order against the parties to the law suit, their lawyers, witnesses, and anyone else connected with the case. Under the judge’s unprecedented ruling, journalists and other observers were barred from recording any image or sound from the courtroom during trial.

Was the Simpson criminal trial really responsible for the resurgence of negative attention given to cameras in courtrooms? As easy as it is to blame all of this upon America’s obsession with a fallen sports celebrity, perhaps it is more an issue of the way the medium of television operates in American culture. Is it a function of television cameras that they must necessarily sensationalize? Some scholars and pundits would have us believe that television is a cultural phenomenon that, like an electronic King Midas, turns everything it touches into a spectacle of entertainment.

And to a degree, these critics have a point.

Still, much as bashing television as a medium (and COURT TV as a network) may be appealing, it’s only part of the story when it comes to trial coverage. The fact is, trials have always been a source of controversy and drama for those willing and able to follow the proceedings. Although some sensational COURT TV cases such as the Bobbit, Menendez and William Kennedy Smith trials seem to be indicative of a rising trend, America has a long history of other spectacle trials that predate television and newsreel film.

Some are still familiar to us today, like the Scopes “monkey” trial, the Lizzie Borden parricide trial, the John Peter Zenger libel trial, and, of course, the Salem witch hunts. Others have since

faded into the obscurity of history textbooks or faded press clippings.

Although one might think that people were interested in these old cases for their legal or policy significance, most looked upon courtroom activities as a form of public entertainment. Some followed trials as if they were sporting contests. For others, it was an opportunity to sample the private lives of public figures that was appealing.

Before the rise of newspapers in the mid-nineteenth century, trials rarely got the national notoriety that one would associate with mass entertainment. Reports from, and descriptions of trials, were not widely available to the general public, except in localities near the trial. Television, the ultimate technology of broad appeal, has only taken to the next stage what the onset of newspapers had begun a century before. Television has, in effect, provided judges, lawyers, and defendants with a national audience of unprecedented diversity and size. Now people from all over the political, social, and economic tapestry of America can argue about, enjoy—or become disgusted with—the theatricality and suspense of our criminal justice system.

Much as I would like to argue, as many television stations do, that covering courtroom trials is a news event, I remain unconvinced. What, for instance, was especially newsworthy about the Simpson trials? Apart from the entering of a plea, the opening arguments, some testimony and, of course, the verdicts, what was so important about the Simpson case to warrant the type of continuing massive live media exposure that so many journalists were willing to give it?

Although many media lawyers might reflectively argue that the public has a right to know what was happening live in Judge Ito's courtroom, as it happens, I'm not sure that in a case such as Simpson's we should be invoking a first amendment

mantra reserved for monitoring the actions of government or debates over political policy. Indeed, if the public's right to know was the true motivation for coverage, why did CNN and other television stations interrupt the live satellite feed of the proceedings with frequent commercials?

Some local stations went as far as to take commercial breaks approximately every six to eight minutes, whether or not Judge Ito was issuing a ruling from the bench. The only time the station's "commentator" would delay a break was when the lawyers were fighting, or a witness was crying or offering dramatic testimony. And, of course, one only need recall the day the Simpson compensatory civil verdicts were announced, when network news anchors publicly agonized over whether they should cover onlookers outside the Santa Monica Courthouse or President Clinton's State of the Union Address, to realize just how empty the "public's right to know" has become as an argument.

We live, simply, in an age where distinctions between news and entertainment have become more blurred than ever before. In the modern world of "Infotainment," hybrid programming types that, by their very nature, require real-time or live coverage in order to be entertaining have thrived.

When you think about it, television's coverage of legal trials is a news and entertainment hybrid that combines the voyeurism of reality television, the suspenseful live action of sports programming, and the legitimate inquiry of journalists and legal analysts. Whether courtroom coverage is enlightening or exploitative, is a function of just how well these competing factors are balanced by program producers and their managements. And nowhere is this challenge to turn America's fascination with our courts into good TV more compelling than on

COURT TV itself, the one network devoted exclusively to bringing judge and jury into our living rooms.

2. Eye Witness

As a frequent viewer of COURT TV programs, I am impressed by just how much the network tries to strike a balance among the newsworthy, the voyeuristic, and the entertaining. In a curious way, COURT TV offers something for nearly everybody. At times, some of its programs are like well-rehearsed PBS documentaries or instructional videos. At other times, the network becomes something akin to a cross between *Hard Copy* and *The People's Court*. Although some might lament this approach to legal programming, I admire it. As I see it, it is precisely this multiplicity of purpose that ensures COURT TV's long-term survival.

For those interested in legal news, pending legislation, and judicial issues, COURT TV offers a weekly discussion program called *Washington Watch*, hosted by the network's chief legal anchor, Fred Graham. Graham, a seasoned legal journalist with years of experience at CBS and *The New York Times*, is clearly at home with the show's public affairs focus. Interviews with celebrated lawyers in and out of government make *Washington Watch* seem like the legal equivalent of *Face the Nation* or *Meet the Press*. Although the program does not regularly attract high-profile politicians and policy-makers, guests in the past have included Attorney General Janet Reno and White House Counsel Abner Mikva.

Less impressive are the nightly reports *Prime Time Justice* and *The Court TV News*. The latter program, anchored by Chris Gordon, airs live at 7:30 PM weekdays, billed as a "fast-paced half-hour legal news show." The program clearly appeals to fans of the ABC, NBC and CBS networks'



Gabriel Heatter

evening news programs. Gordon generally tries to cover a lot of ground between commercials in his thirty minutes. Conventions of the familiar network nightly news formats, including reporting that sacrifices depth and complexity with sound-bites and pat conclusions, are less a problem here. Viewers interested in more about a specific story have other options on the COURT TV circuit, including extended taped highlights or live coverage of trials currently in court.

For COURT TV reporters, it's not enough to make brief mention of the latest testimony from a trial against a cigarette manufacturer; the background and impact of every witness is given in detail. If it's a slow news day, Gordon provides his audience with commentary and highlights of the trials that COURT TV televised earlier that day. Usually, the trial "update" has little or no value as news. As is the case, increasingly, with most television news programs local, network or cable, *The Court TV News* includes items that excerpt and over-promote other of their programs

as if they were part of the “news.”

Then there’s *Prime Time Justice*, a hybrid hour of documentary, highlights, news analysis, and/or guest commentaries—depending on which day of the week one happens to be watching. On a recent Monday evening, I tuned into an excellent documentary on life at a correctional “boot camp” in upstate New York.

Although the narrator occasionally repeated himself, the reporting and footage were compelling, as cameras followed several non-violent drug offenders through the process of reform, from arraignment to release. Documentaries, however, seem to be the exception to the rule on *Prime Time Justice*. Most of the time, the program seems like an expanded version of *The Court TV News*.

The similarity of *Prime Time Justice* and *The Court TV News* underscores a problem with much of the network’s news programming: there is little to distinguish one show from another. Whether it’s either of these two nightly reports or a third daily “preview” called *Justice Today*, viewers are generally offered the same highlights from the same trials, recycled legal news, and updated or repeated reports from—for example—the Santa Monica courthouse where the Simpson civil trial was conducted. This redundancy is even more of a problem in the evening, overnight and on weekends, since COURT TV airs multiple reruns of its original programs when trials are not in session.

Recycling also describes COURT TV’s regularly scheduled documentary series: *Trial Story* and *Verdicts and Justice*. *Trial Story*, which airs nightly at 9 p.m. Eastern, spends an hour (or, occasionally, two) rehashing the most dramatic moments from a trial previously covered. Recent *Trial Story* episodes have included the precedent-setting legal case of Gregory K., the boy who sued his parents for “divorce,” and the melodramatic, but legally ordinary, *Joan Collins v. Random*

House case, in which the former *Dynasty* diva avoided a breach of contract judgment sought by her publisher. Significant or sensational, these trials, and the tabloid stories that surround them, have all been seen before on COURT TV and elsewhere.

Verdicts and Justice spends a half hour each week bringing viewers back to the climactic moment when a verdict was handed down in a trial previously aired by COURT TV. Although the program claims to give viewers the chance “to determine the soundness of the verdict and learn if justice is served,” such a lofty goal seems elusive at best in a format that has to distill the full range of testimony and evidence of a trial in less than thirty minutes.

For the most part, this program focuses on far lesser known defendants than O.J.—someone like Kevin McKiever, for example, the accused killer of a former Radio City Rockette. If anything, *Verdicts and Justice* might give viewers the impression that justice is summary and simple, notwithstanding the program’s intent. It is, however, entertaining; especially when the verdict is unknown to the viewer.

As much as COURT TV’s repackaged “news” program can appeal to viewers with a flair for drama, it’s the network’s “reality-based” shows that are most appealing. *Instant Justice*, a nightly (and oft-packaged) presentation of videotape culled from municipal courts across the country, makes no pretense to being “news.” Described as an “entertaining glimpse” of the “real *People’s Court*, the real *Night Court*,” this is to the criminal justice system what *COPS* is to law enforcement.

With the eye of a voyeur, cameras record a shady parade of petty miscreants, chronic drug offenders, and drunk drivers as they have their day—or as usually is

the case, night—in court. Augmented with the lively color commentary of host Carol Randolph, *Instant Justice* was an instant success with viewers who like simple controversy and swift resolutions. Judge Wapner would be very much at home with this show.

The System, COURT TV's weekly look at the enforcement and administration of justice on a local level, offers audiences the same diet of pathos, desperation, and grittiness as *Instant Justice*. Set in a diverse community in New York City, *The System* is a cross between a cinema verité version of *Barney Miller* and *NYPD Blue*. This is not about celebrity defendants or sensational crimes. Each week, hand-held cameras follow criminals and police as they go through the never-ending saga of arrest, interrogation, and arraignment. Over time, some of the police officers become familiar faces to viewers. Unfortunately, so do some of the criminals. Although it describes itself as "the ultimate lesson on how the judicial process works," it's not clear what the system really teaches from one week to the next, except perhaps cynicism and disappointment.

Although COURT TV executives would probably consider all of their programs educational, some clearly offer more of a learning experience than others. Practicing lawyers, law students and legal fans would enjoy *On Appeal* and *Supreme Court Watch*, both of which generally provide more in-depth analysis of legal issues than the shows that highlight trial coverage.

On Appeal offers a half-hour review of issues relevant to a case that has been recently decided by appellate judges in Federal and state courts. One recent program, for example, focused on a capital case in New Jersey in which the defendant had asked the state's highest court to expedite his own execution! With the help of Arthur S. Miller, the ubiquitous Harvard Law Professor, COURT TV anchor, Raymond Brown, carefully summarized

the reasoning that led New Jersey's Supreme Court to decide that a defendant on death-row does not have a right to waive his right to post-conviction relief.

Supreme Court Watch is for those interested in what's going on at the United States Supreme Court. From the first Monday in October to the end of the Court's term in late spring, Supreme Court Watch offers weekly insight into the appellate cases at the forefront of the Justices' agenda, and the nation's.

Generally, the program focuses on cases that are both legally and politically significant; cases involving polemic issues such as abortion, the right-to-die, criminal procedure, and civil rights. Don't expect to see much about the latest Court decision on some obscure procedural issue, or a statute that applies only to longshoremens. This show is at its best when it offers expert analysis and commentary on issues like the integration of women cadets at the Citadel, or the unconstitutionality of anti-gay rights ordinances in Colorado.

3. Kid Stuff

With the introduction of *Teen Court TV*, the cable network has finally recognized that it is uniquely positioned as a provider of innovative legal programming for children. Launched last year, *Teen Court TV* consists of three participatory series that are seen first on Saturday mornings, and then repeated throughout the weekend. The first of these programs, *Justice Factory* (10 a.m.) takes a legal issue that kids have questions about and presents a half-hour on-location report that answers students' questions and exposes myths about the law.

One recent *Justice Factory* visited high school students in suburban Chicago to examine the issue of legal rights for students. In a hip, high-energy style, the program interviewed selected public and



Fred Graham,
COURT TV Chief
Anchor &
Managing Editor

private school students about their rights; had some of the students dramatize issues for the camera (such as random locker searches and coming to class in defiance of a school dress code); and inserted brief summaries of those Supreme Court decisions over the last thirty years that helped both define and limit the rights of students. This program is not only an excellent educational experience for teens, but, frankly, adults could learn a lot from it, too. Even lawyers might find it to be a good review.

Your Turn and *What's the Verdict?*, two hour-long programs that air immediately after *Justice Factory*, are notable efforts to educate young viewers between twelve and seventeen. Unfortunately, these series fall just slightly short of their mark. *Your Turn* casts Carol Randolph in the role of "Oprah" moderating a town meeting. Randolph sticks microphones in the faces of adolescents who ask pointed questions of a panel of experts on a particular topic. As a vehicle which gives young people the chance to air their thoughts directly to people with power, the show is excellent.

Ironically, that's what makes it less of a learning experience than it might be. Since the program is filmed as though it were live, questions or comments that should have been edited are included.

What's the Verdict? has host Dan Abrams and a panel of three teenagers look at trial highlights of a recent case. With the help of Abrams, the kids discuss the case and issue their own verdicts. Then they are shown the actual verdict and asked to comment on it. The problem with this format is that, like the adult-oriented *Verdicts and Justice*, this has the potential of misleading viewers into thinking that a proper verdict can be arrived at based on excerpted testimony, and summaries of evidence.

This problem was not lost on one of the young panelists on a recent program when he announced that he had reservations about deciding the fate of a teacher accused of soliciting a bribe from a student. After looking at several minutes of taped highlights, he clearly felt that justice would require that he hear more of the story.

4. On Trial

As a producer of original programming, COURT TV has had various degrees of success combining entertainment, news, and reality-based formulas into its packaged shows. When it comes to live “gavel to gavel” coverage of actual trials none of the other networks can match the quality—and quantity—that COURT TV gives viewers. Its creators long ago realized that extended court coverage would be the major attraction—and they do not disappoint loyal viewers. With few exceptions (like during the Simpson criminal trial), network cameras follow two or three trials during the course of a week. These trials, which vary in type and state of origin, are in various stages of the courtroom proceedings.

One case, for example, may be only in opening arguments, while the others may be in the midst of testimony or nearing a verdict. COURT TV focuses primarily on the trial that is most dramatic on a particular day; which generally means the trial closest to conclusion. When the primary trial is not in session or in recess, coverage

turns to the proceeding next closest to conclusion. Dramatic moments in any of the cases which are not transmitted live are often shown in extended, unedited clips on videotape.

Thus, on a given week, COURT TV may primarily focus on a trial of Steve Beckham, a South Carolina man accused of hiring a hit man to kill his wife, that is nearing a verdict; offer secondary coverage live or on tape of *Turner v. Dolcefino* and *KTRK*, a multi-million dollar libel suit against a Houston television station; and introduce as a third trial the case of Jon Feeney, a Missouri science teacher accused (and eventually acquitted) of killing his family. Once the verdict is in on the South Carolina case, the other two trials will move up in priority, and another case will be added to the roster.

This revolving system is an innovation that gives sufficient time to acquaint viewers gradually to the facts and issues of each trial; background that viewers need to understand before they can follow the trial. Those who tune into a trial already in progress can learn what they need to know about a case from frequent captions



Steven Brill, who started it all.

that describe opposing parties, witnesses, and the allegations at regular intervals. At regular intervals, commentators and anchors also provide summaries of the case. This incessant repetition can get a bit irritating.

To its credit, COURT TV does not interrupt its live trial broadcast with regularly-scheduled commercials. Anchors generally break for commercials only when there is a sidebar, a momentary break in the action, or a recess. For those with the time—and attention span—to watch, this extensive service offers an excellent viewing experience. Given that some states will allow cameras to pan about the courtroom, upload graphics and photos of evidence, and zoom in for close-ups of participants and observers, I would argue that watching a COURT TV trial is a very different experience than watching from the back of the courtroom, or the jury box.

Although some may feel that COURT TV is better than being there, I'm not so sure. Much as the network attempts to be comprehensive, it offers a skewed view of justice that prohibits viewers from observing the reactions of jurors, profane outbursts, and vivid representations of gory evidence. The reason for this restraint, of course, makes perfect sense given that a television camera can invade a victim's privacy, put a juror at risk, or sicken viewers with the macabre. Most courts, in fact, require this type of limited self-censorship. For those who must argue or judge a case within the courtroom, however, evidence excluded from television may mean the difference between a verdict of guilty or not guilty, or between the death penalty and life imprisonment.

Representing justice, of course, is really not COURT TV's chief responsibility. For its owners, attracting a large viewing audience is. As it begins the second half of its first decade, COURT TV may be embarking on a new strategy of introducing programs built around the power of a

celebrity host or commentator. Chief among this new type of program is its nightly live call-in show that pairs outspoken Atlanta prosecutor, Nancy Grace, with former Simpson lead attorney, Johnnie Cochran.

Within days of its premiere in January 1997, *Cochran & Grace* quickly became the network's flagship program. In a way, the debut of Johnnie Cochran as TV anchorman-host underscores how celebrity trials like Simpson's have become the bread and butter for this growing cable network. After all, Cochran is not an expert on the administration of justice or great legal concepts. Although they did a good job revisiting cases such as the Food Lion suit against ABC News, Cochran and his new partner really don't seem natural in this assignment; they're there because of their personalities and their notoriety.

Johnnie Cochran suggested recently that we should get on with our lives now that the O.J. Simpson trials are over. I wonder if the same could be said for COURT TV. As the heady, sensational days of Simpson trial coverage finally begin to fade from memory, the question remains whether the Courtroom Television Network will be able to resist the temptation of exploiting the type of celebrity trial reporting that has become a standard of the medium.

For the most part, COURT TV has succeeded because it uses cameras and commentators to construct a narrative that offers interlocking appeals to people looking for drama, competitive suspense, news, and instruction. Like other hybrid forms of television entertainment, COURT TV is good television, especially when it's doing what it does best: covering the courtroom trials live. Some of its regular program series, and most of its young people's shows, are innovative and informative.

To understand the success of COURT TV is to understand America's long-held fascination with public trials. Steve Brill's

brainchild is television's spin on a tradition of trial reporting and dramatization that predates the founding of our nation, but didn't achieve prominence until the rise of mass media in the nineteenth century. As the United States enters the digital information age, COURT TV—or some similar operation—will likely adapt to new technologies and new formats in order to satisfy an insatiable American appetite for sensational real-life courtroom drama.

Soon a new corporate chief will preside over the future of the organization, since its brilliant and aggressive founder Steven

Brill is leaving, having failed in his attempt to buy Time Warner's share in the company. Will this change the course and contents of the channel? The jury is still out. ■

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Michael M. Epstein is a practicing lawyer who teaches and writes about American popular culture. In addition, he has contributed articles to this publication and others on the different ways lawyers are portrayed on television. He also has published on a variety of media topics relating to government regulation, cult TV and science fiction.

“Quote...

Television in the Supreme Court

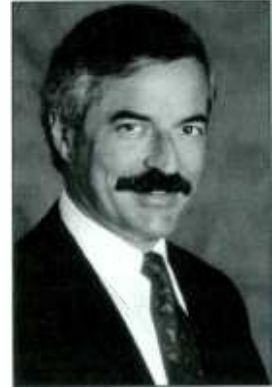
“It would be very bad public policy for the courts of any jurisdiction to give television the run of the courtroom. In most cases, it would probably add to the unease of the principals and make the doing of justice more difficult. But I see no reason to regard the choice as being between total ban and total acceptance; there might be times when a defendant would feel that a maximum of disclosure by every means of communication might promote justice in his case.

“I would like to see a more flexible approach even in the courts. There are from time to time, for example, civil litigations which are essentially controversies over public policy. There are pleadings before courts of appeal in which justice to a single individual is not at stake but grave issues for the whole body politic are. Would it have been a good or bad thing if the public could have seen and heard, on television, the pleadings before the United States Supreme Court on racial segregation in the public schools? I tend to think it would have been rather a good thing.”

—Richard H. Rovere, Essay in *The Eighth Art: Twenty-three views of Television Today*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1962.

Unquote...”

The Seven Daily Sins of Television News



CBS News President,
Andrew Heyward

By Andrew Heyward

What I worry about is pretty simple and straightforward. Why is network news losing so many viewers? It's a form of existential angst, I guess: not why are we here, but how much longer will we be here if we don't do something differently—although remembering why we are here, and how we got here, may help us determine how we can stay here and count for something in the future.

First, some scary statistics: the combined share of the three network evening news broadcasts is down more than twenty points in twenty years—from a 71 share in the 1975-76 season to a 50 share in 1995-96. In a Pew Research Center survey published in May, 1996, only 42% of the respondents say they regularly watch one of the three nightly network broadcasts, down from 60% in 1993. And the falloff is most significant

among younger viewers. Great.

I know some of the reasons. More competition from cable: not just news on demand from CNN and now MSNBC and FOX, but entertainment channels that “nick” away at all our audiences. And better competition from the news people at the stations; local news broadcasts have more access to national and international stories than ever before.

I also think I know some other reasons. We don't have a Vietnam or a Watergate to glue the nation to the evening news every night. (Speaking as a citizen for a second, thank goodness we don't.) The big story of our time is not as obvious or compelling, although it may be even more important. Will America be able to keep all its promises to all its constituencies as the century draws to a close? Immigration, education, affirmative action, crime, welfare, health care—all part of that story. And that's what a lot of our best coverage

is really about, but war or famine or even Hurricane Opal it's not.

People are also doing other things with their time. The Pew survey suggested that rising use of personal computers is partly to blame for the decline in news viewing. And the reason cited most often—especially by young people—for not watching the news is “no time!” They're too busy.

But I think we contribute to the problem too, every day, in ways we're not even aware of. How? Well, funny you should ask, because I happen to have a list here of what I call the Seven Daily Sins.

The First Daily Sin is IMITATION.

Fred Allen said it: imitation is the sincerest form of television. But still, how can the network evening news programs be so similar? Adam Smith—the real one, not the guy on PBS—must be spinning in his grave, and would certainly be spinning the dial if he were around today. We're in a commercial, highly competitive struggle for viewers, and yet our solution for standing out in the marketplace is to do just what the competition is doing.

Oh, I know my colleagues back at CBS will be mad at me for saying this—and of course on any given night any given broadcast might feature reporters and reporting that stand out. Each of the networks takes justifiable pride in the care that goes into the craft. But think about it from the viewers' perspective. If you could watch only one network for a year, and your neighbor another, how different would the experience be?

And listen to this. Our research shows that half the viewers of any given evening news broadcast—on CBS, NBC, or ABC—half the viewers—only watch that particular program *one night a week*. The implication is obvious. To these viewers, it doesn't make much of a difference which one they watch—or whether they watch

at all.

No one will ever admit it, but on too many nights network news producers judge themselves by how similar they are to the competition, as if that were somehow a reassuring sign that our collective news judgment is valid. Imitation is comfy and cosy—it's harder to second-guess than originally, I suppose. But in the audience, similarity breeds contempt.

The Second Daily Sin is PREDICTABILITY.

How often are you surprised by something you see on the news? We are trapped in our formulas both for story selection and production. Again, we are afraid to try something new, to move away from what we're sure we know how to do. And the result is too often competent but not compelling.

Take the 1:30 news piece—now the universal standard around the world. Think about how much effort goes into slicing and dicing the news we've gathered so we can throw everything into that same recipe . . . and you'll realize why the ingredients have no taste when we're done with them. Not wonder most of the people we interview appear as stick figures or stereotypes: the politician, the expert, the victim, the eyewitness. “It sounded like a freight train.” And like a freight train, most of what I see on the news, I can see coming a mile away.

The Third Daily Sin is ARTIFICIALITY.

If we're supposed to reflect and report on reality, why are we so unreal ourselves? If you stop and really listen to how a typical television reporter tells a story, you'll hear how artificial it sounds. There's an unnatural emphasis, a strange inflection to the words and sentences. Even words—“pontiff” comes quickly to mind—that

you never hear in real life. Nobody talks that way, except for us. The purveyors of news.

We also bleach the personality out of our newscasts, especially at the network level. Just for example, how often do your reporters' questions make the final cut? On our hard news broadcasts, almost never. Takes too much time. Yet that's the one chance the reporter has to engage in a normal conversation, as opposed to narration followed by that equally unnatural phenomenon, the sound bite. Somehow there's a fear of reminding the audience that a real person is telling the story, as if somehow that would get in the way of so-called objectivity. Baloney.

And I know there's a temptation to put attractive people on television, but I think the audience has to perceive them as authentic. We managers hire the same faces and voices again and again, without paying enough attention to whether they are real reporters who understand and believe what they're saying. Take Edward R. Murrow. He had to fight to hire William Shirer, the first of the "Murrow boys," because Shirer had a high-pitched voice rather than the authoritative, announcer-ish voice of a radio host. But Murrow prevailed, and Shirer became one of the great pioneers of broadcast journalism.

And I think the great broadcasters have that quality of authenticity. It's a quality you can't manufacture or fake, but if you find it, treasure it.

The Fourth Daily Sin is LAZINESS

The people I work with put in long hours and are very devoted to their jobs. They're certainly not lazy in the conventional sense. But I think we've all become lazy in our thinking, in our reluctance to dig out original stories and come up with new ways to tell them.

Critics of local news who single out

excessive crime and fire coverage often miss the point. They think it's because those stories are sensational. In fact, many crime and fire stories are singularly dull and irrelevant to most viewers' lives. They're just easy compared to original reporting.

The same goes for network news. It's a lot easier to round up the usual sound bites and "cover" an incremental development on Capitol Hill or at the White House than it is to explain how policy made in Washington genuinely affects Americans outside the Beltway. This is not just a matter of economics, either. Yes, investigative reporting is more expensive than covering an event off the daybook. But original reporting is often just a matter of a few more phone calls, of demanding that our producers and reporters go beyond the obvious. If network news sometimes seems as irrelevant as a fire or murder in somebody else's neighborhood, I think laziness is at least partly to blame.

The Fifth Daily Sin is OVERSIMPLIFICATION.

That might sound like a strange one. Yes, it's true that our job is to clarify events and issues for our viewers and listeners. And in a one-pass-through medium like broadcast journalism, complexity is particularly scary. But our audience is smarter and more thoughtful than a lot of us think. The people out there in America know that life is not as simple as what they see on the news, a world of heroes and villains, winners and losers, exploiters and victims. Yet that's what we show them, night after night.

We reduce complicated debates over policy to political slugfests, which we cover as though they were sporting events. We reduce difficult issues to simple dramas—like the current concern over downsizing, which too often shows up on network television as a morality tale

pitting evil employers against downtrodden workers. (Harry Smith's recent documentary on this subject was a refreshing exception.)

But the world is a complicated place—and the people we're serving know it. There are no easy answers, and we hurt ourselves and drive viewers and listeners away by pretending there are. Most TV sets aren't black-and-white any more; we're behind the times.

The Sixth Daily Sin is HYPE.

Think about the ridiculous claims we make all the time—expecting them to be taken seriously. Can you remember the last “story you'll never forget”? How about the one before that? I can't. Barbara Walters refuses to use the word “shocking” in her copy anymore. Good for you, Barbara.

And how about “exclusive”? Soon we'll be pasting the word “exclusive” over Dan, Peter and Tom as they read the news—no one else has HIM, after all.

I don't want to sound naive. I know it's competitive out there, and I know we have to corral and keep viewers. Some of my own fondest memories are of writing teases for the eleven o'clock news. But curiously, hype has the opposite effect. If everything is momentous, nothing stands out. And if you have to trumpet your wares loudly every day, you need an endless supply of “new” wares to get excited about. That's one reason we do so little follow-up and don't always stick with a good story. It's harder to sell the next day and the next.

Over the years, we've exaggerated so much that we've eroded our own ability to convey what's truly significant. I think that's one reason the network news divisions failed to generate much excitement when the Berlin Wall came tumbling down. Here was a perfect television story that also happened to be one of the most

significant developments since the Second World War. *Prime Time Live* was live as the wall was “liberated.” But to the audience, it was just today's top story . . . just television.

Ironically, despite the hype, the news seems smaller since Murrow's day. We've cut and cropped it down to size to fit our little box.

Which brings me to the Seventh Daily Sin. CYNICISM.

I think we're cynical about the audience and cynical about our ability to make a difference in people's lives. All the other daily sins—imitation, predictability, artificiality, laziness, oversimplification, and hype—are a reflection of this one.

Yet now more than ever, ours is a business for idealists, for true believers, not cynics. It's become a cliché to say that America is hungry for heroes. Because it's true. Murrow was a hero in his day, not just a star. Journalists today are held in low esteem but that doesn't have to be. Our viewers and listeners are also hungry for honest information, for help in coping with a bewildering world. We have an enormous opportunity to win our good name back—and insure our own survival in the bargain.

The transformation of broadcast journalism from a calling and a public service to a profit-making business has been chronicled too many times to warrant repetition here. You all know the story. We all live the story, every day. But my point is that it makes good business sense to take a hard look at ourselves and why we're losing our voice in the national dialogue. As new technology comes along, the networks will have to fight harder to retain viewers and influence. To my 12-year-old daughter, Nickelodeon and MTV are no different from ABC, CBS and NBC—except they're a lot more interesting. And she spends at least as much time

on-line as in front of the tube. The comfortable oligopoly that protected all of us is splintering.

Yet no one has come along to replace what you and I do very well. Because television news takes a lot of skill and investment and resource to do properly, it's hard to offer a cheap imitation. So the solution is obvious. Identify a need and become one of the few who can satisfy it. That sounds like a pretty good business proposition to me. Success is not what motivated Murrow and the Murrow boys. They were driven by a mix of altruism and adventurism that would seem hopelessly corny today. But succeed they did, because they filled a need. And they did it with passion, with authenticity, with innovation, with a sense of wonder.

Listening to and watching Murrow himself, you are struck by the great strengths of our medium: immediacy and personality. We do fine on immediacy; our high tech toys see to that. But too often we honor Murrow in the breach by forgetting what he never forgot—that at the end of day, we have the extraordinary privilege of talking to other Americans, person to person, about things that really count.

That's why it's not just a job that brought us to television news. So let's not pretend that it is. We can do good and do well. We have to. ■

This article is adapted from the keynote address by Andrew Heyward, President of CBS News, at the annual convention of the Radio and Television News Directors Association Convention in Los Angeles, October 9, 1996.

Entertaining the country and the world

Television production
and distribution.

Six major cable
networks. Newspaper
syndication and
merchandise
licensing.

The Hearst
Corporation's
Entertainment &
Syndication Group
is a major source of
entertainment
and information
services to the
country and
the world.

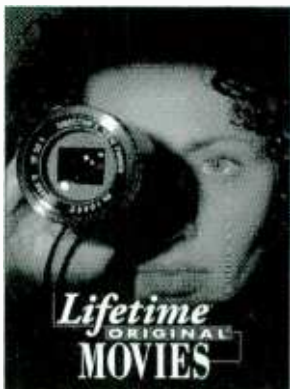
King Features

King of the comics and a
worldwide leader in
merchandise licensing



Hearst Entertainment

A leading producer and
distributor of television
movies, animation
and reality series
and specials



Lifetime

Television for Women

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My Son, The Talker

A Reporter's Life: Walter Cronkite

By *Walter Cronkite*
Alfred A. Knopf: New York

By **Lawrence Laurent**

Walter Cronkite's mother lived to the age of 102 years. She was only in her 80s when we had lunch at the Sheraton-Carlton Hotel in Washington, D.C. What I remember best from that luncheon was her story about Walter's activities as a teenager in Houston, Texas. Walter's father, a dentist, had purchased an expensive console radio, which included a phonograph and a primitive recording machine. Aluminum recording discs were used to store and replay one's voice.

"Walter just loved that machine," his mother recalled. "Every child in the neighborhood, all his friends at school, came in to play with the microphone and to listen to the playback. Some of the kids were afraid of it. Some stuttered. Some refused to talk, but Walter! My son, Walter! He could always talk!"

Walter is now 80 years old and he can still talk. Only now, he has returned to the print medium and produced his autobiography. It is a chatty, informal entertainment; a loose accounting of the events since his birth in Jefferson City, Mo., growing up in Kansas City and Houston and entering a journalism career that shifted regularly from newspapers to radio to United Press (before it became United Press International).

Walter is quite casual about dates, but he is emphatic that on March 30, 1940 he married Betsy Maxwell. She was 45 minutes late for the ceremony, but they are still married and have three children, Nancy, Kathy and Chip. Along the way, he had a full life, from re-creating football games for a radio audience, using only the most sparse telegraphed data, to live play-by-play broadcasts of the football games for the University of Okla-



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homa; to World War II United Press correspondent with the Navy in the North Atlantic. Later, he covered the U.S. invasion of North Africa; was in London, for the Blitz, and on the Continent of Europe as American forces struggled across France and into Germany.

He covered the Nuremberg War Trials for UP and became its Moscow correspondent. But, by this time he had achieved a salary of \$127.50 per week. He was advised that the UP preferred hungry, young kids, who gloried in "experience" and never expected to make any money. That took Cronkite back into radio. He was a television pioneer in Washington, mainly because the big names, the headlines, were content with radio and wanted nothing to do with the new combination of pictures and sound.

Truth in packaging requires that I confess to having known, respected and liked Cronkite since an April night in 1953. He was doing a very primitive nightly newscast for WTOP-TV, then jointly owned by *The Washington Post* and CBS. I was working as a rewrite man at the *Post* and was highly frustrated by fragmented accounts of a near-accident at an indoor circus playing at Uline Arena. (Circus press agents were notorious for staging "accidents" for publicity, and just a few years earlier many reporters had bitten on a yarn about a fight-to-the-death between a circus panther and a gorilla. In time, embarrassed reporters learned "all that blood in the animals' cages" had been manufactured by the Cook Paint company.)

One of our legmen told me that Walter Cronkite had been at the afternoon circus performance with his young daughter and had witnessed the accident. I telephoned

Cronkite at WTOP-TV and received a calm, measured reporter's verification of the accident. My highly suspicious night city editor accepted Cronkite's account only after I assured him that this was the same Walter Cronkite who had spent 12 years with United Press. The editor, then as now, had a very low opinion of television reporters.

This was before I began writing a column about broadcasting. I wish to note here that I entered that job already holding a high opinion of the reportorial skills of Walter Cronkite. (Truth in packaging also requires that I report—even if Cronkite never mentioned it in his autobiography—that he is a past President of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. Also, at the inception of *The Television Quarterly*, Walter permitted the use of his name as the co-chairman of the Editorial Board. I am told that he never attended a single meeting, but this magazine remains grateful.)

A Reporter's Life has been on *The New York Times* weekly list of best-selling non-fiction books since its publication. This attests to the interest in the man who possessed "the most trusted voice in America" and to the affection in which he is still held by the great audience. He has also narrated a multi-part documentary series, produced by son Chip, for cable television's Discovery Channel, which uses much of the book's material, word for word.

Cronkite makes clear that he earned a reputation "for fast copy throughout my newspaper career. Fast-breaking stories left my typewriter in a hurry. Not great literature, but fast and usually accurate."

But don't expect any great insights into the news business, or television or mass media. Cronkite makes plain (on page 5) that he has little patience with deep think-

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ing, and even less with introspection: "Such self-centered, navel examining profundities do not come often to me. . . .", and nothing in the next 379 pages contradicts this observation.

He was always such a likable man, with his "favorite uncle" appearance, the manner of the "tail twister" at the local Lion's Club weekly luncheon and the hearty spirit of a smalltown politician. In private, under just the right circumstances, he might perform a brief, decorous Hula. His sense of rhythm is very good.

In so many ways, he was the ultimate company man, who accepted slights and put-downs from bosses with little public fuss and without apparent rancor. Two particular incidents stand out, and either of them would have caused an Edward R. Murrow or a David Brinkley to quit the network on the spot. But Cronkite soldiered on—solid, reliable, dependable.

The first incident came after Walter had launched the ambitious *CBS Morning News* as the network's answer to the popularity of NBC's *Today* program. Walter learned accidentally what his entire crew already knew. He was being replaced as the host by Dick Van Dyke, an entertainer from a New Orleans TV station, who, like Cronkite, is a native of Missouri.

Cronkite, without public comment, returned to staff duties.

The second insult was even worse. Cronkite had set the standard for an anchorman at the national political conventions in 1952 in Chicago. But with the rise of NBC's Chet Huntley and David Brinkley, CBS lost the ratings lead at national conventions. At the order of CBS Board Chairman William S. Paley, Cronkite was replaced just before the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City by the team of Roger Mudd

and Robert Trout.

CBS ratings failed to improve. Cronkite remembers this incident in this way: "Under management's confused direction, the new anchor team of Roger Mudd and Robert Trout, two of the most skilled political correspondents in the business, had no better chance than I, and by 1968, I was back in the convention anchor job to stay until my retirement from the *Evening News* in 1968."

The booming, upbeat *bon homie* does disappear, however, after the arrival at CBS of Lawrence Tisch, described as "hotel operator, insurance mogul and tobacco company owner." He came in as the "White Knight" to save CBS from a takeover by Ted Turner. Cronkite recalls: Tisch "kept assuring our management that he had no intention of trying to secure a controlling position, that his purchases were purely an investment. That was the first of a series of Tisch statements that apparently were misunderstood by everybody but him.

"Within weeks he held more stock than Bill Paley, and he moved in. He was elected to the board and, protesting all the while that he didn't intend to become involved in management, maneuvered himself into the chairman's seat."

Another executive who failed to command Cronkite's respect is onetime CBS News President, Van Gordon Sauter. He is described as ambitious and "...playing the company's executive chairs. He believed his job was to build (Dan) Rather's reputation at whatever cost, and he seemed to be aiming to climb on Rather's back to the presidency of CBS Television."

Walter Cronkite became a member of the CBS Board of Directors and quickly discovered that even from that prestigious perch, he couldn't get the new CBS News execu-

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tives to fulfill the promises and commitments they had made to him before his retirement. "I regretted that the banishment they seemed to have ordered for me. . . ."

Still another sorrow came from the lack of social or civic responsibility he found among members of the CBS board of directors: "One of my major disappointments was that the CBS Board, made up of some top-notch business, financial and industrial leaders, was concerned only with the company's finances and paid no attention to programming. We never discussed violence or children's programming or permissible language or the frequency or suitability of commercials.

"Each spring the entertainment executives would show a sampling of the next season's new programs. The board members frowned and grimaced at the sitcoms. They laughed, but only at what was supposed to be the serious drama. As the lights came up, the members shook their heads, grinned embarrassed grins at each other and went about the business of the next financial report."

At several points, Cronkite quite properly lauds the legendary editing skills of Ed Bliss, who improved so much of the *CBS News* writing for so many years. (Bliss retired from CBS and joined me on the faculty of the School of Communication at The American University in Washington. He is a splendid teacher, along with being a great editor.) At several places in this autobiography a reader will ache for the sure, gentle touch of Ed Bliss on this Cronkite manuscript.

Surely, he'd have told Walter that "aided and abetted" is journalese for "helped and encouraged." Nor is it wise to tell a reader that in writing the reconstruction of a scene, "I just made up that last quote (as I will some others before this tale is done.*)" Bliss also would have corrected Walter's

approving a quotation from New York Governor Mario Cuomo that "no person whose name ends in a vowel has ever been elected President of the United States." I can hear Bliss now, saying, "But, Walter, what about Presidents Pierce, Coolidge and Monroe?"

I suspect, also, that Bliss would have counseled deletion of the story about Walter's acceptance of an expensive gold Rolex watch, designed only for heads of state. Top newsmen do not accept gifts, even from Swiss watchmakers.

However, such slips of the typewriter can be forgiven in this day when "books" are mainly dictated, transcribed and published with precious little editing. Do not, gentle reader, expect to find footnotes, source material or even a bibliography. They don't exist in this book, in keeping with most current light, non-scholarly works. Even so, I find it most difficult to understand Knopf's publication of a newsman's autobiography without an index of names, places and organizations. What's the matter, Knopf? Afraid someone might want to check the accuracy?

Finally, a reviewer must take note of Cronkite's own summation of his career. He writes (page 373): "A career can be called a success if one can look back and say: 'I made a difference.' I don't feel I can do that. All of us in the early days of television felt, I'm sure, that we were establishing a set of standards that would be observed by, or at least have an influence on, generations of news professionals to come. How easily these were dismissed by the Van Gordon Sauters and those who felt they had to imitate to compete." ■

Lawrence Laurent is the Television Critic (Emeritus) of *The Washington Post*. He teaches Critical Writing and Reviewing at The George Washington University and is a Trustee of the Broadcast Pioneers Library.

Sisters of the Sitcoms

Prime-time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's movement since 1970

By Bonnie J. Dow

University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia

By Martha M. Lauzen

The women of prime time are an eclectic assortment of stereotypically meek yet caring women (*Caroline in the City*), unruly women (*Roseanne*, *Cybill*), and teenage witches and ditzes (*Sabrina*, *The Teenage Witch*, *Clueless*). Often, when academics discuss the role of women in prime time, they focus on content analyses of demographic characteristics. The results of these studies exist in a vacuum, devoid of the societal context in which these characters are constructed and viewed.

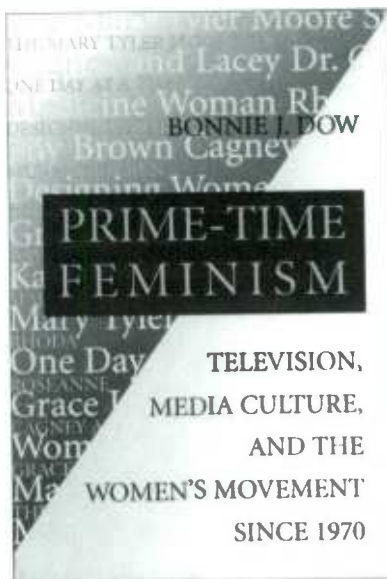
This is not true of Bonnie J. Dow's new book *Prime-time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970*. In this book, Dow examines five prime-time programs that have reflected and contributed to our cultural dialogue about feminism over the past 25 years: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *One Day at a Time*, *Designing Women*,

Murphy Brown, and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. In order to illustrate the evolving nature of the discussion about feminism, Dow chooses series seen during different phases of the feminist movement. The first

two programs (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *One Day at a Time*) aired during the "peak time for radical feminist activity and visibility"—*Murphy Brown* and *Designing Women* during "a time characterized by antifeminist backlash and the construction of 'postfeminism.'" *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* "reflects the late 1980s/early 1990s influence of maternalist feminism."

In the Preface, Dow explains her reasons for studying television and writing this book. "I study television because

I think it is important, because I think it could be better, and because I want people to take it seriously. I also study it because I like it." Dow's enthusiasm and overall



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affection for television are evident. Each chapter is jam-packed with examples from the five prime-time programs mentioned above, as well as examples from many other shows and media.

Although the book is intended for an academic audience, with the exception of the introduction, the book is accessible to a wider general audience. The introduction explains the rhetorical-critical framework Dow uses to analyze women and feminism in prime time. However, what this chapter may lack in accessibility, the rest of the book more than makes up for in its use of entertaining examples and insightful analyses of prime-time feminism.

Dow begins her discussion with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. The debut of this show in 1970 coincided with the advent of second-wave feminism marked by the publication of Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963 and the founding of the National Organization for Women in 1966. Dow draws a parallel between the emergence of Gloria Steinem as the spokeswoman for feminism's second wave and Mary Richards. Both women are attractive, young, and single and possess "warmth, friendliness, style, and modesty." Both women have the "potential to make liberation marketable." However, Dow also notes that Gloria Steinem and Mary Richards are nonthreatening, transitional characters.

Mary is "a woman sophisticated enough to recognize sexism when she sees, it, but she is not necessarily assertive enough to do anything about it." Mary differs from previous women in prime-time television as "she was single by choice, had no explicit familial protection, and saw her job as a career rather than as a stopgap on

the journey toward marriage." Dow discusses how Mary enacts traditional female roles of wife, mother, and daughter in the workplace setting, implying that one can take the woman out of the home, but can't take the home out of the woman. In sum, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* represents "adjustment without change."

One Day at a Time is the first successful situation comedy with a divorced woman as a lead character. While Mary Richards adapts "traditional ideals of womanhood to the workplace," Ann Romano realizes she needs a whole new set of rules. The main themes of *One Day at a Time* are self-actualization, independence, and personal fulfillment. In *One Day at a Time*, the political is transformed into the personal. "*One Day's* strategy of raising complex feminist issues only to dissolve them into the personal psychology of individual characters, thereby suppressing their larger political meaning, is not a strategy unique to this sitcom, or, indeed, to television in general."

Dow observes that television's focus on the individual, as opposed to collective meaning of feminism results in the misperception that women can "make it" in the male domain of the workplace through nothing more than personal choice. "*One Day's* vision of an individualistic feminism rooted in self-help solutions is one of the easiest and least disruptive kinds of feminism for audiences to absorb because it plays into several assumptions that are crucial to the maintenance of patriarchy."

Designing Women and *Murphy Brown* represent the postfeminist period. During this phase, prime time television "assumes that feminist goals have been achieved for the most part, by women's access to the public sphere." Women who stay at home, particularly with families, are idealized

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during this phase. Women's success in the workplace is assumed. It's a fantasy constructed with smoke and mirrors through the magic of television. Once again, the individualist theme is communicated at the expense of the political.

"In postfeminist times, 'choice' had replaced sexual politics as an explanation for the problems and possibilities in women's lives. *Designing Women's* attention to sexual politics, then, is not a sign that television became more radical in the 1980s; the opposite is more likely true. Rather, by 1986, *Designing Women* was forced to provide information and reasoning that would have been implicit for viewers ten years earlier, as it was in *One Day at a Time*."

Dow recognizes and discusses the mixed messages that are sent by *Designing Women*. While the show gives its audience glimpses of realistic women's talk, that talk occurs in the "work setting" of a charming traditional home. While *Designing Women* offers the unusual possibility of identification with multiple female characters, all of these characters are white, middle class, and heterosexual. In acknowledging these contradictions, "*Designing Women* undermines easy postfeminist conclusions about what kind of women are feminists, about the lack of sisterhood among women, and about the declining relevance of sexual politics."

Murphy Brown is "postfeminism personified." Although considered a show with a "feminist consciousness," Dow observes that Murphy frequently must pay for using her quick wit and acerbic tongue. As the show's producer, Diane English, noted, *Murphy Brown* is "a sort of cautionary tale about getting what you wished for." While Murphy is an award-winning investigative journalist, she pays for her lack of femininity. As evidenced by her inability to

successfully navigate even the simplest of domestic tasks (i.e., cracking open an egg), Murphy is often the object of disdain and ridicule. The question regarding Murphy Brown is, who is the joke really on? A society that must tolerate Murphy's aggressive and abrasive style, or Murphy?

The fact is, Murphy just can't win. If she is assertive, she isn't a "real" woman. If she is more feminine, she can't compete in the male domain of investigative journalism. Dow states: "The prevailing tone in *Murphy Brown* is irony: Murphy is funny because she consistently acts as we do not expect a woman to act. Rather than rejecting naturalized prefeminist conceptions of 'good womanhood,' the sitcom depends upon them to make sense. The troubling aspect of this dynamic is that laughter is linked most often to the absurdity of Murphy rather than to the absurdity of conventional expectations for womanhood, indicating that the postfeminist presumption of women's equality is premature."

"Unmarried, and without a satisfying romantic relationship," Murphy pays dearly for her feminist leanings. In the male-dominated world of television, she simply gets what she deserves.

In the final chapter, Dow discusses *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. This show "adapts and illustrates some key themes in recent postfeminist and feminist thought that radiate from the concept of woman's 'difference'; that is, the idea that inherent qualities of womanhood (often linked to motherhood) should be valued for their positive application in the public sphere."

Dr. Mike is a fantasy combination of intelligence, compassion, beauty, and domesticity. Her romantic relationship

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with Sully is one of mutual admiration and respect, with Sully sharing in traditional domestic responsibilities. The theme of "heroic individualism" is carried through this show as well. Dr. Mike "chooses to go West to practice medicine, she chooses to mother, and she chooses the right man with whom to share her life."

While choice is an important message for the show's young female audience, "this message contains the seeds of what is most problematic about postfeminism: the belief that women's choices are free from constraints and that they have the same freedom to make choices as men do." Dow also bristles at the show's frequent implication that because women are different than men, they are somehow better.

Dow ends the book with conclusions about feminism on television. She notes that television communicates that "patriarchy is over, that liberal feminist individualism can solve women's problems, and that our 'choices' are what really determine our fates. These assumptions presuppose the notion that second-wave feminism 'worked.'" As a result, feminism is reduced to a "combination of power dressing, economic success, belligerence, self-confidence, and female chromosomes. In short, it is a lifestyle, an attitude, an identity."

While Dow considers prime-time female characters and the larger issue of feminism, she all but ignores the important role played by women working behind the scenes. In a study I conducted of sitcoms and dramas in the 1995-96 prime-time network season, I discovered that women working as directors, writers, and producers create more powerful female characters on screen. Women working behind the scenes give female characters more to say, let them introduce topics of conversation, and have

the last word. In addition, female characters on shows where women are in charge interrupt and advise other characters more often.

These women create female characters who speak their minds and talk back to others; they achieve conversational parity for their female characters in a television world dominated by male characters.

However, these findings must be put in perspective. My study found that 68% of shows have no female executive producers or producers, 89% have no female directors, and 72% have no female writers. Women working behind the scenes can make a difference, but they are woefully underrepresented. Some discussion of the female community working behind the scenes and their views would be an interesting addition to this book.

Dow quite deftly identifies the compromises that prime-time television makes in portraying women and discussing feminism. She builds a compelling argument that feminist messages in prime time are buried in the mire of individual needs and choices. Perhaps Dow is asking for television to accomplish too much. Television has never excelled at constructing contextually-based multidimensional characters or stories. Television at its best focuses on limited amounts of information, highlighting individuals and events at the expense of movements. ■

Martha M. Lauzen is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication at San Diego State University.

Adventures in Development

Conversations with my Agent

By Rob Long
Dutton, New York

By Bert Briller

Here's a hilarious memoir, the case history of how a sitcom is developed, gets a network slot and is canceled after a dozen episodes. The autobiographical novel, noted as "half-true" but hitting the truth target consistently, reveals some inner workings and absurdities of the Hollywood programming mill.

The author Rob Long doesn't have to use fictitious names for two of the main characters in his story. His novel's hero is named Rob Long. Together with partner Dan Staley, the other major character named, Long wrote and executive-produced NBC's *Cheers* in its eleventh and last season. In 1993, Ted Danson decided to quit his popular bartender role on the Glen and Les Charles and James Burrows show for Paramount Television. That ended the hit series' production. Suddenly, Long, who at the young age of 27 seemed to have it all, was out-of-work. However, his agent did get Long and Staley a development deal, which older West Coast veterans told them is a kind of limbo or "Development Hell."

Interspersed with conventional prose passages are vignettes of conversations with his agent in script format. Here's a

sample when the agent tells Long the script of the pilot is due Friday:

Me: Friday? This Friday?

My Agent: Actually, last Friday.

Me: Impossible. I mean this Friday is impossible. And next Friday is impossible too. We need two weeks, at least. Tell them two weeks.

My Agent: I can't do that. Number one, I'm on vacation. I'm calling you from Cozumel. And (B) I already told them they could have it Friday.

Me: What?

My Agent: I gotta go. We're all going snorkeling before we start the lunch buffet.

The agent in the novel is a hard-working, helpful fellow, but idiosyncratic, crotchety and contrary. Long's dedication makes clear that his actual agent, Beth Effner, is like the fictional 15-percenter in only two ways, being truthful and offering good advice.

Long was pursued by another agent,

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whose wooing included this Alice-in-Hollywood bit:

Agent: You're hot, hot, hot! . . . Because you have an unsold pilot. Not everybody can say that!

Me: Yeah. Some people can say that they have a sold pilot.

Agent: You know what I think? I think success is overrated, it ties you down. Which would you rather have: a successful show on a big network, grinding you down every day, every day a new crisis, a star tantrum, an affiliates rebellion, a script rewrite; or, would you rather have a dozen unsold pilots, each for a different network, each a new, fresh adventure? . . . You make more money in failure.

That's one example of what Long calls the "Hollywood Inversion Principle of Economics"—the HIPE. Whereas in the outside business world, the goal is generating profits for the corporation and its shareholders, Long says, in the production of TV entertainment the goal is making a few individuals rich. Their cuts, the payroll, taxes, the producers' take, the actors' salaries, budget overruns, prints, advertising, *et al* all take precedence over the backend profits.

Everyone says "pay me up front and you can have the back-end profits" (if there are any). He concludes, "You can start to see why the Japanese tried so recently to sell Columbia and Universal studios back to the gypsies who sold it to them in the first place."

Television sitcoms are so bad, Long declares, because they have to pass through too many filters. After the writer comes up with the idea, the studio "gives

notes," suggesting changes and additions; then the network "gives notes", with more changes and suggestions. The filtering process results in pabulum.

Sitcoms are subjected to the Mickey Mouse vs. Bugs Bunny debate, Long complains. He explains: Mickey is not a funny character, doesn't tell jokes, doesn't have a point of view, and girlfriend Minnie is an uptight bore. On the other hand, Bugs is a brilliantly inventive comic genius, sharp-witted, and in the face of death and torture can still get out a cheery "What's up, Doc?" So how come it's Mickey who brings in the big dough?

In Long's view, the networks want their sitcoms to be full of bland characters like Mickey, with maybe a single Bugsy neighbor. Writers, on the contrary, like a bevy of Bugses with maybe one Mickey to ask, "What's going on here? Are you all out of your minds?" The network likes things likable. The writer likes things funny.

Sometimes, with roughly the infrequency of Haley's Comet, Long writes, something "slips through the sticky machine and comes out both funny, likable, sharp, and new. *Seinfeld*, say, or *Cheers*."

With the relaxing of the Financial Interest and Syndication rules, which had been devised to keep the networks from gaining too much control over programming, networks began getting back into producing and studios launched new networks. In this situation, Long and Staley managed to get a sitcom on the air with a new network. Unfortunately, it was on a studio-owned network, just starting up with only two nights of programming a week. The novel doesn't name the show or the network, but casual detective work suggests the program was *Pig Sty* on the United Paramount Network.

Long and Staley's show was hampered

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by poor clearances and a weak lead-in. Moreover, their studio, in an effort to cut its near-term losses and reduce its debt after an expensive buyout, sold its interest in the network. The show was cut loose and subjected to the same vagaries as other series, Long relates. Earning only a 3 Nielsen rating and 5% share of audience, it was canceled at the end of its first cycle. Their hot pilot and bob-tailed series ended in cold storage.

Entertainingly written, *Conversations With My Agent* explodes some myths about television. It demonstrates there's no such thing as "overnight success"; every success is coaxed and cajoled. As a writer, Long probes the role of the writer.

Television writers have more power than feature film writers, he argues, because many television scripters are "hyphenates"—such as writer-director and writer-executive producer.

Long's savvy in script-writing translates into a chuckle-rich book, one which also conveys the ironies and idiocies of television's fun factories, and deftly caricatures the talent, functionaries and go-betweens in a business where a good agent may be more important than a good script. ■

Bert Briller was executive editor of the Television Information Office, Vice-President for sales development of ABC-TV and a reporter-critic for *Variety*.

“Quote...

That's Entertainment

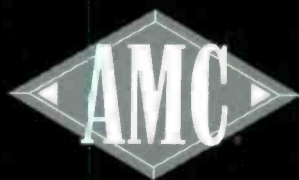
“Everywhere one looks today there is a confusion between the confected and the real, between movies on screen and movies playing out in real life. In part, the confusion is the result of entertainment being our central frame of reference, and we instinctively filter nearly every experience through its scrim. And, in part, it is because television, which is how so much of reality reaches us, imposes its own frame and conventions on what it shows. But mostly—and perhaps most frighteningly—we are confused because life has come more and more to resemble entertainment.”

—Neal Gabler
Los Angeles Times
March 9, 1997

Unquote...”



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A Critic for Times of Change

The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States

By Michael Kammen

Oxford University Press: New York

By Marilyn J. Matelski

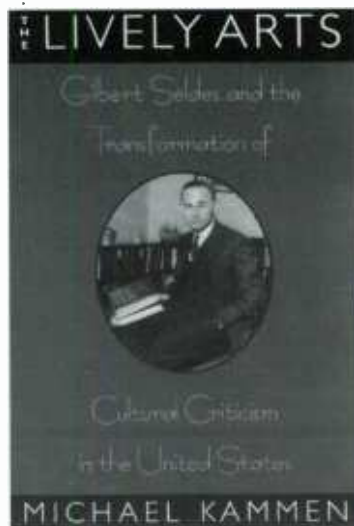
Often, after reading about life during the early twentieth century, I feel I may have been born fifty years too late. The world at that time was in the midst of monumental change, geographically, politically, socially, and technologically. By 1900, the Boxers were staging a rebellion against British dominance, the Boer War was escalating in South Africa, Pierre and Marie Curie had discovered radium and plutonium, Guglielmo Marconi was experimenting with wireless transmissions across the English Channel, Pablo Picasso was preparing for his first Paris exhibit and Sigmund Freud was raising eyebrows with his newly published work, *Interpretation of Dreams*.

In America, Coca Cola found itself in the throes of a cocaine scandal, Emersonian individualism became immensely popular amid vastly growing numbers of immigrant settlers, and vaudeville was considered to be the hottest

entertainment medium around (although it would soon be replaced by some film and music industry “upstarts”).

The possibilities for personal growth and national identity during this era seemed endless as well, especially given the media “explosion” of radio, film, records and new print technology. According to author Michael Kammen, in *The Lively Arts*, critic Gilbert Seldes recognized his great luck at being born at the “right” time, having written that “in my own lifetime, I have witnessed more changes in the modes of communication than occurred in all recorded history.”

Seldes turned his “luck” into something more concrete, however, committing himself to a lifetime of studying the media, working within it, writing about it, and ultimately creating the foundation for a new discipline known as “cultural studies,” a blend of communication theory, film and television analysis,



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and literary criticism within an historical context.

Kammen's very readable biography neither glorifies nor exaggerates Gilbert Seldes' place in the development of cultural studies. Seldes was not "infinitely wiser [n]or more prescient than his contemporary critics." Rather, Kammen comments on Seldes' unique contribution to the discipline—that of a visionary/practitioner, with vast experience as a writer, editor, historian, producer, and researcher/interviewer for all forms of the "lively arts." Kammen also cites Seldes' years as Director of Programs for CBS Television in its early years and as founding dean of the Annenberg School of Communications as strong credentials for media analysis and criticism.

Gilbert Seldes was born in 1893, of Russian Jewish parents, in the farming community of Alliance, New Jersey. While his "Jewishness" became an important theme during several periods of his later life, Seldes' family was not deeply religious; in fact, his father deeply opposed any religious influence "in children too young to understand it."

Seldes' mother died at an early age, leaving his father to raise Gilbert and his brother, George. The father encouraged his sons to think freely, and to read as much as possible. No books were forbidden in the Seldes household, although certain guidelines were given, as George Seldes explained in his autobiography. According to him, the elder Seldes "insisted that we not waste our time reading Alger and Henty and rags-to-riches 'boys' books' and popular novels, but read books of some value, frequently a little beyond our understanding. We were told to begin making a library as soon as we were able

to buy books, or to suggest good books to relatives who sent birthday presents." One of the family's favorite authors at this time was Ralph Waldo Emerson, an influence that would remain with Gilbert for his entire adult life.

Based on his readings from Emerson as well as discussions with family and friends, Gilbert Seldes developed a strong commitment to individualism, but also felt the need to cultivate a national identity for America. Throughout his professional career, Seldes tried to meld these two seemingly disparate concepts with a third element, the communications revolution, a balancing act he struggled with for almost fifty years.

As Michael Kammen notes, "Seldes remained committed to the belief that popular culture could be both democratic *and* distinguished," although later in his life—especially after the introduction of commercial radio and television—he felt the possibility may be doomed. Nevertheless, most of Seldes' books and articles assert the need for individual voices within an identified whole, and for a democratic America.

While working as a philosopher-journalist-editor for *The Dial* in the 1920s, Seldes encountered and befriended many famous literary artists such as e.e.cummings, H.G. Wells, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Edmund Wilson, D.H. Lawrence, William Butler Yeats, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Marianne Moore; he also created a few enemies, like H.L. Mencken and Ernest Hemingway. Michael Kammen writes about Hemingway in particular, who rankled at Seldes' seemingly uncomplimentary reviews of his books, poetry and short stories.

According to Kammen, however, Hemingway's sometimes nasty actions

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stimulated little reciprocal rancor from Seldes; in fact, he actually praised Hemingway consistently, "often lavishly," for the rest of his life. After Hemingway's death, Seldes said, "I am essentially not concerned with anything personal about H. I am thinking of him in connection with the other writers of his early years [as an expatriate]."

Seldes' leadership at *The Dial* brought recognition and prestige to the literary/cultural publication within a few short years, reflecting high writing standards, editorial balance, and a cosmopolitan view shown by no journal in its time. *The Dial* also reflected a particular style and identity during these years, that of Seldes as a "critic for Everyman."

Kammen quotes Seldes in his 1922 article, entitled "America's Letter": "For many of us the use of literary as a means to an economic end has become tiresome. We do want to know the relevance of a book to life, of course; but we want our critics to tell us just how well the 'criticism of life' is managed in a novel, for instance, and then to go on and make our enjoyment greater by referring us to the artistic harmonies which the novel may possess, to let us share a little the rapture of the creator."

As the popular arts developed technologically, so did Seldes' maturity and insight in *The Dial* and other publications. This evolution is most evident in his classic 1924 book, *The 7 Lively Arts*, a compilation of essays on various aspects of popular culture. Seldes defined the "7 Lively Arts" as "slapstick moving pictures, comic strips, revues, musical comedy, colyums, slang humour, popular songs and vaudeville."

In a later edition (1957), he revised these arts to include radio and television,

voicing doubts about the future of a democratic society submerged under a plethora of popular culture. The book also covered the business aspects of the popular arts as well as their aesthetic dimensions. In it, Seldes warned that "with the shift of all entertainment into the area of big business, we are being engulfed in a mass-produced mediocrity"—a concern he carried with him for the rest of his life.

Despite these doubts about America's future with popular culture in its pores, Seldes continued to follow and support the growth of communication technology—writing, producing and directing in the media he feared most. He disliked radio immensely, calling it "the most annoying, the most inescapable, and the most insufferable racket ever put over on the American public." Television fared better in his mind, having the potential to be "the primary force in the creation of a unified entertainment industry which will include sports, the theater and the movies, newsreels, radio, night clubs, vaudeville, as well as many minor activities."

Seldes subsequently joined CBS as its first program head in 1937, and soon developed a niche for educational television, creating cooperative relationships with the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art. After completing his widely read work, *The Public Arts* in 1956, Seldes accepted a post as founding dean of the Annenberg School of Communications. There he focused much of his time on the problem of ethical standards in a competitive, non-government regulated marketplace. In recognition of his special contributions to media ethics, as well as his lifetime achievement, Seldes was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1963.

From this time until his death in 1970,

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Gilbert Seldes continued to share his insights, experiences, fears and hopes for understanding the media and its impact on American identity and culture. Other media critics and philosophers, for example, former colleague Kenneth Burke and pop icon Marshall McLuhan, have no doubt been influenced by Seldes' views on popular culture. One recurrent theme in particular—Seldes' observation that each medium is unique, and should be recognized and utilized with that uniqueness in mind—served as a foundation for studies in media determinism . . . or as some members of the *Laugh-In* cast were fond of saying, "the medium is the massage."

For those of us who look at media from

a cultural perspective, Gilbert Seldes was an invaluable contributor to the discipline; and Michael Kammen provides the reader with a colorful "bird's-eye" view into an insightful man born during a provocative period in American history. While the details of Seldes' personal life and career may be a bit overwhelming to the casual reader, those who are interested in a deep study of the man and his times will appreciate the care with which Michael Kammen has developed his subject. ■

Marilyn J. Matelski is Professor of the Communication Department at Boston College. She has written nine books on radio and television, and is currently working on a study of soap operas and their impact throughout the world.

Book Ends

You've Gotta Have Hart

"In the mid-1940's, Moss Hart was president of the New York Dramatists Guild. One afternoon he called together the Guild's foremost members to discuss demands and standards for writers in the new medium of TV.

"Many viewed the meeting as a joke. One veteran Broadway playwright described what he had already seen on TV as 'amateurs playing at home movies.'

"Hart insisted the members address the problem at hand. 'The time will come when stations will be telecasting perhaps twelve, perhaps fourteen hours a day,' he told them.

"A colleague interrupted, 'I won't write for television, and I don't know anyone else who will.'

"Hart pushed on. 'The day is coming when a two-hour play will be seen once by millions of people. The network will be looking for writers to supply them with thirty-six full plays—or seventy-two hour-long plays—each week.' The silence was deafening. Finally, the oldest writer in the Guild slowly raised his hand.

"'Where was it ever decreed that man had to have so much entertainment?'"

—Michael Ritchie, in *Please Stand By: A Prehistory of Television*.
Overlook Press, Woodstock, New York, 1994.

Present Without Power

The Media In Black And White

Everette E. Dennis and Edward C. Pease, Editors.
Transaction Publishers: New Brunswick, N.J.

By Howard Myrick

The title of this book, *The Media In Black And White*, could well have been "The Media In Red, Brown, Yellow, Black and White" with no particular order given to the listing of the colors or racial groups discussed. Why? It is because the content is not just about Caucasians and African-Americans, but about the role of the media, in all its forms in our complex racially and culturally diverse society. Although television looms large in this critique, this book by no means neglects other media. Indeed, this book does what it set out to do: examine media with the intent of helping Americans understand race and how media clouds our understanding of race.

Helping media professionals, especially journalists—both print and electronic—to understand their roles and responsibilities and the consequences of their actions is where the real significance and value of this book resides. For this reason I would prescribe it as required reading for all who work in the media.

But who has time to read yet another media-bashing book, written by a bunch of ivory-tower intellectuals who do not understand the realities and imperatives of the media business? Here is where the

reader is in for a surprise. First, the contributors to this volume are a well-chosen mix of scholars and practitioners who know what they are writing about. Also, they understand that journalists, particularly, are people of action, often "limited in resources and time, under great competitive pressure . . . (to) select, simplify and organize the day's events into a meaningful and visually compelling narrative . . ." (Robert M. Entman in his essay, "African-American According to TV News".)

The organization and format of this book are superb and a real tribute to its editors. What they have achieved is a collection of relevant and timely essays, rich in content and intelligently organized, with a table of contents containing more than the usual chapter headings, but also, a synopsis of each chapter which helps to make this volume user-friendly.

But basically substance is what makes this book so useful and valuable.

The thesis, around which all the contributors and their essays revolve, is enunciated succinctly by Sig Gissler, former editor of the *Milwaukee Journal* and now a journalism professor at Columbia University, who in his piece "Newspapers' Quest

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for Racial Candor” declares, “Race is America’s rawest nerve.” And Ellis Cose, in his contribution “Seething in Silence: the News In Black and White”, amplifies and elaborates with this opening gambit: “For reporters, race can be a treacherous subject, raising questions that go to the heart of the journalist’s craft.”

He asks, “Is objectivity (or, even fairness) possible when dealing with people from different racial groups and cultural backgrounds? After all, perceptions vary radically as a function of race—or...as a function of the very different experiences members of various racial groups have endured.”

Because media gatekeepers are generally white and male (as noted in the essay by Jannette Dates and Edward Pease) . . . “It is not so surprising that the messages they permit to pass through their media gate support their own views of the world.”

Other contributions focus on other consequences of this state of affairs:

“Most viewers of American TV news know black men only as criminals, and people of color as poor, desperate or dangerous.” (Les Payne, *Newsday*, quoted by Dates and Pease in “Warping the World-Media’s Mangled Images of Race”.)

Because most major media have predominantly white audiences, as a bottom line issue, black journalists are expected to “cover race-related assignments . . . pitched to white readers . . .”, states Andrew Hacker in “Are the Media Really White?”

In this connection, William Wong, quoting Kathy Imahara, asserts, “Los Angeles seems to have done a strange thing in (its) need to have an Asian woman anchor on all the stations . . . That hasn’t, however, translated into any more stories about the Asian community.” (Wong, “Covering the

Invisible ‘Model Minority’”.)

From my own observations and experiences, I have resorted to labeling this situation as the phenomenon of “being present, but without power.” The consequence of this aberration is that audiences and readers lose the benefit of balancing perspectives and better and more accurate reporting of the “real” American which is much more diverse, culturally richer and, indeed, more interesting than the stereotyping, distortions and blandness that characterize so much of American journalism, “passing” as representative and fair.

The recent saga of the O.J. Simpson case(s) has made it clear that race is still the festering American sore that refuses to heal. Even when covered by the camouflage of silence and neglect, it remains hidden deep in the American psyche like a recessive gene or deceptive virus that flairs up in violent ways. The mass media, as though caught by surprise, responds by bolting out of its somnambulism, shoving microphones and cameras in the first available faces, interviewing those who have nothing to say, bestowing credibility on the undeserving, anointing self-appointed leaders—and committing a host of other sins against themselves and the public. In brief, the media too often becomes a part of the story, if not a part of the problem, often contributing to (as Robert Entman asserts) “making urban America less governable, deepening the chasm of misunderstanding and distrust between blacks and whites.” In this connection, Manning Marable’s essay “Reconciling Race and Reality,” makes a convincing case for this contention that “. . . Television has added a new level of pathology to the white mind’s popular image of blackness . . . Most African-American inner-city residents are not drug dealers or criminals, contrary to the impres-

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sion promoted by American media.”

What this volume makes clear is that there is validity to the advice that being “firstest” with the “mostest” is fraught with danger. Putting the bottom line/profit incentive first is to put the public interest (and the truth) last. Admittedly, as Oscar Gandy, the University of Pennsylvania media scholar concedes, “Bad news sells—and . . . bad news with pictures sells even better (but) many of us have begun to question whether all this selling produces benefits without cost.”

In spite of all the bad news from the trenches, several of the contributors to this book were able to point to glimmers of light on the horizon. I like particularly Melita Marie Garza’s essay, “Hola, Ameri-

can! Newsstand 2000,” in which she observes, “Newspapers can see the writing on the wall, and it’s in Spanish.” Among other developments she was referring to such examples as Knight-Ridder’s publication of the Spanish-language daily *El Nuevo Herald* in Miami and *El Monitor*, the Sunday Spanish edition published by the *McAllen Monitor* in South Texas, Capital Cities/ABC bi-lingual *La Estrella* and some other proactive steps being taken in various places. Garza adds, with some degree of levity, “It was inevitable in a society in which salsa now outsells ketchup.” ■

Howard Myrick is professor of Broadcasting, Telecommunications and Mass Media at Temple University in Philadelphia.

Books in Brief

BY FRITZ JACOBI

Aaron Spelling: A Prime-Time Life

By Aaron Spelling with Jefferson Graham
St. Martin's Press, New York

This theoretically admirable rags-to-riches story is so abominably told that it reads as if it had been ad-libbed by Spelling to his co-author without the slightest editorial intrusion. And Spelling was once an award-winning playwright!

Aaron Spelling grew up the son of poor Jewish immigrants on the wrong side of the tracks in Dallas, Texas, and later became, according to *The Guinness Book of World Records*, the most prolific television producer of all time. Yet this self-congratulatory memoir, written in virtually illiterate

Hollywood-speak, is, like many of Spelling's most successful television series (*Charlie's Angels*, *The Love Boat*, *Dynasty*), aimed at the lowest common denominator. The vocabulary is so limited that "great" is his

only descriptive adjective, used three times in a four-line paragraph. And it is altogether fatuous to reprint large chunks of scripts from such shows as *Dynasty*, *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Melrose Place*.

Rambling, repetitive and superficial, filled with banalities, nonsequiturs and one leaden cliché after another, this autobiography does little justice to a producer who achieved vast and dazzling wealth through this uncanny instinct for the tastes of the television audience. He and his collaborator make his potentially fascinating life story just incredibly boring. ■

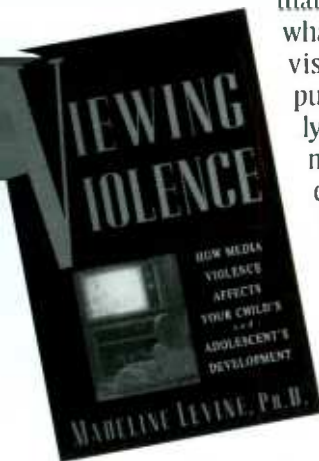
Viewing Violence: How Media Violence Affects Your Child's and Adolescent's Development

By Madeline Levine
Doubleday, New York

"The debate is over. Violence on television and in the movies is damaging to children," says Dr. Levine, a clinical psychiatrist who doesn't write like one. She presents an alarmingly convincing case that children are profoundly and per-



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manently affected by what they see on television. She pulls no punches as she clearly demonstrates that media violence encourages aggression, desensitization and pessimism in our children.

Relying not only on incontrovertible research but

also on her experience with her own three young children, Dr. Levine shows that children who watch a lot of television violence are cultivating aggressive attitudes that last a lifetime. She shows how television has its greatest negative effects on those children whose parents are not involved in their viewing.

This is an important and powerful book. The author even has some good things to say about certain TV programs, most notably *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (she calls PBS a "national treasure" and really socks it to Newt Gingrich!). And she has some constructive advice for parents: put your children on a TV diet, watch with them and insist on their reading.

"Violence among youngsters and teenagers has skyrocketed," Dr. Levine writes. "Researchers speak with one voice in telling us that this is partly due to the incessant glamorization of violence in the media. However, the entertainment industry's self-protective stance has resulted in these findings being ignored, denied, attacked or misrepresented. . . . There is not a single studio head in this country who is not aware of the exploding homicide rate for adolescents. These captains of industry

have all been shown the connection between media portrayals of violence and real-world violence. Their continued dismissal of these facts is criminal." Aaron Spelling, are you listening? ■

Smoke and Mirrors: Violence, Television and Other American Cultures

By John Leonard

The New Press, New York

The conventional example of chutzpah, which is more easily illustrated than translated, is that of the young man on trial for the murder of his parents who throws himself on the mercy of the court because he's an orphan. A critic leveling criticism at another critic—particularly one as distinguished as John Leonard, who reviews television for *New York* magazine and is literary editor for *The Nation*—could also be construed as chutzpah. And yet, alas, Leonard's potentially eloquent paean to television begins brilliantly but soon becomes a disappointment.

Taking quite the opposite tack from Dr. Levine, Leonard argues "that TV, however much a creature of the fast-buck media monopolies and quarterly-dividend greed-head crowd, is full of surprising gravity and grace that where it departs in any significant way from the



tenacious norms of the pop culture that long ago preceded it and still surrounds it, those departures have been open of mind and generous of heart if also wishful and naive; and that we'd actually be a kinder, gentler, healthier nation if in fact we embraced the scruples and imitated the behavior recommended by most entertainment programs—more welcoming of diversity and difference, more impatient with the routine brutalities of a master class and a mass society, more of a community than an agglomeration of market segments and seething sects."

A brave undertaking but not convincingly realized, in the opinion of this reviewer. After a warm, affectionate, three-dimensional tribute to Ed Sullivan and his showcasing of higher culture—"For more than two decades he had not only kept the faith but had every week renewed it, telling us what was funny, who was important, and how we were supposed to feel about the world he monitored on our behalf"—Leonard lapses into a strung-together collection of profoundly subjective reviews aiming presumably to prove that television reflects society but doesn't influence it.

The book is a platform for the display of the author's boundless and dazzling erudition; his literary references are myriad, recondite and ultimately irritating; and he is infatuated with the sound of his own intellectual wisecracks. Just one example, in a discussion of espionage shows: "While we await the Aldrich Ames mini-series, we can gladly construe the 1994 return of *I Spy* as a TV movie in which Culp and Cosby end up strapped down, back-to-back and naked, in heavy Austro-Hungarian Empire chairs—thus fulfilling the Huck (Jim)-Ishmael (Queequeg)-Natty Bumppo (Chingachgook) homoerotic-miscegenated psychosexual subject of the

original series when we still Leslie A. Fiedlered while the Cold War burned." There's lots of this, all of it enviably clever but much of it smart-ass.

From police shows and social issues to news—how newsmen are portrayed in TV drama and how TV deals with real-life news—Leonard makes a case that there is a lot of quality on the tube. But in the process he glazes our eyes with lengthy lists of programs and personalities and endless sentences, one of which goes on for 146 words occupying 23 lines on half a page. Now *that's* chutzpah. ■

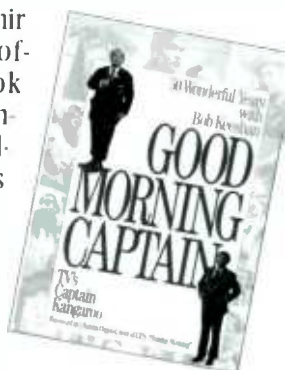
Good Morning Captain: 50 Wonderful Years with Bob Keeshan

By Bob Keeshan, edited by Cathryn Long
Fairview Press, Minneapolis

More of a souvenir paperback coffee-table book than an incisive memoir, this extensively illustrated volume is pleasant but often cloyingly sweet. Bob Keeshan, once Clarabelle the Clown on *Howdy Doody*, rose

to fame as "Captain Kangaroo" in a program that spanned almost 40 years of television from its initial broadcast on CBS Television in 1955 until its final airing on public television in 1993.

Buried in a vat of sometimes-saccharine accolades are some fascinating facts and



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laudable sentiments: Keeshan turned down TerryToon cartoons because of their violence and “inappropriate cultural attitudes”; he encouraged his young audience to read; he showcased animals and made zoologist Ruth Mary Manecke an integral part of the production staff; there are many amusing backstage photos never before seen. But the proliferation of encomia and kind words for everybody didn’t really convince this reviewer, who as *Howdy Doody’s* publicist nearly 50 years ago knows that not everybody was a prince (or even a princess, for that matter). Nevertheless Keeshan deserves high praise for two strong statements:

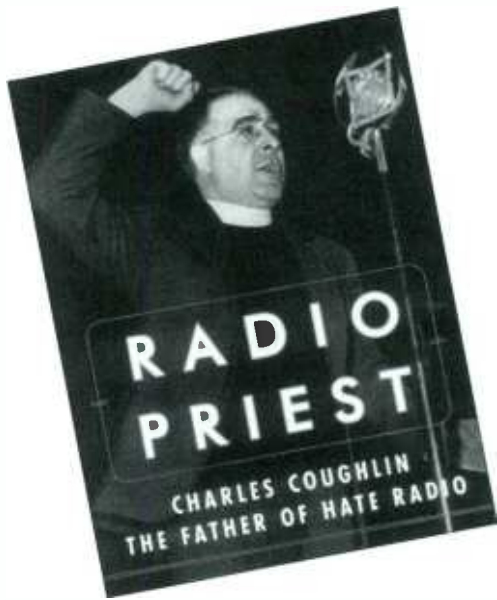
1. “Americans must care about children at risk because we all pay the very high cost of failure when we do not . . . As taxpayers, we should insist that low-cost preventive programs be introduced to deal with children and families at risk.”

2. “I have always believed that every television program begins with writing. The greatest actors, producers, or directors cannot overcome a bad script. Writing is the basic ingredient.” Hear, hear! ■

Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio

By Donald Warren
The Free Press, New York

Here is a fascinating if ultimately puzzling book about this virulent, vitriolic, rabble-rousing demagogue whose inflammatory anti-Semitic radio broadcasts influenced a frighteningly large audience before and during World War II.



Warren is a professor of sociology and anthropology who writes like a suspense novelist. His book is a real page-turner: he builds to a great crescendo of verbal violence as he traces the impact which Father Coughlin, who became a hero to Nazi Germany, exerted on a large segment of the American public.

Crammed with well-documented original research and interviews with primary sources, *Radio Priest* shows how Coughlin played a key role in defeating a 1938 Congressional reorganization bill, how a pro-Franco speech generated 150,000 telegrams to the White House and 1.75-million signatures on a petition to defeat anti-Franco sanctions, and how his Archbishop was reluctant to discipline him for fear of alienating American Catholic laity. Outbreaks of violent anti-Semitism in the U.S. during World War II could be traced to Coughlin’s influence, the author states, and there was evidence of an FBI coverup.

The contemporary relevance of *Radio Priest* is clear: Coughlin “ushered in a

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revolution in American mass media by his dramatic ability to blend religion, politics, and entertainment in a powerful brew whose impact is still being felt decades after his demise as a public figure," Warren writes. "Two significant media phenomena, televangelism and political talk radio, stem back to him . . . His broadcast heirs: angry media personalities who practice an electronic demagoguery by projecting qualities of populist sincerity and trustworthiness while providing a forum for violence-provoking political expression."

What is both puzzling and disappointing about this otherwise admirable book is that it just stops, it doesn't conclude. There is really no satisfactory explanation for why Coughlin was never indicted for sedition or why he wasn't formally disciplined by his hierarchical superiors. A virtual traitor to his country, an inciter to riot, he lived on, apparently unrepentant, until he died, in 1979, at the age of 88. This is a mystery which Warren simply doesn't illuminate. ■

Electronic Media and Indigenous Peoples: A Voice of our Own?

By Donald R. Brown
Iowa State University Press, Ames

Ascholarly examination of the purposes and fate of radio, television and video in the service of indigenous populations ranging from Australia to Ireland, from Mexico and Canada to Scandinavia. Among the several

purposes of this kind of media is to increase the sense of self-esteem on the part of the indigenous peoples, but the author's findings in the end are vague and inconclusive despite the fact that his work is exhaustively researched and documented. Perhaps no generalizations are possible because he has looked at such a widely disparate range of cultures. From the Maoris to the Zapotecs, from the

Basques to the Native Americans to the Lapps, all are minorities in their own lands but were there millennia before the majority.

"The indigenous electronic media clearly have important roles to play in the realm of indigenous political life," Browne concludes.

"If they appear to be playing those roles minimally, spasmodically, or selectively, that may not be surprising: those media are comparatively young . . . While language revival or revitalization has been a major reason for establishing indigenous broadcast stations, very few of them broadcast in indigenous languages, and most of them broadcast primarily in the majority culture languages."

In the end one has to wonder why the author—professor and chairman of the Department of Speech-Communication at the University of Minnesota—undertook this study, which piles fact upon fact, rendering a potentially fascinating subject crushingly dull. Strictly for the anthropologist or the electronic equivalent of the ethnomusicologist. ■



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Dictionary of Teleliteracy

By David Bianculli
Continuum, New York

Subtitled "Television's 500 Biggest Hits, Misses and Events," this tome at first glance appears to be another who-needs-it, strictly for nostalgia buffs or *Jeopardy*-contestant wannabe's. However, on closer inspection the somewhat mistitled Dictionary turns out to be a sprightly

if highly idiosyncratic and totally subjective series of critical essays, some scathing and some surprisingly fulsome.

From *ABC World News Tonight* to *Zorro*, Bianculli provides his own brand of breezy assessment. For

example: "How I hated [*The Brady Bunch*]. I still do—only more fervently, because now my kids have discovered it in syndication"; "To its eternal shame, CBS . . . did nothing in 1995 to mark the fortieth anniversary of *Captain Kangaroo*"; "*Charlie's Angels* never disappointed: it was always as horrendous and inept as you could hope to expect, and was the kind of guilty pleasure that was no less enjoyable with the sound off"; *Jeopardy!* "may have been Grant Tinker's first major lesson that quality, intelligent TV could reap big dividends."

The author devotes almost as much space to *Bullwinkle* as he does to the *CBS*

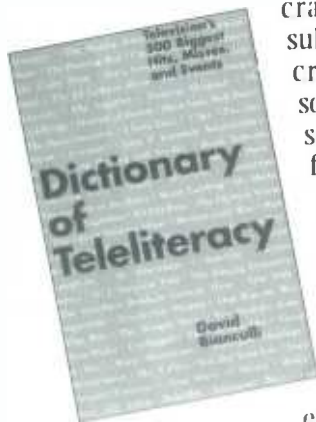
Evening News, revealing his relish for bad historical puns and literate if zany comedy. There are an extensive bibliography and two lengthy indexes, one of names, the other of titles, as well as scads of appropriately placed photos. ■

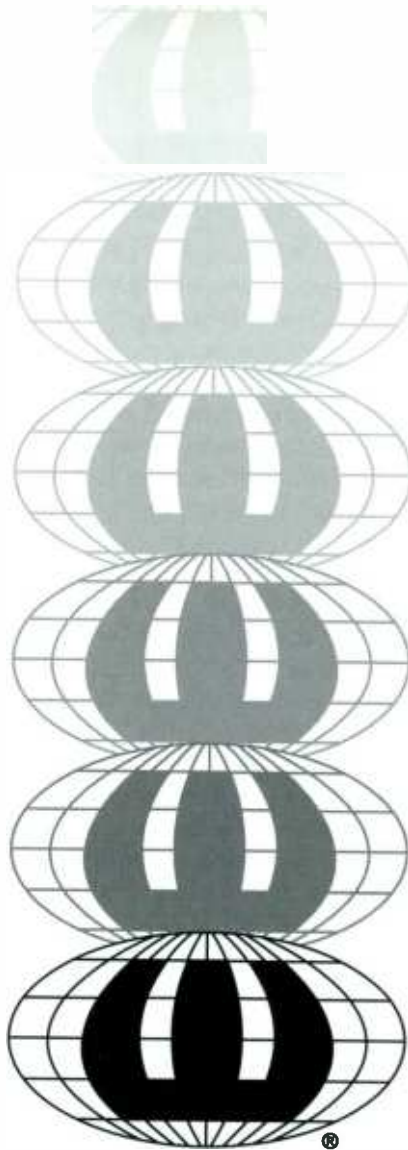
Live at Five

By David Haynes
Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis

Although this department does not normally review fiction, here is an amusing romp of a novel with a television setting. The focus is on Brandon Wilson, a black co-anchor of a TV news program with a sub-basement rating. Dexter Rayburn, an ambitious new station manager who is essentially a cartoon twerp/villain, conceives the "brilliant" notion of originating the program from a ghetto housing project in order to boost the show's rating. Dexter insists that Wilson, the son of two middle-class suburban black schoolteachers, reinvent his background so that he can appear to have risen above his "ghetto childhood."

Is the premise believable? Not very. Nevertheless the author is expert at leading the reader on—you care what happens to the protagonists—and in creating an aura of tension. The climax surprises in its details but not in its overall denouement, which has been telegraphed early on. *Live at Five* is a fast, entertaining read. But for real cliff-hanging suspense, give me Donald Warren and Father Coughlin any time. ■





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In Memorium

Marie Torre

“Marie Torre was my mentor, my teacher, my colleague and my friend. She was an inspiration and role model to countless people in the Pittsburgh television market.” This comment by veteran KDKA public affairs producer Aviva Radbord speaks to the meaning of Marie Torre’s 14-year career to the viewers of Pittsburgh, which she came to identify as home, despite being born and raised in Brooklyn and building a reputation as newspaper reporter and columnist dealing with TV for the *New York Herald Tribune*. She is, of course, best remembered in this connection for her precedent-setting refusal in 1959 to reveal the identity of her informant in a story dealing with the cancellation of a Judy Garland appearance on CBS. It is difficult to picture this elegant and gracious lady behind prison bars, but that nasty reality was her lot for 10 days—her punishment for taking the First Amendment seriously.

New York’s loss was Pittsburgh’s gain and a newspaper career turned toward electronic media when she moved from the *Herald-Tribune* to KDKA-TV. Co-anchoring the noon news with the legendary Bill Burns, she built a powerful journalistic presence. She was a pioneer in opening television’s news ranks to aspiring young women, one of the first to cover hard news as a matter of course.

She returned to New York in 1977 as a local television host, and worked in Wilmington, Delaware television and radio. For many years, she served with distinction as a member of the Editorial Board of *Television Quarterly*.

Pittsburgh’s Carlow College has established the “Carlow College Marie Torre Lecture Series,” which will seek out speakers who, like the honored journalist, are of high integrity and potential role models.

Marie Torre was not only an esteemed reporter and broadcaster—her achievements included three Emmy Awards—she was also a cherished wife, mother and grandmother. Her two children, Adam Friedman and Roma Torre, who is following her mother’s trail as news anchor for cable’s *New York One News*, speak for all of us who knew and worked with her in these words they wrote to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*: “There is no solace from the pain of her loss. She was a giant woman who left a gaping hole in our hearts.”

—The Editorial Board, *Television Quarterly*

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June Colbert
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Kay Koplovitz, *Chairman*
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