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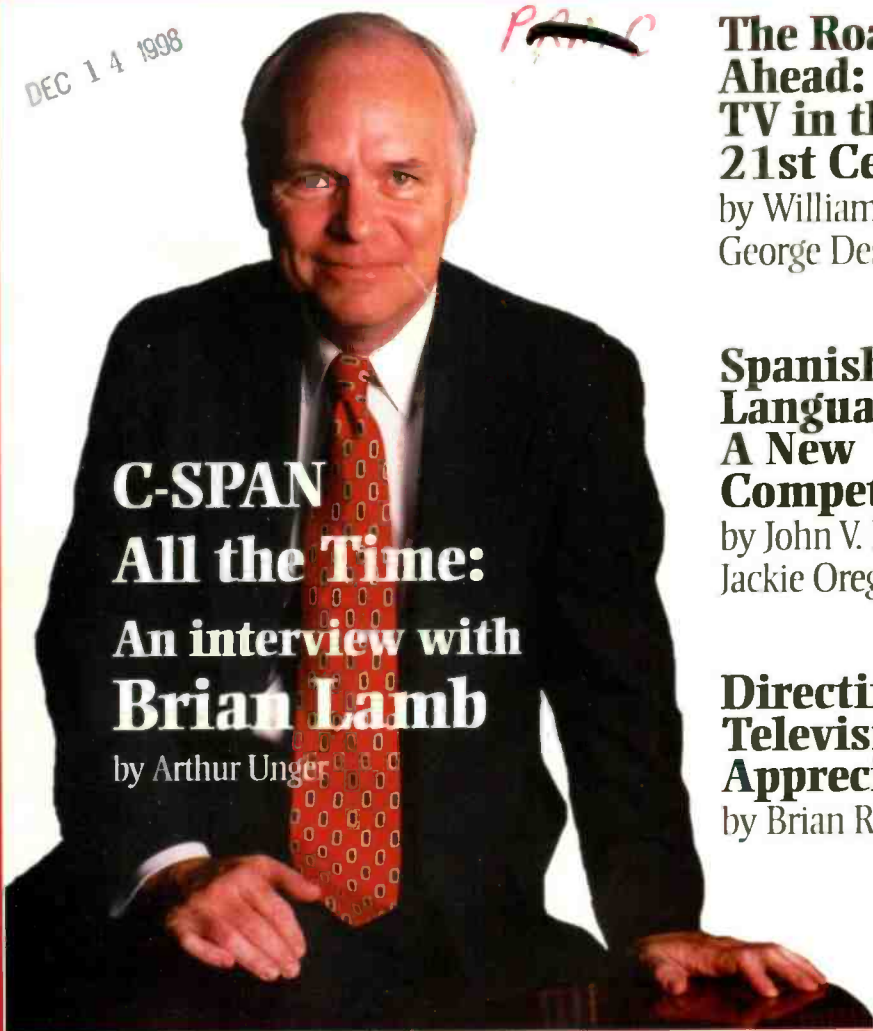
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*Pavlik*



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by Arthur Unger

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by William F. Baker and  
George Dessart

## Spanish Language TV: A New Competitor

by John V. Pavlik and  
Jackie Oregel Pavlik

## Directing for Television: An Appreciation

by Brian Rose

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# TELEVISION QUARTERLY



VOLUME XXIX NUMBER 4

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2

## The Road Ahead

*by William F. Baker and George Dessart*

18

## Spanish-Language TV in the USA

*by John V. Pavlik and Jackie Oregel Pavlik*

24

## Some Final Thoughts on Seinfeld

*by Albert Auster*

34

## Directing for Television: An Appreciation

*by Brian Rose*

40

## Golden Age Ironies

*by Bert Briller*

46

## An interview with Brian Lamb of C-SPAN

*by Arthur Unger*

65

## Review & Comment:

*Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding*

*by W. Terrence Gordon*

*reviewed by Michael Real*

## Books in Brief

*reviewed by Fritz Jacobi*

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# The Road Ahead

*The authors of Down the Tube—a challenging history of television which indicts the medium for its failures—examine constructive ways to improve TV in the future. Digital technology may offer a second chance for change. Meanwhile, they urge a new national television policy for the 21st century.*

**By William F. Baker and George Dessart**

**W**hat will the road ahead be like? Will it be the promised superhighway, bulldozing its way across the continents, wide and swift and relentless, interested only in its destination? Will it be a meandering secondary road, respecting the mountains, coming into the lives of the county seats, the crossroad towns, the suburbs, and the endless grids of modest housing which encompass and nourish the central

districts of our cities?

Will it be democratic, accessible to all, bringing delight and enrichment? Or will it be simply another impersonal source of noise, pollution and stress? What vehicles will travel this road? For whose sake? Under whose direction? What will they carry? Will we like it? Will it help? And will we have any say in the matter? Will it reflect our choices? Is it too late to shape our information future? What does that future portend for programming, for

children, for broadcast journalism, for public television? What will be the fate of the viewer? Will we be even further commodified?

## **Do we stand at a crossroad or have we traveled too far?**

**W**hen the Clinton Administration set out to develop the necessary broad support for the bill which ultimately became the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the term "information superhighway" entered the vocabulary. Vice President Gore was dispatched to sing its praises. And praiseworthy it certainly seemed. If you were lost in the woods, or at sea, or in an unfamiliar city, your location would be instantly pinpointed and whatever help was needed would soon be at home. If you were injured on the highway, your medical records would be summoned up and the nation's foremost surgeons would be in video contact with the paramedics, who would have been en route to the scene from the very instant the accident occurred. Every school in the country could, at any time, summon up the leading authorities in every field.

The technology for most of all this had been developed; only two elements needing to be put in place: infrastructures to establish and maintain linkages among the various institutions, and a vastly improved broad band network to distribute the signals. Indeed, the administration's dog-and-pony show was addressing the latter concern. The United States could not maintain its preeminence in international finance without a complete overhaul of the data networks involved. Since the 1980s, the amount of money which passed through New York City in any three-day period was equal to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)—the country's entire output of goods and services in a year. Every ten days, the amount flowing through New York was equal to the world's

GDP. With electronic financial transactions increasing exponentially, the United States had no choice but to upgrade its capacity. Hying the emergency and education capabilities seemed a lot safer politically than asking members of Congress to underwrite a system which would help Wall Street when they were busy explaining to their constituents why the local military base had to be closed. Television would play into the information superhighway through convergence. Computers, telecommunications, and mass media would soon interchange signals as their technologies began to look and function alike. Then, the argument ran, we could have five hundred channels. To make all this happen, we would need to reform the communications laws.

We were at a crossroads indeed. A new, comprehensive telecommunications act, long anticipated but not possible until the mid-1990s, appeared to be imminent. Not only that, but many of the promises of the information superhighway were already coming to pass as the Internet seemed to be exploding from a university-based research tool into a popular electronic communications system. Most important, a new era in television technology was coming to fruition after a frustrating twenty years of development.

A new regulatory framework could provide hope that a reactivated public interest standard would answer the perennial questions about television fare: Why is so much television so unfulfilling? Why must it be so formulaic? Why must it be so offensive that many people would welcome the government setting the criteria for acceptability?

Any regulatory framework attempting to address these issues is constrained by three resources: money, time and content. For at least the last twenty years, media scholars have been watching the principle of relative constancy at work. The principle holds that as the population grows, the

total amount of money spent on information and entertainment will grow, but the proportion of the GDP representing communications expenditures remains relatively fixed from year to year, despite the appearance of new technologies, new media, or new content.

For example, in 1996, \$113.7 billion was spent on advertising in the United States. That amount, which had risen in the previous five years, paid for a high proportion of radio, television, cable, newspapers and magazines. The amount that consumers spent directly on cable, motion pictures, home video, recorded music, newspapers, books, magazines, business information services, and interactive digital media of all kinds—\$103 billion—had also risen. Pay-per-view movies on cable grew by 44 percent. The sum of all expenditures for communications, \$290.7 billion, represented 3.8 percent of the GDP. Despite the fluctuations in individual components, despite the appearance and growth of VCRs, home video, personal computers and the Internet, that percentage had varied only by two tenths of a percent for more than twenty years. It is estimated that it will rise to 4.2 percent by the end of the century.

Another way to describe the principle of relative constancy is to say that the public's expenditures on media in the United States represent a zero-sum game. For every dollar spent on a new medium, a dollar is taken from older media. Every additional dollar put into television production must be met with a dollar coming out of advertising at the expense of radio or print or outdoor, or a dollar coming out of profits. Americans will not tap into the rent or the food money to pay for media.

Closely related to the money issue is the management of that other scarce recourse, time. Analyses by Veronis Suhler & Associates show that the average person,

twelve years and older, spent 9 hours and 18 minutes a day on all communications in 1996. The yearly total has not varied by more than two hours since 1989, nor is it estimated to do so for the rest of this decade. This is not surprising in light of the increasing number of two-income families, the greater time demands placed on job holders and the decrease in leisure time. It is also not surprising that 46 percent of the time spent on communications was spent with television, and 32 percent with radio. What may be surprising is that while reading accounted for about an hour a day, less than 6 minutes a day was spent on computer on-line services and the Internet. Despite all the hype about the information superhighway and its components, the amount of time the average person spends on these pathways is not expected to reach much more than an hour a month. The average American will spend only thirty hours on-line during the entire last year of the century.

### **What of television— will we like it?**

**I**n that same year, 1999, each American will spend an average of 1,645 hours with television. A little more than two thirds of that time will be spent with broadcast television. Less than 5 percent of the time will be spent watching movies and special events on premium cable channels and pay-per-view. Ironically, in this age when the prospect of five hundred channels is casually spoken of, there is a growing scarcity of prime time programming.

Network prime time has been the staple of American program supply, both broadcasting and cable. It has also historically supplied an average of 21 percent of European programming. The decline in broadcast network shares has inevitably diminished the amount of money available to develop and produce prime time entertain-

ment. Even more important, the short-term bottom line obsession of management through most of the last ten years, has decreased the supply by 20 percent, and the magazine shows have proliferated. These series were scheduled primarily because they are relatively inexpensive to produce. Admittedly cable has been producing more and more original programming. But the money cable provides to make programs amounts to from 5 to 12.5 percent of what the networks pay. Network shares have stabilized and are expected to remain where they are for the balance of the country. But if network shares once again begin to drop, can sufficient audiences be aggregated to assure advertiser support for twenty-two hundred hours of new prime time programming a year?

Programming genres are cyclical. We seem to be in a particular formulaic period. But relief may be on the way—the baby boomers are reaching their fifties. People in their fifties begin to watch more television than ever before. The first generation raised with television—and the largest generation before or since—will bring more people to the set every year for at least the next decade. Will the networks seek their patronage? For that matter, will advertisers recognize that baby boomers have more disposable income than younger groups? Or will the advertisers in their desire to capture the much smaller next generation, drive the boomers to cable reruns?

The Europeans have contended for the last ten years that there is a world-wide dearth of programming. The number of channels in Europe has grown by 50 percent since 1987, when nearly fifty thousands hours of American programming were showing up each year on European television sets. Even though the European Community has placed a 25 percent quota on programming from non-European sources, there will still be a

demand for seventy-five thousand hours of imported programs. Because our population base is so big and our popular culture so widely accepted, it is unlikely that any nation will supersede the United States as the primary source of exported programming. Admittedly, the seventy-five thousand hour figure is an artifact: any episode of *Baywatch*, a popular export, will appear on television in several countries and each appearance counts as one hour. But if new programming does not increase in the United States, will we be able to meet the demands of Europe or will we see more TeveGlobos emerging to fill the gap?

The European problem, however, is small compared with the domestic shortfall. Cable networks in the United States now number more than 150, and for the past five years or more there have been at least 150 new networks scrambling for shelf space at the annual cable markets. Many will not succeed, but they all put together pilot programs or, in some cases, a pilot day of programming. More than one broadcast entertainment executive has privately complained that these projects, as well as the increased demand from established cable networks for original programming, have made it difficult to put together production teams for their projects.

### **Is the road ahead the fabled information superhighway?**

Probably not. At least, not as it was envisioned. NBC is coming closest to its realization with their joint venture with Microsoft, MSNBC. Both that channel and CNBC are now being seen internationally. Also, in June 1997, MSNBC mounted a substantial promotion campaign to announce that its 10:00 to 11:00 PM news broadcast was the only “network-produced” hour-long nightly news program.

Many broadcasters throughout the country have experimented with web pages that permit viewers to summon up ancillary data. Public broadcasters have been heavily engaged in such experiments. But so far none feature interconnectedness to the extent possible with MSNBC. And even that channel comes nowhere near providing the level of interactivity that the envisioners of a video Internet promised. Their vision of a robust democratization of television will remain only that, a vision, for the next decade at least. Nor, for that matter, will we see five hundred channels. Given the small amount of pay-per-view activity seen now and projected for the rest of the century, we will not see video-on-demand (VOD) either. VOD is the setting aside of, say, nine channels to accommodate a single pay-per-view movie with start times every ten minutes, thus making it possible to sit down with popcorn at 8 o'clock and watch your choice on channel 401, or at 8:10 on channel 402, or at 8:15 . . .

The future of television will be driven by two factors: the fate of regulation and our national preoccupation with technology. Never mind what kind of program we present, or what kind of programs the audience deserves. If we build it—whatever it may be—they will buy.

### **Will television be accessible to all, bringing delight and enrichment?**

**I**n February, 1996, President Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The new law did nothing to address the concerns we've expressed in *Down the Tube*, but very few people were surprised. The 104th Congress had come into power a year earlier, championing smaller government, less regulation and the unbridled primacy of the marketplace model.

*Broadcasting & Cable* with its usual

restraint, ran a banner on its cover. "The Future Begins Now." The Chairman of the House Commerce Committee, Thomas Bliley, somewhat anachronistically announced: "This is the first major overhaul of telecommunications law since Marconi was alive and the crystal set was state of the art." At least a dozen visionaries, Edward R. Murrow among them, turned over in their graves.

There have been three regulatory (generally Democratic) periods and three deregulatory periods in American history. Each begins with a "watershed election in which . . . a new alignment of party presidential voting—resting on a new coalition—was established, which kept its essential shape for at least twenty years." In *The Politics of Rich and Poor*, Kevin Phillips, who served as Richard Nixon's chief political analyst, enumerates the characteristics which our deregulatory period shares with the two previous eras, the 1890s and the Roaring Twenties:

Conservative politics; Reduced role for government; Difficulties for Labor; Large-scale economic and corporate restructuring; Tax reduction; Disinflation or deflation; Two-tier economy (difficult times in agricultural, energy and mining areas; good times in emerging industry, service and financial centers); Concentration of wealth; Increased debt and speculation; Speculative implosion.

He adds: "It is no fluke that the Republican supremacies coincided with and helped generate the three major capitalistic heydays in which wealth became more concentrated—the post-Civil War Gilded Age, the Roaring Twenties and the Reagan years."

A "capitalist heyday" is precisely what Wall Street, and many in the television industry, saw coming with the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act. The



act addresses eighty issues ranging from cable rates to how business might benefit from combining their particular competencies with those of companies in other areas of the field. The promise, as with mergers and acquisitions, is that the result will be greater than the sum of the parts.

The Act specifically removes all regulatory barriers to long-distance telephone companies providing local service, and vice versa. It permits cable systems to enter the telephone business, and vice versa. It permits broadcasters to enter the cable system business, except in markets where they have stations.

Moreover—and this item has attracted more attention than any other—the Act permits the ownership of as many television stations as one wishes, provided only that the total audience thus reached in less than 35 percent of all American television households.

Within the next ninety days, David Smith, CEO of the Sinclair Broadcast Group in Baltimore, had acquired River City Broadcasting LP. The resulting Sinclair Communications, with twenty-nine television stations, became the largest television station group in the country and, with thirty four radio stations, the seventh-largest radio group. The combined operating income of Sinclair and River City would have made it the fifth-largest broadcast group in cash flow. With that cash flow, Smith's "very practical objective" of owning one hundred television stations "in the next few years" does not seem like an idle boast, considering that Sinclair's twenty-nine stations, mainly in medium markets in the Midwest, reach only 13.3 percent of the nation's television households.

And although less than 15 percent of the nation's audience may not seem significant, some monopoly watchers might be concerned by the observation of media broker Steve Pruet: Sinclair, with stations from Raleigh/Durham to San Antonio,

now owns "the whole middle of the United States almost in continuous markets."

Proponents of the Telecommunications Act contended that competition would be fostered by unleashing media-owning companies from restrictions as to how much they could own. Many others, however, remember what happened when the airlines were deregulated. The handful of airlines that had controlled 80 percent of the market increased their share to 95 percent. Similarly, they remembered the consent decree which ended network production resulting in a greatly increased share of market for the eight production companies. After the giant mergers in the last quarter of 1995 and throughout 1996, twelve companies stood out as the major media forces in the media industries in this country.

Ranked by their 1996 revenue, the Mega-Media Twelve are: Time Warner Inc., The Walt Disney Company, News Corp. Ltd., Viacom, Tele-Communications Inc., Sony Corp., General Electric, Westinghouse Electric Corp., Gannett Co., General Motors, Comcast Corp. and Seagram Co. Ltd. (*see sidebar*).

These numbers tell only a small part of the story. More important is information on what portion of the nation's and the world's audiences these companies control. In addition to owning all of the commercial broadcasting networks in the United States, together with WB and UPN, the new hopefuls, the Mega-Media Twelve own no fewer than 89 television stations. The overwhelming majority of stations in the nation's top ten markets are owned by the Twelve. Since they also own more than 600 radio stations, two of the three major news magazines, virtually all 24-hour news channels, and more than 92 daily newspapers, including *USA Today* and the *New York Post*, the twelve have enormous influence over the nature and amount of

news disseminated to the American people.

In entertainment their holdings are even more significant. The twelve own all of the major motion picture studios and virtually all of the producers of network entertainment broadcasting. Every cable channel that manages to attract more than a million viewers per week is controlled by the Mega-Media Twelve. Thirty-one million cable households—more than half of all cable subscribers in the United States—are customers, and therefore

dependent on the channel choices of the Twelve. Moreover, the other cable systems in the country are dependent solely on the Twelve for nearly half of the basic and pay channels they carry.

Among them the Twelve control, in addition to their television and radio interests, more than 12 major trade book publishing companies, more than 60 magazines and most of the recorded music in the United States.

The Mega-Media Twelve are arguably both the largest oligopoly and the largest

## Mega-Media Twelve

**1. Time Warner Inc. Revenue:** \$20.9 billion. **Operating income:** \$2.1 billion. **Broadcast television:** WB Television Network, Warner Bros. Television; International Warner Brothers. **Cable:** CNN 5 networks; HBO 3 networks, TBT 2 networks; the Cartoon Network; Cable systems serving 12.3 million subscribers; **Motion pictures:** Warner Bros. Studios, Warner Brothers International Theaters. **Video:** Warner Home Video. **Publishing:** Time Inc.; *Entertainment Weekly*; *Fortune*; *People*; *Sports Illustrated*; *Time*; Time Warner Trade Publishing; Warner Books; Little, Brown. **Music:** Warner Music Group; Atlantic Records; Elektra; Warner Bros. Music International; Warner/Chappel Publishing Co., **Retail:** 50 percent of Columbia House; Warner Brothers Studio Stores; Book of the Month Club; **Other:** Warner Brothers Theme Parks; CNN Interactive.

**2. The Walt Disney Company. Revenue:** \$18.7 billion. **Operating income:** \$3 billion. **Broadcast television:** Walt Disney Television (International); Touchstone Televi-

sion; Walt Disney Television Animation; Buena Vista Television, ABC Television Network; 10 television stations; **Cable:** ESPN; The Disney Channel; A&E; The History Channel; Lifetime Television; ABC Radio Network, **Radio:** ABC Radio Network, 11 AM's, 15 FM's; **Motion pictures:** Walt Disney Pictures; Touchstone Pictures; Hollywood Pictures; Caravan Pictures; Buena Vista Pictures; **Video:** Buena Vista Home Video; Buena Vista Home Entertainment; **Publishing:** daily newspapers, 50 trade publications; *W*; *Discovery*; family magazines; books, comics; **Music:** Walt Disney Records; Hollywood Records; **Retail:** 101 Disney stores worldwide; clothing; toys; licensing ventures; **Other:** Disney theme parks; Walt Disney Theatrical Productions; Disney Online; Disney Interactive; Disney Cruise line; interests in international broadcasting companies and partnerships with Ameritech to develop new cable TV networks.

**3. News Corp. Ltd. Revenue:** \$14.3 billion. **Operating income:** \$1.4 billion. **Broadcast television:** Fox Broadcasting Co., 23 U.S.

television stations; 20th Century Fox Television; 20th Century; Twentieth Century/Astral Television Distribution Ltd.; Evergreen Television Productions, Inc.; Fox Children's Network, Inc.; **Cable:** 2 Fox networks; Pay-Per-View services. **Motion pictures:** Fox Motion Pictures; 20th Century Fox Film; Columbia TriStar Films; 21 Century Film; Cinemascope Products; Fox Animations Studios; Mirror Pictures; Van Ness Films; Fieldmouse Productions; Fox West Pictures; San Antonio Film Features; **Video:** Fox Home Entertainment. **Publishing:** Harper-Collins US Inc.; Murdoch Publications; News T Magazines; News American Publications; *New York Post*; *TV Guide* (subsequently sold); **Music:** Fox Music Inc.; Fox Records; Fox Film Music; Fox On Air Music; Fox Broadcast Music; NewsCorp; STAR TV; BSkyB.

**4. Viacom. Revenue:** \$12.1 billion. **Operating income:** \$2.2 billion. **Broadcast television:** Television Signal Corporation; Riverside Broadcasting Co.; 13 TV stations; Paramount Communications Inc.; 75 percent of Spelling

oligopsony in the United States. Since there are only 12 major *sellers* of programming—the studios and the networks control the development process—the price set by any one of them may well affect the entire market. Similarly, since the Twelve include the major *purchasers* of programming—the networks, cable and major station groups—the market leverage of any one of the twelve can affect the price any distribution system would be willing to pay.

Internationally, the Twelve have significant interests in the Scandinavian Broadcasting System; in cable channels in Germany; children's programming in

China; Nickelodeon UK; HBO Olé and El Canal in South America; NBC Super Channel in Europe; satellite channels in Europe, Asia, South America; and numerous other interests in many other countries. Disney, Time Warner and Seagram dominate the world's theme park industry. Murdoch's empire includes 123 daily newspapers around the world as well as BSkyB, the direct broadcast satellite system in Northern Europe. He also has control of the largest potential television audience, the 1.6 billion persons in the footprint of STAR TV.

Since 1988, there have been at least 1,500 significant mergers and acquisi-

Entertainment Group, Inc.; **Cable:** MTV; Showtime; Nickelodeon/Nick at Night; VH1; USA Networks (subsequently sold); Comedy Central; All News Channel; 12 radio stations; **Video:** Blockbuster Entertainment Corp.; **Motion Pictures:** Paramount Pictures, Viacom Productions; **Publishing:** Simon & Schuster; Macmillan Publishing USA; Prentice-Hall Co.; technical and professional books; **Other:** Discovery Zone, 5 theme parks; Games Production, inc.

**5. Tele-Communications Inc. Revenue:** \$8 billion. **Operating income:** \$2.3 billion. Cable systems serving 14.4 million subscribers; Liberty Media; Bravo Classic Movies Ltd.; Cable Accounting Inc.; Home Sports Network; local cable networks; Direct Broadcasting Satellite Service Inc.; Netlink USA; United Paging Corp.; UCT Aircraft Inc.; United Corporate Communications; United Hockey Inc.; Intelligent Electronics.

**6. Sony Corp. Revenue:** \$7.9 billion. **Operating income:** \$517.7 million. **Television:** Sony Pictures

Entertainment; Columbia TriStar Television. **Motion pictures:** Sony Pictures Entertainment Inc.; Columbia Pictures; TriStar Pictures; Sony Pictures Classics; Triumph Films. **Music:** Columbia Records; Epic Records Group; Sony Classical.

**7. General Electric. Revenue:** \$5.2 billion. **Operating income:** \$953 million. (Both figures from media activities alone.) NBC Network; 11 TV stations; 7 cable/satellite networks including CNBC and Court TV, MSNBC, a joint venture with Microsoft.

**8. Westinghouse Electric Corp. Revenue:** \$4.4 billion. **Operating income:** \$1.4 billion. (Both figures from media activities alone.) CBS TV Network; CBS Entertainment/News/Sports; 14 TV stations; 175 radio stations. (On December 1, 1997, having sold off all non-media businesses, Westinghouse's assets, together with Infinity Broadcasting and CBS, became CBS Corporation.)

**9. Gannett Co. Revenue:** \$4.4 billion. **Operating income:** \$1.4 billion. 18 TV stations; USA Radio

Partners; USA Today; 95 Gannett Newspapers; USA Weekend; Cape Publications Inc.; billboards; Advanced Media Solutions.

**10. General Motors. Revenue:** \$4.1 billion. **Operating income:** \$259.8 million. (Both figures from media activities alone.) Hughes Electronics Corp.; DirecTV; Hughes Galaxy; Hughes Network Systems; VSAT; PanAmSat.

**11. Comcast Corp. Revenue:** \$4 billion. **Operating income:** \$1.2 billion; Cable systems serving 4.3 million subscribers; cable systems in the UK; QVC electronic retailing; wireless telephone service; satellite television. Joint ventures in Primestar, BBS service and Spring Spectrum.

**12. Seagram Co. Ltd., Revenue:** \$3.7 billion. **Operating income:** \$379 million. Universal television productions; 10 percent of Time Warner; 50 percent of USA Networks; Universal Pictures; 49 percent of United Cinemas International; 49 percent of United Cinemas International Multiplex; 49 percent of Cineplex Odeon Corp.

tions in the United States. How did this merger mania come about? The frequently heard and often accepted explanation is that mergers are driven by three phenomena; the maturity of traditional forms, the appearance of new technologies; and the prospect of convergence.

Maturity in this instance is analogous to the transition from adolescence into adulthood; many businesses, like young adults, reach their maximum growth. Television stations are not mature businesses, however, and broadcast networks even less so. This is not true with respect to television stations and, even less so, with respect to broadcast networks. Even though their share of audience had declined, the average network prime-time ratings reached an all-time high in 1994, owing to the increase in television households—up nearly 20 percent from the 80 plus million in 1983. The number of television households will inevitably continue as long as the population continues to rise.

The networks lost share relative to cable largely because of their preoccupation with short-term profits during the early 1990s. During that period the more cheaply produced magazine programs came to occupy one out of five hours of prime time on the networks. In time, magazine programming drove viewers to the independents which were able to offer more and more first-run syndicated entertainment programming. From a revenue standpoint, network television will continue to thrive because it remains the most efficient means for advertisers to reach a mass audience.

Cable, on the other hand, is becoming a mature business. The nation is almost completely wired. More than 98 percent of all television households have been passed by feeder cables and could have cable tomorrow if they subscribed. However, nearly forty percent of the households passed by cable will probably never become subscribers.

Cable was deregulated in 1984 and subsequently reregulated in 1992 as a result of intense customer dissatisfaction with rate hikes and poor service. Certain cable rates have been deregulated again in the 1996 Telecommunications Act. But the cable operators seem not to have learned their lesson. Even before the Act went into effect, several major MSOs were raising the rates yet again by changing the number of channels in premium packages offered to their customers.

### **The marvels to come—what do they portend?**

**T**he much heralded new technologies fall into two related groups, DTH, Direct to Home, and HDTV, High Definition Television. DTH uses broadcast satellites that relay signals directly to eighteen inch reception dishes that deliver a much clearer picture than cable ever could. There are five operators already engaged in or prepared to enter DBS: Hubbard; Echostar; Primestar; and two consortia, Hughes and AT&T; and MCI, which is allied with Murdoch's NewsCorp. Murdoch brings his considerable experience in the UK and in Asia—MCI anteed up the \$683 million for the use of the spectrum.

In a clear example of convergence—the third phenomenon said to be driving the merger movement—the long-distance company AT&T is getting involved in a state-of-the-art medium which might be able to deliver its telephone services, as well as programming, without expensive house-to-house optical fibre wiring. One of the barriers to convergence disappeared with the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act. Cable systems may now use their fiber-optic cables to deliver telephone services; “telcos” may enter the video delivery business; and broadcast networks may once again own cable systems.

In all mergers the idea is synergy: A telco brings its switching capability and a cable company can supply its knowledge of programming. Then the whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts.

Much to the surprise of many media watchers, high-definition television is presenting the most synergistic possibilities of all. In fact, HDTV may provide us with the very opportunity for change we have advocated throughout *Down the Tube*.

For at least the last twenty years, American engineers have sought a way to provide a better service without increasing the bandwidth of the signal and thus using more of the limited electromagnetic spectrum. The chief figure in this effort has been Joseph Flaherty, CBS's Senior Vice President for Technology, who persuaded the NHK Laboratory, the television research facility serving the Japanese industry, to try solving this problem. By the summer of 1981 they had developed a prototype camera.

A year later, CBS arranged demonstrations in Washington, Los Angeles and New York. We attended these demonstrations, which included at least two cameras. At each event the reaction of the audience was the same: Hollywood producers, FCC Commissioners, and industry executives gasped in amazement and delight. There appeared to be no doubt that HDTV was clearly the wave of the future. But although the Japanese, in partnership with CBS, had already been working on HDTV since the 1960s, there were several barriers to overcome, some of them enormous, before that future would arrive.

The most obvious was that the bandwidth question had not been resolved. Each station broadcasting HDTV would require six times the bandwidth of NTSC channels. Since the spectrum was already crowded to capacity, either as many as five out of every six stations would have to be shut down or some other portion of the

spectrum would have to be used. Clearly the first alternative was politically and practically unacceptable. The United States solved the problem by appealing to the International Telecommunications Union to use spectrum space set aside for the Japanese system, by then known as MUSE.

Meanwhile, European countries became concerned lest MUSE might provide the opportunity for the Japanese electronics companies to overwhelm their industries as had already happened in the United States.

Compatibility was an issue every bit as thorny as spectrum space. The FCC, as it had earlier done with the introduction of color television, long held out for a system which would permit television sets to receive both NTSC and HDTV.

In 1988, in part to resolve that issue, the FCC established the Advisory Committee of Advanced Television Service (ACATS), under the chairmanship of Richard Wiley, an energetic and effective former FCC chairman. Joe Flaherty, who, like a new-tech Ancient Mariner, had continued to champion CBS and NHK's MUSE, became a dominant member of the Committee. ACATS proved to be catalytic: no fewer than 20 different systems were proposed. Some, like MUSE, were analog systems; others were digital, thus making them at least potentially compatible with computer technology.

Operating without government funds but with donations of \$8,000 from each of the 19 committee members, ACATS set up a laboratory in Alexandria, Virginia, to provide a peer-reviewed process for testing prototypes. During this period, one and then another manufacturer saw opportunities to combine forces. Finally, four systems emerged successfully from the test process. Wiley announced that another round of "very expensive" tests would be necessary to make the desired improvements by a certain date. When the

manufacturers objected, Wiley offered an alternative: "Form a single, Grand Alliance system."

It took another year to complete the design of the equipment. But the result, Richard Wiley contends, "is the greatest advance ever in television technology . . . It's what I characterize as the theater in the home. Larger, wider screens. Almost photographic images."

Wiley has every right to be proud of having put the system together. Getting Zenith, General Instrument, AT&T, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a consortium led by Philips Electronics, NBC and The David Sarnoff Research Center to combine their strengths and produce a system both compatible with the international standard and acceptable to all the networks, commercial and public, is a prodigious accomplishment.

But the public has a \$75 billion stake in its television sets, to say nothing of its VCRs and its NTSC home video equipment. Whether they will be willing to buy ten million big screen—35 inch—sets at one or two thousand dollars more than the most expensive sets on the market today is a significant question. Consumer sets represent the largest investment in television equipment. Replacing one receiver in each of the nation's television homes with a \$2,500 HDTV set would cost nearly 250 billion dollars.

The broadcasting industry also faces large expenditures. It is estimated that conversion to HDTV will cost each of the nation's 1,200 television stations something between \$10 and \$35 million. The industry as a whole will spend an estimated \$12 to \$42 billion.

Those costs, however, do not include the cost of the transitional broadcasting. Stations may have to maintain duplicate studios and duplicate transmitters for the period of 9 years permitted by the Telecommunications Act before turning in their NTSC frequencies.

The last question may be the most interesting one of all. Who will broadcast in high definition? And under what circumstances? This question may seem meaningless on its face: the 1996 Telecommunications Act clearly states that at least initially, the only entities eligible to obtain advanced television (ATV) licenses are broadcasting stations now on the air and others already approved to construct stations. The term advanced television embraces all digital television: both the system the Grand Alliance has settled on, HDTV, and SDTV (standard digital television), which is an improved type of NTSC, today's television system. No licenses will be granted, however, until the Congress settles one contentious issue.

In the early 1990s, Congress approved the auctioning off of portions of the spectrum to prospective cellular phone users. The sum thus raised greatly exceeded expectations and attracted considerable attention at a time when the Congress and the Clinton administration were both expressing concern over the national debt. The National Association of Broadcasters immediately began to lobby against any such auction for high definition spectrum, citing the enormous costs stations would incur in developing the new technology.

Nonetheless, to the surprise of many of his pro-business colleagues in the 104th Congress, Majority Leader Robert Dole described the idea of turning over spectrum to the broadcasters as a "giveaway" and threatened to hold up passage of the Telecommunications Act in the Senate. He later withdrew his opposition in exchange for a commitment from the FCC to issue no licenses for ATV until Congress resolved the issue.

Not just the camel's nose, but the camel himself was already in the tent. The idea of auctioning or leasing spectrum is clearly on the table. Moreover, Congress instructed the Commission to permit ATV licensees to offer "ancillary or supplemen-

tary services consistent with the public interest.” If a subscription fee is charged for any such services, the station must pay a fee to the commission. Fees are to be designed, in part, “to recover for the public a portion of the value of the public spectrum resource made available for such commercial use.”

The Act adds that licensees will pay an amount equivalent to what would have been obtained if there had been a competitive bidding process. Congress thus adopted, it seems to us, the concept of an assigned value to the electromagnetic spectrum.

## **What does the Telecommunications Act portend for public television?**

**U**nder the new law, every public licensee should be eligible for an ATV spectrum license. The critical question is how public stations—all of which are not-for-profit, educational, or local government entities—will pay for the construction of digital facilities. The most recent studies show that it will take \$1.7 billion to convert all public broadcasters (including radio) to the new technology. It will take great creativity to fund that transition and simultaneously devise a long-term permanent funding mechanism to sustain public broadcasting. During the last two years, a variety of funding proposals have been considered and rejected.

One potential source of future funding is the analog spectrum. Once the transition from analog to digital broadcasting is complete (when at least 85 percent of consumers in each market have access to digital signals), broadcasters will be required to return their portion of the analog spectrum. Those frequencies will then be auctioned by the FCC for other telecommunications purposes. Even a small percentage of the proceeds of such

an auction would allow for the creation of a trust fund that could sustain public broadcasting far into the future.

Although the public television stations are seeking matching grants from the federal government, from their local communities, and from state governments, it is questionable at this point whether public television will be able to raise enough money for the transition solely from these traditional methods. What is clear, however, is that additional channels for public television would be of enormous benefit to audiences throughout the country. Such an expansion, sufficiently funded, would enable public television to fulfill its promise of cultural, educational, and intellectual diversity while also serving, in fresh, enriching and effective ways, the socioeconomically underserved. It is possible that the new technologies may, after all, result in beneficial new regulations.

## **Where are we in the regulatory cycle?**

**W**hat is also clear is that at the very least, the current regulatory cycle may soon be moving us toward a closer look at the role of regulation in American society. We have seen several harbingers of change. Polls show that public sentiment strongly supports the Food and Drug Administration in its efforts to halt the exploitation of children by the tobacco industry; airline safety and reinstatement of an effective and modernized Federal Aviation Administration are being called for after the ValueJet and other airline disasters. Concern over health care costs and dismay over the role of almost completely unregulated insurers are mounting rapidly.

In this climate, the Telecommunications Act of 1996, surely an opportunity for regulatory reform, seems to us disappointing. Its stated purpose its “to promote

competition and reduce regulation in order to secure lower prices and higher quality services for American telecommunications consumers and encourage the rapid deployment of new telecommunications technologies." One wonders how such provisions as increasing the number of stations an oligopoly can own or manage serves the interests of competition.

There is one ray of hope. Section 201, "Broadcast Spectrum Flexibility," which covers the allocation of spectrum for ATV, does not preclude the FCC setting up an auction or setting a fee for spectrum use. The mention of the "public interest, convenience, and necessity" standard no fewer than four times in less than fifty lines suggests a genuine concern on the part of Congress that the new frequencies be put to other than trivial or completely commercial, non-program, use. And then, of course, there is the fee question, which establishes, as the 1934 Act never did, that spectrum is a scarce resource belonging to the public.

The 1966 act begins its consideration of ATV with "If the Commission determines to issue additional licenses for advanced television services, the Commission should—". The FCC is not directed to issue ATV licenses at all, nor is the possibility of an auction ruled out. Congress neatly sidestepped the issue and left open the possibility of negotiation. We believe that if ways can be found for the public to benefit from the issuance of ATV licenses, the 1996 Act may stand out as the first legislation to consider the public interest rather than what interests the public.

It has been our argument that misregulation and its unintended effects are a bane not only to broadcasters and others in the industry, but also to the public. It has kept us from the realization of E.B. White's vision; we have neither Chautauqua nor Minsky's, neither Lyceum nor Camelot. Our civilization has been judged and

found wanting.

When the 1996 Telecommunications Act came to a vote, it was during a period of deregulation, of unrestrained mergers and acquisitions. The Act's major achievement was to make them even easier across the traditional barriers between the various communications industries. But the Telecommunications Act of 1996 was not the only regulation emerging at that time. Concerns about program content were beginning to be expressed in several quarters. By May 12, 1997, *Broadcasting & Cable* was sufficiently alarmed to editorialize. Pointing out that one hundred members of Congress, led by Newt Gingrich, had signed a letter to the heads of the television networks requesting that they once again program 8:00 to 9:00 as the family hour, the editorial raised the specter of "...programming to the tastes of a national nanny with a political agenda."

Let's recap. At least one governmental entity wants to dictate the type of children's programs broadcasters have to air, the kinds of programs they put on at 8-9 p.m., the content ratings system they employ (V-chip, age-based ratings, etc.), how many and what kinds of public service announcements they carry, the times they may program adult-oriented material—i.e., content that registers on some bureaucrat's sex or violence meter—how much broadcasters can or cannot charge for their own advertising time if the client is a well-heeled political machine and whether they may carry truthful advertising about a legal product.

At this rate, the government is going to price speech right out of the market.

We don't think so! We have shown that the profit margins and cash flows of broadcasting and cable are very sound compared to most American commerce and are likely to remain so. But there is an even



greater difference between us and the country's leading trade journal in the electronic media. The real impetus behind this list, we would contend, was not the agenda of a national nanny, but the failure of the industry to address public needs and considerable audience wants as well.

There are several reasons for this failure. Public apathy about the deinstitutionalization of America has led to lowered expectations, thus facilitating the reshaping of broadcasting institutions as mere profit centers. The relentless drive to maximize profits at any cost by maximizing audiences has fostered the pandering to the lowest common denominator of public taste at the expense of expanding public sensibilities. Any doubt on this point can be instantaneously dispelled by viewing a single episode of The Entertainment Channel's *Talk Soup*, a review of the most egregious segments of the current week. Similarly, the commodification of local news programs and their audiences has diminished public discourse.

Also contributing to the industry's failure are three other factors: the entry of a generation of managers with little or no commitment to the product and absolute devotion to the ever-increasing profitability of their television properties; the trend to globalization and the rush toward mergers and acquisitions; and finally, the popularity among investors of broadcasting stocks, fueled by deregulation.

Ultimately, however, most problems in our medium, public as well as commercial, come back to issues of deregulation, misregulation and re-regulation. Our position is clear. We subscribe to the trusteeship model. Broadcast licenses should carry a commitment to the public interest, articulated in policy, embedded in well-conceived legislation, and monitored consistently and helpfully. We believe that neither excessive regulation nor unbridled laissez-faire market forces serve the Amer-

ican public, especially with respect to news, public affairs and children's programs. Television is far too influential to leave to chance, and far too fragile to be hobbled with misconceived and unexamined restrictions.

We are not alarmed by the six proposals emanating from the 104th Congress. What does disturb us are the conditions which prompted them. Broadcasters trying to palm off *Gilligan's Island* as education programming, airing fewer and fewer public service announcements, and ignoring parental concern about making commonplace the tasteless exploitation of scatological, sexual, and violent material—these are trends that should raise alarms.

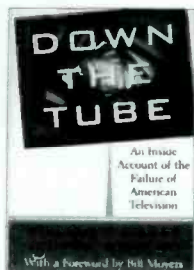
We have a unique opportunity before us, if we but seize it. Technology is about to drive us into a new era. The digital revolution will, at the very least, require a complete replacement of the equipment which makes television possible. But this technological advance is different from previous ones. We know the calendar: the system will not be fully operational for eight to ten years.

Those years are a gift which must be used carefully and purposefully. We propose nothing less than using the period to draw up a national television policy. The discourse should take place on at least five levels: the government (both the FCC and the Congress), the industry, the professional societies, the academic community, and the public.

Agenda items come to mind immediately: assuring the future of public broadcasting; spectrum assignment issues; the role of television in the political process; television and the education of our children; a definition of the public interest for the 21st century.

We have been given a chance to right the wrongs of the past. The alternative—failure to confront the issues—is unacceptable. We are in peril of discovering the

prescience of Edward R. Murrow's comment that without human determination to use television, our marvelous medium, for higher purpose, it is "merely wires and lights in a box." ■



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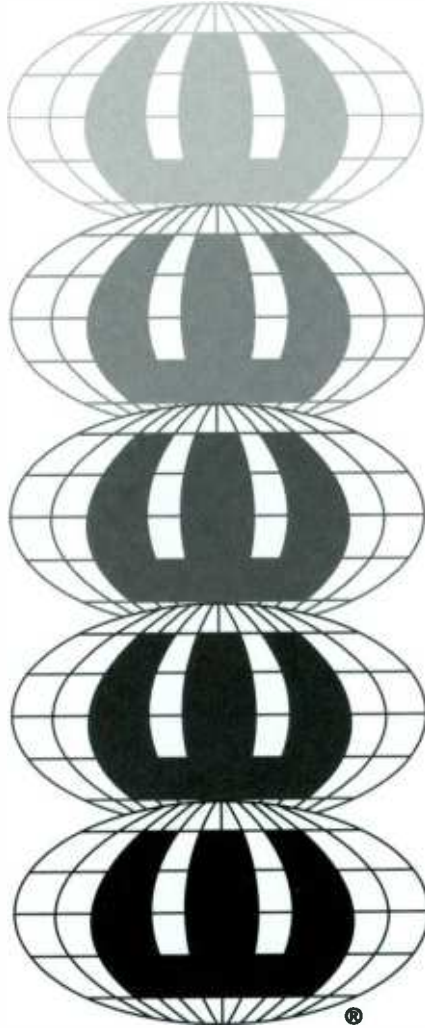
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## “Quote ... Unquote”

“The 12th-century Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides called scandal mongers ‘the evil tongue,’ and described insinuations that sow suspicions without shedding light on the implied offense as ‘the dust of the evil tongue.’ The dust of innuendo and calumny has always traveled fast, but modern media can disseminate it with unprecedented speed.

“Incredulity, a good old-fashioned editorial virtue, is sorely needed in response. It requires that we not be over-quick to grant credence to what we read and heard—an indispensable first safeguard against contributing to damaging the credibility of individuals covered by newspapers and, in the process, that of the press.”

—Sissela Bok, keynote address,  
American Society of Newspaper Editors, April, 1998



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# It's Booming: Spanish-language TV in the USA

*Soap operas that don't run on forever, "futbol," astrology, sexy movies, variety shows and plenty of international news are building audience and advertising for networks and stations.*

**By John V. Pavlik and Jackie Oregel Pavlik**

**M**ost Americans know relatively little about some of the most popular programming on television today, unless they speak Spanish and watch Spanish-language television programming. In cities from Miami to New York, from El Paso to Los Angeles, Spanish-language television has captured increasingly large portions of television viewership. In fact, in Miami, the fifth-largest market in the U.S. with 1.4 million television viewers (Nielsen estimates there are 5.1 million Hispanic television households in the U.S.), the number-one-rated station is Spanish-language WLTV. WLTV finished first in the February 1998 ratings sweeps, edging out six English-language stations and another Spanish-language station. This was the first time the top-rated station in any major market was not English-language, but probably not the last time. WLTV drew a 5.6 rating (14

percent share of sets in use) compared to WFOR-TV, a CBS affiliate, with a 4.6 rating (11 percent share) for the February sweeps.

In some ways Spanish-language television is both a window into the past and a glimpse into the future of English-language television. Among the most-popular programs on Spanish-language TV are programs that defined much of the so-called golden age of television: variety shows and music specials. *Sabado Gigante*, *Siempre Domingo*, *Premio Lo Nuestro á la Musica Latina* and *Al Ritmo de la Noche* are just some of the many variety shows and music specials offered by Univision and Telemundo, the two largest providers of Spanish-language programming in the United States. These variety shows feature an "Ed Sullivan" type emcee, song-and-dance acts reminiscent of Vaudeville, and a live studio audience.

Univision Communications, the leading

Spanish-language broadcaster in the U.S., operates the Univision Network, the Univision Television Group, and Galavision. Chairman, president and CEO Jerrold Perenchio owns about 40% of the company, while Mexico's Grupo Televisa and the Caracas-based Venevision are part of a partnership that owns about 20% of Univision. Univision was formerly a wholly owned subsidiary of Hallmark Cards, and was originally the Spanish International Network (SIN), founded in 1961.

The Telemundo Network began in 1986 when Reliance Group Holdings acquired the Blair Company, whose holdings included Spanish-language stations in six of the top seven Hispanic markets. Telemundo was acquired in November of 1997 in a \$539 million deal by Sony Corp., Liberty Media Corp. (a subsidiary of cable giant Tele-Communications Inc.), Apollo Management and Bastion Capital.

Spanish-language television also may signal the future of English programming: much Spanish television is graphic in its depiction of both violence and sex, sometimes together, and sometimes sadistic in nature. Women are frequently presented in blatantly sexist roles and as sex objects. This is especially true in many movies, or *películas*, created in Mexico and South America, but broadcast by Telemundo in the U.S.

Sometimes, movies contain explicit scenes in which a 'blue dot' is used to cover private body parts—movies which most English-language broadcasters today would heavily edit, but may not in the future when the V-chip is in place. One *película* broadcast on May 3, 1998, on WNJU (Telemundo affiliate in Teterboro, New Jersey), *Sed de Venganza*, or 'Thirst for Blood,' featured a blood-soaked corpse with several shot-gun blasts to the stomach lying spread-eagled on a bed, its hands and feet tied to the bedposts.

This scene is just one of many graphic

depictions of bloody violence throughout the film. Notably, although *Sed de Venganza* is listed in the program listings of *The New York Times* television guide, the content of the movie itself is not described in the 'Movies This Week' section of the guide.

Some of Spanish-language television would likely be prohibited by the Federal Communications Commission if an English-language station tried to broadcast the same program, even in the same market. Ostensibly, the reason it is permitted on Spanish-language stations is that a different community (i.e., a Spanish-speaking one) is served and it has different standards that do not find such content objectionable. Of course, it's possible the FCC hasn't received many complaints about what airs on many Spanish-language stations, or gives less attention to Spanish-language stations because most of them are broadcast on the UHF spectrum. The appointment of Gloria Tristani to the Commission in 1997, the first Commissioner of Puerto Rican descent, may bring more FCC attention to Spanish-language TV.

## Winning the Ratings War

Many might also be surprised to learn that the fifth-rated television network in the United States is also Spanish-language, the Los Angeles-based Univision network, ahead of Viacom's UPN network and Warner Brothers' WB network, as well as cable networks HBO and ESPN.

Univision leads the Spanish-language television market, reaching 92 percent of all Hispanic households, via twenty owned and operated stations (12 full-power stations serving 12 of the top 15 Hispanic markets, plus seven low-power stations), 27 affiliated television stations and 835 cable affiliates. Univision's holdings also include Galavision, the top-rated Spanish-language cable network in the

U.S. with more than 2.4 million subscribers. Univision airs the top 14 national programs as rated by the Nielsen Hispanic Television Index (Telemundo has the 15th to 20th rated shows, for the week of May 18, 1998). Univision also broadcast all 64 games of the 1998 World Cup soccer championship).

In contrast, Florida-based Telemundo reaches 85 percent of Hispanic households, via seven full-power stations in the top seven markets, 43 affiliated broadcast stations, 513 cable stations and 91 satellite-direct cable systems. Telemundo has seen its audience share decline in recent years, from 26 percent in the fourth quarter of 1995 to 17 percent in the third quarter of 1997.

This shift has led Telemundo CEO Roland A. Hernandez, to take his network in a new programming direction. "We want to break historic programming models that have been used in the U.S. Spanish-language market." This has meant reducing the amount of *telenovelas*—one of the great popular forms of Latin American programming—and introducing a new slate of programs, including movies during the prime-time 9p.m. to 11 p.m. slot.

Another basic reason for the dwindling Telemundo audience is the simple fact that the company has suffered from a lack of capital, and a resulting shortage of quality programming. All of these factors have led the network to seek new programming partners, including CBS. Univision already has a variety of foreign programming partners, including Venevision of Venezuela and Grupo Televisa of Mexico.

## The Similarities y La Diferencias

Although Spanish-language programming has elements of both the past and the future of English-language television, much of it is virtually the same, except in Spanish. For example, among the most-

popular programs are talk shows (e.g., *Cristina* is like a Spanish-language version of *Oprah*); news (*Noticias* is Spanish-language news); news magazines (*Primer Impacto* resembles a Spanish version of *20/20*, *Ocurrio Asi* is a Spanish version of *A Current Affair*); soap operas (or 'telenovelas' such as *Esmeralda*, the number-one rated show on all Hispanic television, as of May 18, 1998, with a 29 rating and 2.42 million viewers).

Game shows and sports are especially popular (or *deportivos*, especially 'futbol,' or soccer). In contrast, one form of programming that has yet to emerge as a prominent part of the Spanish-language television scene in the United States is the situation comedy, although Telemundo's slate of Fall programming does include at least one sitcom.

A notable twist in Spanish-language programming is that, unlike English-language soap operas, which are known for their longevity (serials such as *General Hospital*, *Another World* and *As the World Turns* have run continuously for years, sometimes decades), *telenovelas* are of short duration—frequently no more than a single season, even for the most popular and highly rated. One wildly popular *novela* is *Mari Mar*, starring the sexy singer, Thalia, which ran for just one season, despite its global popularity.

It's worth noting the importance of cultural factors in Spanish-language programming. Telemundo found that the *telenovelas* of its foreign programming partner, Grupo Azteca, failed to achieve the same ratings successes in the United States as they had in Mexico. The *novelas* were so culturally specific that Spanish-speaking audiences in the United States, which include many groups besides those of Mexican-American descent, were not attracted in large numbers to the Azteca serials. Some of these cultural factors include differences in dialect, values and traditions. For these reasons, little

programming produced in Spain is broadcast on either Univision or Telemundo.

Curiously, one form of Spanish-language programming that seems to transcend the cultural diversity of Hispanic or Latino culture is astrology. Both Univision and Telemundo feature numerous astrological broadcasts, especially horoscopes.

These and other differences have helped contribute to the increasing ratings successes of Spanish-language programs in many U.S. markets. Some Spanish-language programs have even drawn higher ratings than their English-language competitors. In Los Angeles, Univision's flagship station KMEX-TV, channel 34, for the 21st consecutive rating sweeps period (from May of 1993 to May of 1998) has won the top position among viewers most coveted by advertisers: 18-34 year olds (A.C. Nielsen's NSI Demographic Reports). It has similarly been number one among 18- to 49-year-olds for the 17th consecutive period since May of 1994.

Harry Whitman, KMEX's research director, helps explain why KMEX gets the top ratings for its 6 p.m. newscast, *Noticias 34*. "We present news that may not be covered on the English-language stations." When KNBC, for example, led one evening's newscast with a story about entertainer Michael Jackson's looming fatherhood, KMEX led with a report about a suspected sex-abuse suspect attempting to flee across the U.S. border into Mexico.

KMEX also recently became the first Spanish-language station to receive one of the Radio Television News Directors Association Edward R. Murrow Awards for overall excellence. The network's daily national newscast, Univision News, which also won a RTNDA's Murrow Award, is the leading national Spanish-language newscast.

Spanish-language news programming distinguishes itself in another very important way. Unlike most English-language news programs, either at the network or

local level, Spanish-language news contains a great deal of international news. This international focus reflects a great interest here in news from many Spanish-language countries, especially those in the Caribbean, Central and South America and Spain.

## Future Directions

The growing popularity and success of Spanish-language television reflects the changing demographics of the United States, especially metropolitan areas, where the Spanish-speaking population is growing so rapidly. The San Francisco Bay area, for instance, is home to more than 1.1 million Hispanics, making it the fifth-largest concentration of Spanish-speaking Americans in the nation, and about four percent of the nation's Latinos. *The Business Journal* reports that the Bay Area Hispanic population has a buying power of "\$13.3 billion, nearly three times 1980 levels." Nationwide, Hispanics have an annual purchasing power of some \$348 billion.

Another change likely to come in the not-too-distant future is the disappearance of the substantial difference in advertising costs between Spanish- and English-language stations. KMEX charges just \$1,000 per prime time Nielsen rating point for a 30-second ad, while other Los Angeles stations, such as KNBC, KABC and KCBS, charge roughly \$16,000. And although advertisers spent just \$354 million nationally on Spanish-language television in 1996, or less than one percent of the \$35.6 billion spent on all television advertising, this also may soon change, with some eight percent of all Americans speaking Spanish at home (according to the U.S. Census Department). Mainstream advertisers won't likely ignore these opportunities for long, and will likely see prices and advertising expenditures on Spanish-language televi-

sion rise dramatically in the coming years.

Technology, too, will likely play an increasingly important role in the future of Spanish-language television. In New York, the largest concentration of Hispanics is in the Bronx, with some 585,000 Hispanic consumers. This has been recognized recently by Cablevision Systems, which in June of this year introduced *News 12 The Bronx*, the first 24-hour local cable news operation in the borough—it programs Spanish-language public affairs programs on weekends.

*News 12 The Bronx* has an editorial partnership with Latin Communications Group's *El Diario*, New York City's largest Spanish-language daily newspaper. The cable news operation uses the paper's reporters for its Spanish-language weekend programs.

Norm Fein, senior vice president of news development for Rainbow Media, the Cablevision subsidiary charged with managing *News 12 The Bronx*, expects the cable news operation, the first in the nation to feature Spanish-language local news, will fit the *News 12* network's initial advertising revenue equation of 60% to 40% local to national advertisers.

Not everyone is convinced this will work in the Bronx, where the viewership is somewhat less affluent on a per-capita basis than in most other *News 12* operations (such as Long Island).

Michelle Liebowitz, vice president of sales for Univision's Spanish-language station WXTV (New York), believes the Bronx is an important market, but "Cutting the Bronx, a subset of the entire metro New York area, into a smaller subset, Hispanics, may not prove viable for television advertisers."

One place where Spanish-language programming has little presence is in direct-to-home broadcasting (DBS), on services such as DirecTV and Primestar. On the other hand, DirecTV, as well as other DBS services, allows viewers to

select the language in which they would like their programming (of course, not all programs have been dubbed, but many have). In this manner, nearly any programming can be Spanish-language (or German, French, Italian, Japanese or Chinese, for that matter). Although today's top four broadcast networks (NBC, ABC, CBS and FOX) may not produce programming intended primarily for a Spanish-speaking audience, the arrival of digital broadcast television eventually may bring this same set of language options to all over-the-air programming.

In a sign of things to come, KTTV-TV 11 News Los Angeles in August of this year began using the Secondary Audio Program (SAP) to simulcast in Spanish two of its weekday shows, FOX 11 *Morning News* at 6 AM weekdays and *Good Day LA* at 7 AM. Available on newer television sets, the SAP technology is activated using a remote control or a button on the television set. Although KTTV is the first and only one to simulcast any of its news programs in Spanish in the Los Angeles market, many more stations in L.A. and around the nation are likely to do so in the future when digital broadcasting makes simulcasting even easier and more accessible, and as the Spanish-language market continues to grow.

Finally, programming on Spanish-language television is also going to evolve in the digital age. One probable change is increased specialization—niche targeting of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and South American subsets of the overall U.S. Latin American market. Digital transmission, either over the air, via cable or direct-to-home satellite, will permit Univision, Telemundo and others to find viable niche audiences for programming unique to different Latin American cultures and traditions. Channels devoted exclusively to Mexican, Cuban or other Spanish-language cultures will probably emerge in the next five to ten years. The sociology of



the growing Latin community will contribute to this development.

Unlike previous immigrant communities in the U.S., Latin immigrants are not a group whose numbers will decrease with time. They are not likely to be assimilated into the English-language mainstream. They are coming not from overseas but from right across the border. These differences have important implications not only for the Spanish-language networks and stations but for all television networks and stations in the U.S. Although viewership may be declining for the traditional English-language networks, rich programming opportunities await those bold and creative enough to target the Spanish-language community in the digital age. ■

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# Much Ado about Nothing: Some Final Thoughts on *Seinfeld*

By Albert Auster



Back when the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* went off the air in 1977 there were quite a few voices raised in protest and even more in sorrow. Feminists, especially, were practically grief-stricken. As one woman wrote years later, “Mary Richards made it O.K.—O.K. to be a single woman. O.K. to be over 30, O.K. to be independent. She made it acceptable to stay home alone and watch her if you had a mind to.”

Only a few years later the end of a series became a national event. When *M\*A\*S\*H* aired it's final episode, “Goodbye, Farewell and Amen” in 1983, it was not only cause for despair, it was also the basis for the largest audiences ever gathered to watch a single television episode. Ten years later, *Cheers*' demise aroused similar feelings and an equally large audience, but not as large as the one for *M\*A\*S\*H*'s finale. Although failing to eclipse *M\*A\*S\*H*'s final episode's rating, *Cheers* fans certainly matched it in the hyperbole with which they lamented its departure. For example, novelist Kurt Vonnegut said that, “I would say that television has produced one comic masterpiece, which is *Cheers*. I wish I'd written that instead of everything I had written.”

Now barely five years later, we've had the finale of another highly rated, critically acclaimed series, *Seinfeld*. This time, when the announcement was made of the series ending, it caused not only sorrow in some quarters, but consternation: a sense that a national calamity was upon us. Indeed *People* magazine headlined the news with the words, “A Stunned Nation Prepares for Life Without *Seinfeld*.”

Behind all this hype, however, one sensed a note of hysteria, especially from the TV networks. Ever since the late eighties the networks have anxiously watched their audiences decline. This year that hysteria took on mega-buck dimensions when NBC, faced by the loss of *Seinfeld*, and with no immediate successor in sight, agreed to pay 13 million per episode for its hit doctor series, *ER*.

Similarly, faced by the possible loss of its perennial and only certain top ten prime time hit, *Monday Night Football*, ABC agreed to pay practically double what it had previously paid for the rights to broadcast the games. These events, coupled with the end of *Seinfeld*, lead one to believe that behind some of the hoopla surrounding the end was increasing need to deliver large audiences and thus convince advertisers of the continued relevance of the networks.

Another dimension that seemed to be overlooked in the “festivus” of grief (to those uninitiated into the Seinfeldian universe this was the yuletide holiday created by George Costanza's father) surrounding *Seinfeld*'s demise was the fact that despite its huge audiences many people just didn't get it.

For example, a literate and sophisticated couple (she is a published poet with a Ph.D. in English, and has written a book on Faulkner, and he is a retired successful businessman), friends of my wife and me, would often ask us (knowing we both taught media studies, and I was a TV critic) what was good on television. And we would inevitably reply: *Seinfeld*.

Invariably, they would dutifully go and watch the series, and then when we met again, would ask us what we saw in it. This happened a number of times with other highly intelligent people of our acquaintance, with generally the same results. When questioned a bit further as to why they disliked the series, the consensus was that they couldn't see spending time with such unlikeable people.

Not were our friends alone. Maureen Dowd in her Op-Ed page column in *The New York Times* once denounced the show for being the last vestige of 80s yuppie self indulgence. And *New York Magazine* television critic John Leonard in his brief epitaph on the series

demise hardly bothered to hide his disdain.

He commented that, "The passing of *Seinfeld*, that Cheez Doodle of urban fecklessness into cryogenic syndication inspires no tear in this cave. Jerry, George, Kramer and Elaine, never spoke for my New York ... in *Seinfeld* I always miss the snarl and the edge, not to mention real politics and real work ... I know we're all so post-modern hip that we can be ironic about our own nostalgia—but nostalgic about our own irony?"

Of course, Leonard and Dowd might certainly be accused of just a bit of over the top peevishness in their reactions to the sitcom which in other places had been referred to as, "the defining sitcom of our age."

On the surface, it certainly doesn't seem to reflect well on our culture and society that its so-called defining contemporary comedy was one that dealt in such excruciating minutiae as getting a table in a Chinese restaurant, finding a parking space, or locating the perfect piece of fruit. As a matter of fact, if your heart was set on watching a show that really dealt with life's quotidian, then arguably there's no better place to start than reruns of *Ozzie and Harriet*. However, it was *Seinfeld's* special genius to reveal the fact that God (or more precisely in *Seinfeld's* case, the Devil) really did reside in the details.

This is especially true in times such as these when, whether or not Saddam really permits U.N. arms inspectors to get inside his palaces, and sex and subpoenas are topic number one on the Washington, D.C. agenda. They also seem beyond the power of the average citizen to exert much influence over. As a result, daily experi-

ence looms larger and larger in our minds because it is something over which we do presumably have at least some semblance of control. In addition, it is undoubtedly in small letter rather than capital letter experiences that we often gain some of life's more piquant pleasures as well as its equally bittersweet frustrations and disappointments.

Indeed nothing can cast a pall over a day faster than finding out the milk you counted on for your morning coffee has turned sour overnight; or brighten it more quickly than discovering that the check you've been expecting came in the mail. As a result, when Jerry Seinfeld and his co-producer, Larry David, proposed their show about nothing to NBC executives back in 1989, little did they know that they had latched onto the veritable cultural tiger's tail.

Beside seizing on its little portion of a cultural phenomenon, the success of the show was also in no small measure due to its

writing and its actors. The writing of each episode was compared by one critic to "the twisted strands of DNA." Thus, one of the particular hallmarks of *Seinfeld* was to make four often disparate storylines, each seemingly headed off toward its own individual leftfield, end in one place without violating *Seinfeld's* cardinal rule of, "no hugging, no learning."

For example, the *Seinfeld* episode titled "The Boyfriend," (ranked fourth in *TV Guide's* list of all-time best series episodes) in which both Elaine and Jerry vie for the attentions of former New York Met's baseball star Keith Hernandez, and George tries to get his unemployment benefits extended by fabricating a bogus job, ends in a scene where Kramer and the newly

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introduced "Newman" (did we ever really learn his first name?) do a takeoff on the Kennedy assassination's Zapruder film.

Certainly other sitcoms have used the back story, front story approach to great advantage; perhaps none better than *Seinfeld's* predecessor in NBC's crown jewel Thursday night 9:00 p.m. time slot, *Cheers*. However, what set *Seinfeld* apart from these other series was its ability to have the final scene turn into a socko punchline ending that summed up the previous action and left you scratching your head in wonder at the brilliance of the program's inventiveness.

For that matter, not very many sitcoms equalled *Seinfeld* for the consistency and quality of its surreal situations. Sitcoms would have to go a long way to best Kramer and George's father's invention of the male bra (or as they called it "the bro"); the churlish bubble boy who asks Elaine to take off her top; and perhaps most over-the-top of all, the death of George's fiancée from licking toxic glue on the cheap wedding invitation envelopes he forced her to buy. This episode has been the most frequently criticized of all *Seinfeld* shows for going a bit too far.

None of those story lines and fantastic moments would have meant anything without the gifted ensemble that emerged over the years to play them. Lost now in all the hosannas over the passing of the program was the fact that when it debuted back in July of 1989 as *The Seinfeld Chronicles* it was a show without Elaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus); and Kramer (Michael Richards), rather than being the mooch and the constant intruder into Jerry's apartment he later became, was a recluse who hadn't been out of his apartment for ten years. Also forgotten in all the post hoc praise was the fact that the show, which one early critic termed "mildly amusing," was clobbered when it

was opposite *Home Improvement*.

Clearly in its first years, and not until after it was salvaged by placing it in the sure-fire time slot after *Cheers*, the program was a cult favorite and an acquired taste. Much of that early popularity was in no small part due to such things as the misadventures of George Costanza (Jason Alexander), whose whining and self-destructiveness would make Dostoyevski's underground man seem like the paragon of narcissism.

George's style included such kamikaze antics as getting fired from one job because he had sex with the cleaning lady; and trying to get a date with actress Marissa Tomei practically moments after the death of his fiancée. Indeed by comparison no one but a lord of losers like George could make you believe that his boss at the New York Yankees, the famously autocratic George Steinbrenner, was a cuddly version of Mr. Magoo.

Equalling George's outrageous behavior, and undoubtedly surpassing him as the source of the show's original claim on the public's affections, was the hyperkinetic Kramer. Nothing, except perhaps Ed Norton's (Art Carney) balletic arrivals at Ralph and Alice Kramden's apartment in *The Honeymooners*, compared to the whirling dervish entrances of Kramer into Jerry's apartment to serve himself a bowl of cereal, or inform Jerry of his latest scheme for rickshaws to be pulled by the homeless.

Perhaps most unforgettable of all were Kramer's brief but always doomed attempts at normalcy. For example, in the unjustly overlooked story line in the much praised episode "Bizzaro Jerry," Kramer started working at the firm of Brandt-Leland (despite not being hired and not getting paid), which starts his and Jerry's relationship deteriorating into a parody of the classic pattern of the nagging housewife and workaholic husband. Ultimately, it was Kramer's aptitude for physical

comedy (joyfully reminiscent of such silent clowns as Keaton and Chaplin) coupled with his zany schemes and eccentric friends that provided each episode with its unique bit of Dadaist counterpoint.

In the very same “Bizarro Jerry” episode in which Kramer started his job, Elaine discovered a group of friends who are the mirror opposites of Jerry and his friends, and despite the show’s no hugging, no learning obiter dicta, we did gain just a bit of insight into the real Elaine.

Originally added to the cast to provide the show with a bit of “estrogen,” and given a history as Jerry’s ex-girlfriend, the smart, diminutive, feisty, Elaine had more than her fair share of zany adventures and weird jobs. Indeed she was the “best man” at a lesbian wedding, found her nipple exposed in the picture she included in her personal Christmas card, and worked as the personal assistant to the eccentric millionaire Mr.

Pitt, who is so aristocratic he eats his Snickers bar with a knife and fork.

Nonetheless, despite these comic misadventures, Elaine is the only character on the show who seems to know or care that there is a world beyond the hermetically sealed universe of Monk’s coffee shop and Jerry’s apartment, so beloved of Jerry, George, and Kramer. However, despite yearning for the “Bizarro Jerry” world of her friend Kevin and his pals Gene and Feldman, where in contrast to Jerry’s world everyone is nice to one another, go to the ballet and read books together, she’s been so shaped and tainted by her association with Jerry, George and Kramer, she’s become a total misfit in polite society.

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It’s this struggle with conventional society that was also the hallmark of Jerry Seinfeld’s character on *Seinfeld*. In interview after interview, Jerry cited the movie *Lenny* (1971) as one of his major comic inspirations. Now nothing could be more different than the blest life of this child of middle class Long Island parents, who graduated from Queens College, practiced and polished his standup routines in yuppie comedy clubs, and the tortured existence of the so-called “sick” comic who grew up and learned his craft in a world of strippers and burlesque comics, and whose brief but legendary career ended in the drugged-out vortex of criminal prosecutions and paranoia.

It was the now legendary NBC programming chief Brandon Tartikoff who originally dismissed the *Seinfeld* show’s chances of success with the comment that it was too Jewish and too New York. Nevertheless, besides their both being young, Jewish and urban, Brandon and Jerry also shared, in

varying degrees, a kind of alienation from the middle class world. It is the virtual condition of every comedian’s life that he works while most of the rest of the world sleeps—and that the seeds of his/her art are bred in a kind of ironic detachment from everyday life. Therefore, in a term borrowed from the gay (“not that there’s anything wrong with that”) world, the comedian is continually at odds with straight society.

The fictional Jerry’s long string of dates and relationships that never seem to work out, his moderate success as a standup comic, his generally good “buffer zone” relationship with his parents in Florida, and his spotlessly neat and clean Upper

West Side bachelor pad, testify to both his middle class background and aspirations. But the fictional Jerry's conventional tendencies are constantly at war with, and undermined by, his ultra-fastidiousness (Jerry broke up with women for such petty reasons as eating peas one at a time, liking Dockers pants commercials, and using a toothbrush that accidentally fell into the toilet bowl)—and by fear of commitment, and self-absorption.

These latter traits reached epic proportions in the very same episode in which George's fiancée, Susan, dies. Jerry, facing a life alone with Kramer, thinks he's in love with Jeannie Steinman (Janeane Garofala), who has his initials, loves cereal, and riffs on brunches and shirt collars just like him. In a rare moment of self-consciousness, he concludes that "Now I know what I've been waiting for all these years—myself," only to break up with her when he also realizes that he hates himself.

Added to this was Jerry's often reluctant, petty outlaw behavior. Jerry thought nothing of mugging an old lady for a marble rye bread; making out with a date during a screening of *Schindler's List*; was hunted by the public library for a 20 year overdue copy of the *Tropic of Cancer*; and when advising someone about breaking up a relationship, suggested the brutal approach of doing it like removing a Band Aid, "one motion, right off." As a result, despite Jerry's best efforts, he seemed to be in a kind of perpetual unconscious guerrilla struggle with respectability.

This latter battle was one of the guilty pleasures of *Seinfeld*. In recent years, television drama and comedy emphasized either the dastardly conduct of the rich, such as in *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, or the dysfunctional behavior of the working class found in *Roseanne* and *Married ... with Children*.

*Seinfeld* was unique in that it examined

the not so discreet churlish charm of the bourgeoisie. In contrast to the generations of family—and friends—style sitcoms, whose characters, despite frequent misunderstandings, were ultimately generous and mutually supportive of one another. Jerry, George, Kramer and Elaine never missed an opportunity to compete with, lie, and back stab one another.

Not only did the fearsome foursome wreak havoc on each other, it usually extended to anyone in their wake. Heading the long list of *Seinfeld's* victims—which included the likes of Jerry's friend Babu, who was deported back to Pakistan because Jerry forgot to file his visa application—was George's Job-like fiancée, Susan Ross (Heidi Swedeborg). Even before their fatal engagement, she had to endure Kramer's misplaced Cuban cigar burning down her parents' cabin as well as the later embarrassment of the discovery of love letters from novelist John Cheever to her father found in the cabin's ashes; losing her job at NBC; and the breakup of a lesbian relationship—all because of George.

This cycle of devastation even extended to their own families. For example, when Jerry's parents heard that the dreaded Costanzas were about to move to their condominium in Florida, they moved in with Jerry, thus putting an end to his precious "buffer zone." Similarly, when Jerry bought his father a new Cadillac it resulted in the condo's board, of which he was president, voting to impeach him à la "Watergate"—they thought he must be embezzling funds, because they didn't believe a mere comedian could afford to buy his father such an expensive car. Indeed, though Jerry Seinfeld himself claimed *Abbott and Costello* as another of his comic muses (and the series use of dialogue and language confirmed this), the main characters' stick in the eye approach to one another, and everyone else, seemed more akin to the *Three Stooges*.

Nothing, however, rivaled *Seinfeld* for its

version of post-modern etiquette. There was for instance the *Seinfeld* guide to dating that included how many dates you had to have before it was still proper to break up a relationship over the phone rather than in person (only two); how long after sleeping with a woman you had to keep dating her (three weeks). And for those needing guidance on the subject, the information that the longer you knew someone, the shorter you have to wait for them in the street; that you only have to keep a thank-you card for two days after you receive it (unless you have a mantle); and you should never degift (take back something you gave) or regift (give away something you received).

Less frequently acknowledged but nonetheless an essential ingredient of quite a few *Seinfeld* episodes, was their mild satiric jabs at political correctness (especially ironic in a show supposedly about nothing). For example, Kramer was beaten up at an AIDS walkathon for refusing to wear an AIDS ribbon; George's father's car was vandalized when he parked in a disabled parking spot; and in an episode that prompted a network apology; Kramer was attacked when he stomped on a burning Puerto Rican flag during the Puerto Rican Day Parade. The inspiration for these incidents was neither conservative nor liberal politically; instead they seemed inspired by the series' radical individualism, or put in a showbiz idiom, "Screw 'em, if they can't take a joke!"

Unfortunately, this indifference to politics and society did have its downside. For example, black characters in their infre-

quent appearances on the series rarely rose above the level of caricature. Thus, lawyer Jackie Chiles, the series parody of Johnnie Cochran, seemed an Amos 'n' Andy lineal descendant of George "Kingfish" Stevens and Algonquin J. Calhoun.

If the series did have one strong point in its dealings with race, it was with the embarrassment and uneasiness that middle class whites often feel about the issue. As a result in one episode, Elaine, because she's afraid of being considered a bigot, goes through all sorts of contortions in order to find out if the somewhat swarthy man she's been dating, who Jerry thinks is black, is indeed a black man

Of course, Elaine's racial guessing game is mild in comparison to the larger question that often plagued the series—the extent to which the series often went to hide not only its cultural Jewishness but any sort of religiosity. Though the series, apropos of Tartikoff's caveat, is replete with Jewish body language and syntax (George's head slappings and comments like, "again with the keys"); references (Bar Mitzvahs, the Holocaust, Florida condos and Elaine being referred to as having *shiksappeal*).

Nevertheless, *Seinfeld* was always the artful dodger in explicitly acknowledging its Judaism. As a result, throughout the series you had funerals of relatives from Krakow without a yarmulke in sight, a *bris* (circumcision) without even a hint of Rabbi, and when George wants to convert to "Latvian Orthodox" in order to impress a woman, it's never really made clear what religion he wants to convert from.

**Whether Jerry Seinfeld can resist the future siren call of the sitcom better than the likes of equally talented standups, such as Bill Cosby and Bob Newhart, remains to be seen. In a sitcom world where there is so much unrelieved similarity, *Seinfeld* stood out because of its originality and steadfast insistence on being true to itself.**





All of these elements, both positive and negative, came together in the series' intellectually consistent, but generally less than hilarious final episode. It was a conclusion which some finale mavens rated as inferior to *Mary Tyler Moore's* sign off, but better than *M\*A\*S\*H's*, and undoubtedly the equal of *Cheers* curtain calls. Nevertheless, the hoopla that surrounded the show paid off in Superbowl type ratings that almost equalled *Cheers'* final episode (which to be fair is quite good, given the fact that the champion *M\*A\*S\*H's* and *The Fugitive's* finales never had to contend with the inroads of cable).

There was, in addition, one other record set by the passing of *Seinfeld*. Some sort of Guinness mark must have been achieved for shortest post-TV-finale attention span by the modern media hype machine. In less time than it took to say "get out," that colossus had made a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn, and was in overdrive about another story—the death of Frank

Sinatra. In the heat of the coverage of the death of the man, whose voice had become the soundtrack for millions of lives worldwide, the ballyhoo over *Seinfeld* faded like a snowstorm in July.

As a matter of fact, in what seemed like less than a nanosecond, the Upper West Side had been exorcised by images of Hoboken on the television landscape—memories of the antics of Jerry, George, Kramer and Elaine replaced by nostalgia about the hijinks of Rat Packers Frank, Dino, Sammy, Peter, Joey, and Shirley, and ring-a-ding-ding substituted for yada, yada, yada.

The hype meltdown aside, *Seinfeld's* finale's most solid achievement was to manage to conclude without violating the consistency of the series' major characters or its major themes. This was perhaps a bit more difficult for *Seinfeld* than either *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Mary Tyler Moore*, and *Cheers*. In those earlier finales,

there was the end of the Korean War, the purchase of the TV station by a media conglomerate, and the closing of the bar to serve as justifications for these programs, bittersweet conclusions. For *Seinfeld*, there was no such easy rationale.

Also in comparison to *MTM*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, and *Cheers*, where fans and critics cited certain episodes such as “Chuckles the Clown Bites the Dust,” “Abbyssinia, Henry,” etc., as highlights of the series, but left it for latter generations to decide which of them were “classics,” *Seinfeld*’s fans, along with a number of entertainment periodicals and critics, had already constructed an elaborate pantheon of the series’ most inspired episodes and anointed them as the *Seinfeld* canon. As a result, there was hardly much room for additions, which made the task of any final episode much more difficult.

The final episode, however, if not fall-on-the-floor funny, was still amusing, and, in this most self-referential of all series, must have set a record for self-references. Concocted under a cloak of secrecy that the media claimed rivaled the Manhattan Project, former co-executive producer and head writer Larry David created a virtual concordance of some of the series’ major moments, characters, and themes. Receiving curtain calls were story lines such as “The Jerry Show,” George and Jerry’s self-reflexive show about nothing, which they had tried unsuccessfully to peddle to the network in the series’ fourth season. Characters included lawyer Jackie Chiles, the Bubble Boy, Susan Ross’s parents, and others, all of whose appearances, as character witnesses, were occasioned by the trial of the foursome for violating the Lowell, Massachusetts, “Good Samaritan” Law.

In addition, David, in a bow to the show’s most ardent fans, even included moments that alluded to their dreams of how the series should end. Thus, to those who believed that the show’s rightful

consummation should have been Jerry and Elaine’s wedding, there was a moment when the corporate jet on which they are flying seemed about to crash and Elaine appeared about to confess her abiding love for Jerry, only to squelch it moments later when they were saved.

Finally, in a homage to the only love affair the show really ever had—its passion for symmetry—the finale’s concluding moments made a bow to the series origins with Jerry in a jailhouse jumpsuit (George and Kramer in attendance, but Elaine nowhere in sight) doing his standup routine for the cons, spouting trademark insouciant lines such as “So, what’s the story about the ‘yard’?”

This final allusion to the fictional and the real Jerry’s beginnings in standup, may be to some extent a suggestion about his immediate future. However, one might not go wrong in predicting another sitcom in the not-too-distant *Seinfeld* future. As a matter of fact, after the show’s finale a very sober, almost solemn Jerry (in contrast to the *Cheers* cast which was boisterously and blissfully drunk in its curtain call on the *Tonight Show* after its finale) appeared with Jay Leno to talk about his future. Upon his entrance, the studio audience’s standing ovation was so intense and so prolonged that it prompted him to wave and seem to head off stage teasingly shouting, “O.K., Come on, let’s do another season.”

Whether Jerry Seinfeld can resist the future siren call of the sitcom better than the likes of equally talented standups, who starred in hit sitcoms, such as Bill Cosby and Bob Newhart, remains to be seen. What is not moot is that in a sitcom world where there is so much unrelieved similarity, *Seinfeld* stood out because of its originality and steadfast insistence on being true to itself. This makes it especially noteworthy in a

medium where we've become so inured to the sameness of sitcoms that some teenagers can even shout story lines back to the screen à la the *Rocky Horror Show*.

*Seinfeld* was also special because it continued and kept alive a tradition inherent in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *M\*A\*S\*H* and *Cheers*: that at its very best the sitcom has the potential to become an authentic American comedy of manners. In this, *Seinfeld* succeeded by becoming the television comedy that pointed out the imprecision of our contemporary relationships and gave a name to the sources of our modern urban anxiety.

As a result of these efforts, *Seinfeld* achieved something that not even *MTM*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, and *Cheers* ever accomplished, which was to create adjectives akin to the literary-inspired Dickensian and Kafkaesque. Therefore, something is Seinfeldian—or in its more common usage an event or character, is “just like a *Seinfeld* episode,” means that it breaks the fourth wall of conventional expectations to reveal the potential of the everyday as a source of both art and philosophy. So, despite its best efforts at adhering (even onto the very last) to its rule of “no hugging, no learning,” *Seinfeld* left us with a very rich legacy after all. ■

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# Directing for television: An Appreciation

by Brian Rose

While it's no longer in critical favor, there's no question that the *auteur* theory (the 1950's French doctrine extolling the director as the true "author" of a film) helped elevate the role and the power of American motion picture directors. Movies are now routinely identified as being "by" Spielberg or Tarantino, for example, and film directors often share marquee status with Hollywood's biggest stars.

But in American television, the *politique des auteurs* has never really caught on (despite a few earnest academic efforts). It's easy to understand why. Unlike their glamorous Hollywood counterparts, television directors tend to toil in relative, though fairly well-paid, obscurity. There are no TV shows where the director's name comes above the title, nor are TV directors the subject of retrospectives or

categorized according to prevailing styles and themes. Their careers are not studied in college courses; their work is rarely profiled and little understood.

One reason for this comparative neglect is the simple fact that in contrast to film, the television industry operates as a producer-based system. The power clearly lies with producers or producer/writers like Steven Bochco or David E. Kelley who maintain a large degree of control over a program's story, cast, and overall approach. This is equally true of non-fictional formats such as news and sports, with its legendary producers like Don Hewitt and Roone Arledge. As a result, TV directors perform in a somewhat different capacity. Rather than function as a "lone visionary" (a common misperception in film promoted by *auteurism*), directors in television usually work as part of a highly integrated team, with final authority resting with the producer.

Yet these structural differences do not inherently preclude directorial creativity. TV directors are the ones responsible for the how things *appear* on the screen, which includes everything from pacing to framing, from shot selection to graphic superimpositions, from instant editing to the blending of several layers of visual and audio material. To this is added the distinctive pressures of an electronic medium—immediacy and speed. Unlike directing theater or film, a good portion of television is done live or live-on-tape; even prime-time fictional programming is produced at a dizzyingly fast rate. TV directors must be able to react quickly, often to a vast amount of information, while also being alert to the dynamics of composition and emotional content (whether through performance or live action)

Far more than their counterparts working on the stage or screen, television directors tend to specialize, concentrating their energies on one particular format. News directors, for example, may occasionally try their hands at other forms of non-fiction programming, but they rarely if ever, venture into fiction. So too with directors of sports, talk shows, and entertainment specials. Comedy directors usually remain in comedy, though prime-time drama directors may sometimes make the leap to feature films (or more likely to movies-of-the-week). On the other hand, music video directors never seem to move to conventional television of any sort, but will often be picked up by Hollywood in its relentless quest for the youth market and “flavors-of-the-month.”

A primary reason for such directorial specialization is that each type of TV programming demands its own individual skills and techniques. Live formats, like news and sports, are very different enterprises than fictional formats (normally shot on film) like dramas and sitcoms. These generic boundaries have their roots back in the medium’s earliest days, when

television’s unique ability to broadcast performances and events “as they happened” was promoted as its major asset.

To this end, directors were trained using a model developed in live network radio. Rather than work exclusively on the studio floor, as was common in theater and film, broadcast directors were based in the control room. Though it might be only be a few feet down the hall (or later as distant as several thousand miles), the control room became the centerpiece of production, with all material flowing into its myriad monitors, speakers, and switchers. Directors were now connected to the studio stage largely through electronic means, such as cameras, microphones, and headphones, and they shaped the final product as it occurred, editing live for immediate transmission.

Interestingly, this method of production was employed regardless of format during the late 1940s through the mid-1950s, when the TV industry was centered in New York City. Drama, commercials, newscasts, quiz shows, variety shows all utilized two or three cameras arranged within a generally cramped studio setting. What made this type of directing so challenging was its reliance on multiple control-room monitors and instant editing. The varying perspectives provided by the studio cameras (and their rotating assortment of lenses) permitted a new type of flexibility in shot selection. At the same time, it made the director’s job far more demanding, since attention needed to be paid not only to the changing views from the monitors but also to instructing the cameras where to go next. Adding to the pressure were the strict time constraints and the finality of the editing process—once the shot was chosen, there was no going back for retakes.

While these live production practices

were evolving in New York, an alternative filmed-TV approach was developing on the West Coast. *I Love Lucy* led the way by adapting the three-camera studio system of live television to motion pictures. The sitcom's proscenium-stage performances were photographed from the unconventional (in terms of Hollywood) perspective of the audience, with 35 mm cameras replacing electronic ones. Rather than light, block, rehearse, and shoot one shot/setup at a time (the traditional film technique), the director now could plan scene by scene, filming the action in continuous takes that would later be assembled in post-production. The chief difference of the *Lucy* method from live TV was the absence of both the control room and the tension of instant cutting. Shooting on film permitted the director to remain on the studio floor, with the performers and technicians, and the luxury of choosing which shots to use during the final editing process.

As the popularity of this approach grew, particularly when prime-time episodic television abandoned New York for Hollywood in the late 1950s, not all fictional TV programs embraced the multi-camera stage-bound style. Many sitcoms and all one-hour dramas continued to employ standard film production techniques, opting for the greater control and versatility of shooting with one camera. Though it was somewhat more expensive, directors could make their programs at least resemble the look of the big screen, with detailed lighting, flexible camera angles, and, on special occasions, remote locations.

Gradually, electronic TV cameras and separate control rooms found their way to Hollywood as well, where they were used for half-hour comedies (though the majority would continue to be shot using the multi-camera film approach) and enter-

tainment specials. These video productions resembled their earlier East Coast counterparts, except for one crucial distinction—they weren't broadcast live. Thanks to the introduction of videotape in 1956, the pressures of instant editing were no longer an overriding concern; mistakes could now be corrected with retakes or with footage captured by another camera and substituted in post-production. For directors, not having to worry about getting things perfect on the first take made it easier to concentrate on non-technical aspects, such as performances and pacing, which were sometimes neglected in the stress of live television.

As Hollywood became the center for fictional television programming, whether shot on film or tape, New York remained the home of live TV, which now meant reality-based formats such as news, sports, and talk. However, with the introduction of new technologies, the task of directing these formats became much more complicated. Each advance, whether lightweight ENG cameras, microwave antennas, remote trucks capable of carrying an entire engineering complex, communication satellites, or computerized graphics brought new possibilities and new problems.

News directors were now able to quite literally bring the world into the control room; sports directors could go anywhere to cover an event and think nothing of setting up dozens of cameras. But this dramatic increase in scope and versatility also meant far greater directorial responsibilities and pressures. The more cameras being used, the more images to monitor; the more satellite remotes employed, the more need for the most precise technical coordination (and the larger the chance for something to go wrong). If the pace of live TV had been relentless before, the continuing addition of new television technologies now made live TV directing seem like

supervising Mission Control.

Nevertheless, directing “reality” has always been one of the unique creative challenges of television, particularly when the “story” is ongoing and unpredictable. Extended televised coverage of events like the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Challenger disaster, Olympic tragedies (Munich 1972) and triumphs (the U.S. Hockey team in 1980), the virtually made-for-TV Gulf War, and the recent death of Princess Diana requires extraordinary directorial technique and expertise. With camera shots flooding into the control room from around the world, instructions being shouted by assorted producers, and the tense unfolding of a still uncertain story, the director must constantly be on the alert for those telling moments, whether in a state procession or an Olympic contest, that will make the broadcast come emotionally alive for the viewers at home. It’s a skill that calls for a keen eye, quick reflexes, and years of experience.

Though without the thrills of prolonged “crisis” coverage, directing the standard formats of live television, such as regularly scheduled news and sports, can be just as demanding. Flexibility and responsiveness are the key elements, since there is so much that can change in an instant. Breaking news can completely topple a carefully planned newscast; a sudden reversal or injury can send the most routine sports telecast into high gear. Live TV directors must be adept at such quick turns and routinely prepared for the unexpected.

Although it’s true that most live TV operates out of the major networks’ headquarters in Manhattan, the division of East vs. West coast directing is not a precise one; there are a few fictional series (both on film and tape) shot in New York, just as there are various live events

(awards shows, newscasts, and celebrity trials) broadcast from Hollywood. But regardless of where they work or in what format, TV directors rarely receive the respect or prestige of their counterparts in other arts.

Their achievements tend to go unrecognized, I suspect, largely because of the nature of the medium in which they toil. Not only is the visual frame much smaller than motion pictures or theater—thereby discouraging flashy directorial “signatures”—but there are rarely single works to contemplate, since most TV is series-based, with multiple directors (once again removing the stamp of the autonomous “author”). Television’s very ubiquity and its blatant commercialism and industrial structure have also helped to minimize the director’s role. In the eyes of the industry, they are frequently viewed as replaceable technicians; in the eyes of the public, they’re simply part of the crawl of names at the beginning or the end of the show.

To change these perceptions requires a reappraisal of what TV directors do and how they do it. Working in a hybrid medium like television, which enthusiastically incorporates elements from its fictional and non-fictional predecessors, makes the director’s position somewhat confusing. Are they staggers of small thirty- or sixty-minute playlets? Directors of serialized mini-movies? Instant editors of live journalism? Electronic choreographers, combining vast arrays of images, graphics, and sound?

The answer depends on the format and on recognizing that TV directors utilize an arsenal of skills gleaned from theater, film, newsreels, and radio. Sports coverage, for example, often resembles epic drama, with its grand battles and emotional close-ups. Talk shows—Jerry Springer excepted—are often staged like small drawing room comedies or intense character studies. Directing live news events requires the ability to shape a “story” and give it a form

and style as it happens (often for hours at a stretch).

But in applying their skills, it's also important to consider the conditions under which most directors operate. Control rooms and TV studios are arenas of tremendous pressures and constraints, ranging from fierce production schedules (an hour-long soap opera every day, a half-hour sitcom every four days, a one-hour action series every eight days, documentaries every night), to unforeseen technical difficulties, interfering producers, and the unpredictable vagaries of "star" talent in front of the camera. The frenzied nature of this environment demands directors who can handle constant stress while maintaining a firm sense of control and vision.

TV directors must also be unusually flexible, especially given the impact of changing technologies. In the last decade alone, smaller satellite uplinks and faster computer graphics have greatly enhanced the scope of live directing; while live video feeds from 35mm film cameras permit multi-camera film directors to now work with the same immediacy as if they were shooting on tape.

Ironically, the sheer variety of challenges facing TV directors—economic, logistical, technical—contributes to their comparatively understated status. Even within their own specialties, they must be adept at so many different crafts and procedures that their creative roles are often overlooked. Few people consider the tremendous expertise involved in directing live news and sports or in maintaining the performance style and dramatic energy of episodic television. Working with greater speed and urgency than any of their counterparts, TV directors still manage to produce an extraordinary amount of programming that is compelling to watch and of surprisingly high quality.

While it's doubtful that the *auteur* theory will ever find a home in television—such a romantic celebration of indi-

vidualism is much more suited to the glamour of film—it's time to reevaluate the nature of TV directing and the talents of its practitioners. Much as we tend to take the medium for granted, the skills and artistry TV directors employ in shaping what we see deserves to be recognized. ■

**Brian Rose is a Professor of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University. He is the author of four books, including *Directing for Television*, to be published early next year by Scarecrow Press.**



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**PHILIPS**

# Ironies of TV's Golden Age

*Steve Allen had to climb a ladder to chat with his studio audience, ABC had to make fifty agency pitches before it could sell the Disneyland show and then there was the program whiz who insisted TV had to be all-live, all-the-time.*

**By Bert Briller**

Television's Golden Age had its share of base metal. Its alchemists shamelessly connived for "firsts"—to be the first to show live shots of both coasts, or the first to originate their program from a remote city. A piqued Arthur Godfrey could fire singer Julius LaRosa on the air for "lack of humility," and a miffed Jack Paar could walk off his late night show in mid-program. Many of the pioneers proved to be poor prophets. And, in their pursuit of ratings and riches, some were not above making deals with the devil.

In those early days when almost everything on the new medium was live, the kiddie panel talk show *Juvenile Jury* was sponsored by General Foods for Gaines dog food. One of the show's most successful commercials featured a demonstration: a lovable (and hungry) pup was released to choose between two bowls of chow—one

with Gaines and the other with an anonymous brand. The dog would sniff at both and then go for the Gaines.

I asked host Jack Barry and producer Dan Enright how they risked the embarrassment of having the beast choose Brand X. "No problem," Jack explained, "the dog always goes for the Gaines and never for the bowl laced with ammonia."

This was long before the FCC cracked down on deception in commercials—one case involved putting marbles in the bottom of a bowl of vegetable soup so the carrots, peas and potatoes would catch the camera's eye. Another was shooting through an open car window to "show" that its sponsor's glass was absolutely clear.

I knew Jack and Dan when I worked at WOR-Mutual, New York, in 1946-7 before its TV station went on the air. I traveled with them to Schenectady, where

General Electric (whose equipment WOR was ordering) let them experiment with an idea for an audience participation show. The question was whether ordinary citizens who came to a studio could play the game under hot lights, with clumsily-mobile cameras and tangled cables on the floor.

The tryouts indicated that TV game shows were indeed practical and entertaining. Barry and Enright learned the basics of production, but they probably also picked up techniques of manipulation and flim-flammy which led to rigging and trickery—exploding in 1959 in the quiz scandals of their *Twenty-One*.

Prejudice also tarnished the Golden Age. Around 1950, as a reporter/critic on *Variety*, I got a call from an ad agency friend, Sid Rubin. He suggested I meet him at the classy New York night club, Le Ruban Bleu, to catch a new act he thought might headline a television show. The singer was a young, not well-known black performer named Harry Belafonte. After his act, we went back to his dressing room and chatted.

When we left, Sid asked what I thought of a half-hour musical show fronted by Belafonte. I said I was impressed with his charisma, his repertoire, his natural charm. Sid said his proposal was to schedule Belafonte at 10:30-11 PM on NBC's New York owned station following the hit Caesar-Coca *Show of Shows*.

I asked how much Belafonte wanted and who the client was. "\$400," said Sid, adding that the prospective sponsor was a beer. "He's a bargain," I said. "Just right for the Saturday night slot."

Two weeks later I called Sid to hear how the Belafonte deal was going. "Dead," Sid said unhappily. "The brewery doesn't think New York TV is ready for a black singing star."

The rarity of ebony in the Golden Age

was underlined a few years later—around 1955, when I was in Sales Development at ABC-TV. The entire sales department was treated to a night at Manhattan's popular Copacabana, where Sammy Davis Jr. was starring. The event got up a head of steam for the screening of a pilot film, a program featuring Davis and the Will Masten Trio.

Produced at a cost of \$20,000 (about par for that era), the sitcom's plot revolved around a black neighborhood's needing money to buy a community house. Sammy and the Trio's entertaining raised the cash and provided the happy ending. However, there was no happy ending for the packager—advertisers and agencies did not think an almost-all-black series would attract a national audience.

As cable and microwave hookups spread across the country, the links were capricious. All control rooms had slides like "Ooops" or "Please Stand By." WCAU-TV, CBS's owned station in Philly, used a card: "There's nothing wrong with your set. The CBS picture is temporarily interrupted. Technical Difficulties Between New York or Hollywood and WCAU-TV Philadelphia. Please Be Patient." A bit wordy, but often there was enough of a delay for it to be read—and reread.

There were hidden reefs in those early uncharted days. When WOR-TV was going on the air the Empire State Building raised its antenna-site fees to New York City's stations who used it. Jack Poppele, the veteran chief engineer who had been with WOR-AM since its launching in 1922, was incensed at the steep rate. "I'm not going to stand for it," he told me, "I'll build our own tower in New Jersey, just opposite the center of Manhattan, and beam our signal in."

He did just that, at a cost in the high six figures. The only problem was that most New York area viewers had oriented their antennas to the Empire State Building where the other channels' antennas were

clustered. Adding to WOR's troubles were large icicles that fell from the tower's girders and the fact that an airplane crashed into it. Around town, the independent station's independent stand was derided as "Poppele's Folly."

Another questionable engineering speculation was ABC's. An FM radio band is positioned between TV Channels 6 and 7. ABC engineers learned that the U.S. government, for defense reasons, was considering taking over the band housing Channels 2-6, and so the network opted for, and got, Channel 7 in the five markets where it had licenses. Unfortunately for ABC, Channels 2-6 were not taken away and ABC lost an opportunity for its owned stations to be in a more popular area of the dial.

CBS also lost out in trying to guess what the Federal Communications Commission would do in approving a color television system. CBS inventor Peter Goldmark, who had developed the successful 33 1/3 rpm long playing record system, had devised a color system which used a spinning disk with three color filters. It had problems, however, because the disk was mechanical and CBS color programs would not be seen on the large number of existing black-and-white sets.

CBS backed up its bet on Goldmark's system with the acquisition of the Hytron TV manufacturing company. For a time it looked as though CBS would win out, but in the end the desirability of a color system that was compatible with existing monochrome sets persuaded the FCC. It was a multi-million-dollar loss for CBS.

In the heady pioneer days, new theories and concepts were spawned. As film was coming in, *Hopalong Cassidy* and other Westerns once thought played-out were suddenly highly popular. But WOR-TV took the contrarian position that the

unique appeal of television was its *live* quality, and therefore it would carry only live programs! For example, on Monday through Friday evenings it scheduled a drama to be performed live on each evening, just as performances are repeated nightly on the legitimate stage.

Because of its devotion to live productions, WOR built a large studio on Manhattan's Columbus Avenue and 68th Street. As its program chief proudly showed me around the new facilities, he stressed that for flexibility there would be no seating for an audience on the studio floor. Instead, there was a balcony to accommodate the studio audience.

But progress in the development of kinescopes and tape and economics in the perennial life of films eroded the philosophy of *live-alive-o* and fairly soon WOR succumbed to the lure of celluloid. It sold the Columbus Avenue studio to NBC-TV. Dick Pack, then program head of the NBC flagship station, WNBT, developed Steve Allen's late-night program as a local show in that studio. But because the audience was up in the balcony, when Allen wanted to chat with *hoi polloi*, he had to climb a ladder.

The difficulties (and perhaps the exhilarating challenges of the Golden Age) lay in the cloudiness of our prophecies. In 1953 at ABC I wrote a presentation on UHF, *The P's and Q's of V's and U's*. As the third or fourth network (in an economy that was only able to support two-and-a-half networks), ABC was abominably short on VHF affiliates. It was a vicious circle: poor coverage meant meager advertising revenue which resulted in weaker programming. ABC's pitch, however, trotted out all the data we could muster to show that UHF stations could add significantly to ABC's circulation. But the addition of a UHF outlet in Johnstown, PA still left most of the Pittsburgh market unreached. In short, the promise of UHF proved to be much slower in becoming a

reality.

Many of the ironies of the Fifties are traceable to misreading the clock of the Future. However, ABC did make a successful multi-million-dollar gamble in 1954 with Walt Disney, after he had been turned down by NBC and CBS. ABC made over 50 presentations on behalf of the Disney program before the first sponsor signed on.

From agency to agency, we dragged around a five-foot-tall triptych sketch of a proposed theme park to be called Disneyland. ABC had put up \$500,000 and guaranteed loans of \$4,500,000 for a one-quarter interest in the proposed park. But prospective sponsors shrugged. Bob Lewine, ABC's program chief, asked to see the park. He was driven to an orange grove in Anaheim where the Disney folks pointed to some trees as the site of Fantasyland and others as Adventureland. His report brought only more shrugs from prospects, until prospect #55 or #56 saw the potential.

The next year, 1955, with his weekly program the only ABC show in Nielsen's Top Ten, Disney proposed three special programs. One of them forecast the possibility of the U.S. launching a Weather Satellite. This was before the Russians stunned the world with Sputnik, and Disney's animated vision seemed like pure science fantasy. Disney's story board argued that the U.S. only needed to double or triple the amount of our rockets' thrust to get a satellite into orbit, where it could monitor weather systems. Cloud Nine stuff!

But then I saw a couple of names on the story board—Werner Von Braun and Willy Ley. I had known Willy, a refugee from Hitler who had written serious scientific books and had been a member of a German rocket society. The possibility seemed real—but still a long way off. The weekly *Disneyland* programs were a smashing success—remember *Davy*

*Crockett* and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*? But the satellite show never attracted sponsorship; never became part of the Golden Age.

During those pioneering years an important struggle was taking place below the surface—the tug-of-war between the networks and advertisers for control of programming. It developed a great deal of rancor and made “bumping” a dirty word.

A classic case was that of *The Voice of Firestone*. The tire company had sponsored the music program on NBC Radio since 1927 and then added television. Its focus on semi-classical music gained a small but loyal audience on Monday evenings at 8:30. But NBC felt its low ratings, in single Nielsen digits, depressed the network's circulation for the entire night. Despite the threat of a lawsuit, in 1954 NBC head Pat Weaver bumped the show out of prime time. In retaliation, Firestone moved its *Voice* to ABC.

Once again, the ratings were disappointing to the network, although Firestone was comfortable with its performance. ABC moved the program a half-hour later, and then in 1959 offered an even later time slot. Firestone executives felt betrayed. At a meeting in their Akron headquarters, I saw and heard their outrage and indignation. ABC's presentation was sandwiched between proposals by NBC and CBS, but neither offered a prime time period; Firestone's *Voice* was silenced.

In 1956, CBS bumped three advertiser-produced programs to take the time periods for its own *Playhouse 90*. While that dramatic series later won critics' kudos, the summary dismissal of their programs enraged the displaced sponsors, General Foods, Bristol-Myers and Singer sewing machines. They were offered spots in *Playhouse 90*, but one advertising agency executive complained CBS was acting arbitrar-

ily: "We're not being asked. We're being told."

Some critics expressed their concern that in the networks' pursuit of ratings—and in taking control of program development and program schedules—the networks were torpedoing shows that had cultural aspects or appealed to a niche audience.

Why remember the old ironies? Because we are still facing challenges in uncharted waters. We still have to bet on the course Digital TV and High Definition

TV will be likely to take. We still have little hard evidence on which we can arrange our calendars and map future plans. But we can enjoy watching the shifting movements of audiences and regulators, of broadcasters and markets, of changing trends and tastes. We can still try to be prophets. ■

**Bert Briller** was a vice president of ABC television and executive editor of the Television Information Office. Earlier he had been a reporter and critic on *Variety* and on staff at WNEW and WOR-Mutual.

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## Violence and the News

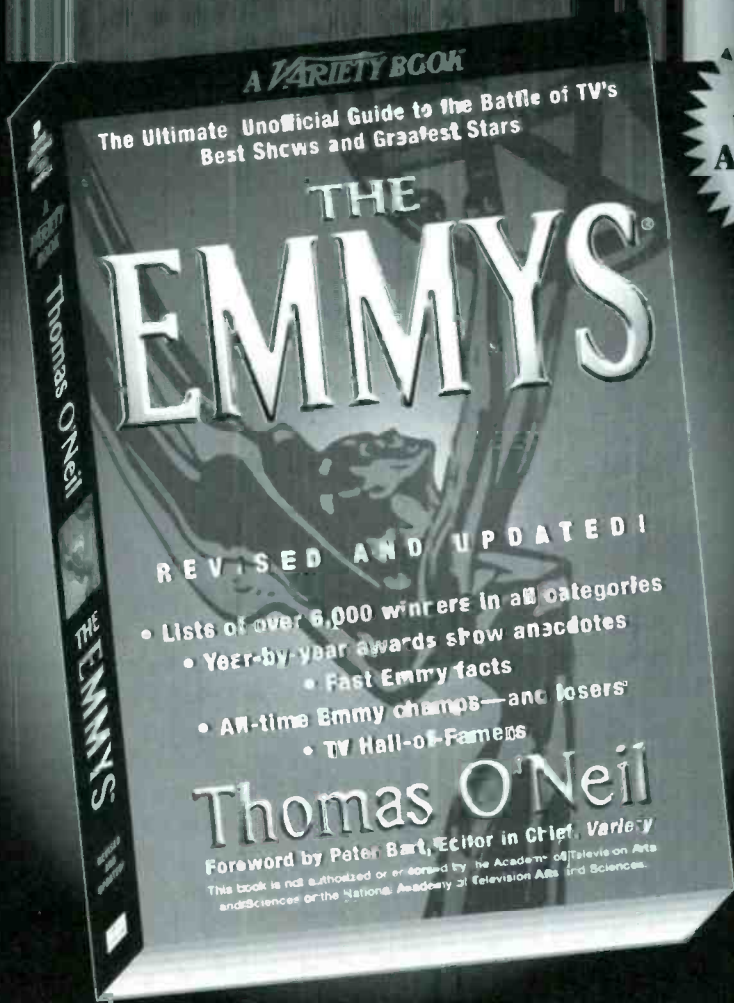
Coverage of violent events averaged just over 40 per cent of all the news in Rocky Mountain Media Watch's fourth annual snapshot survey of local television news across the U.S. The report, entitled *Not in the Public Interest*, released in August, analyzes the content of March 11 newscasts on 102 stations in 52 metropolitan areas, and presents detailed examples of good and bad journalism.

Stations KVUE, Austin, NECN (New England Cable News), Boston, KTCA, Twin Cities and KTVU, San Francisco were commended for presenting quality programs that provide empowering information to viewers. Conversely, stations, KSAZ, Phoenix, WSB, Atlanta, WOOD, Grand Rapids and KNBC, Los Angeles, were among those identified as broadcasting programs that were overloaded with mayhem.

"The report focuses our concern that most local TV newscasts have abandoned the public interest in the race for ratings," according to Paul Klite, Executive Director of RMMW which is based in Denver. "It is also exciting to see a few stations are breaking the tabloid mold." Other findings:

- The news is out of balance on many stations, with an over-emphasis on crime and disaster coverage. This pattern is consistent over a four year span.
- Important issues, like education, the environment, poverty, arts, science, labor, growth, transportation and governance, are neglected in newscasts.
- Women and minorities are under-represented as anchors and sources on programs.
- Entertainment tactics have invaded the news. Sensationalism and hype generate emotion (arousal), but do not inform citizens about their communities.
- Newscasts average one-fourth as much fluff and triviality as news.
- Fifteen stations broadcast more commercials than actual news.

A executive summary of *Not in the Public Interest* is on RMMW's web site at [www.imagepage.com/rmmw](http://www.imagepage.com/rmmw).



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# Brian Lamb CEO of C-SPAN: The Man Behind the Mask of Detachment

*Some critics call him “the Mr. Rogers of adult TV” and condemn C-SPAN as “an electronic elder-care center.” But CEO Brian Lamb never loses sight of his overwhelming mission: to enable America’s “information junkies” to see first hand on cable what government is all about. TVQ’s special correspondent removes his mask of detachment and discovers an impassioned advocate of unbiased public-service programming.*

**By Arthur Unger**



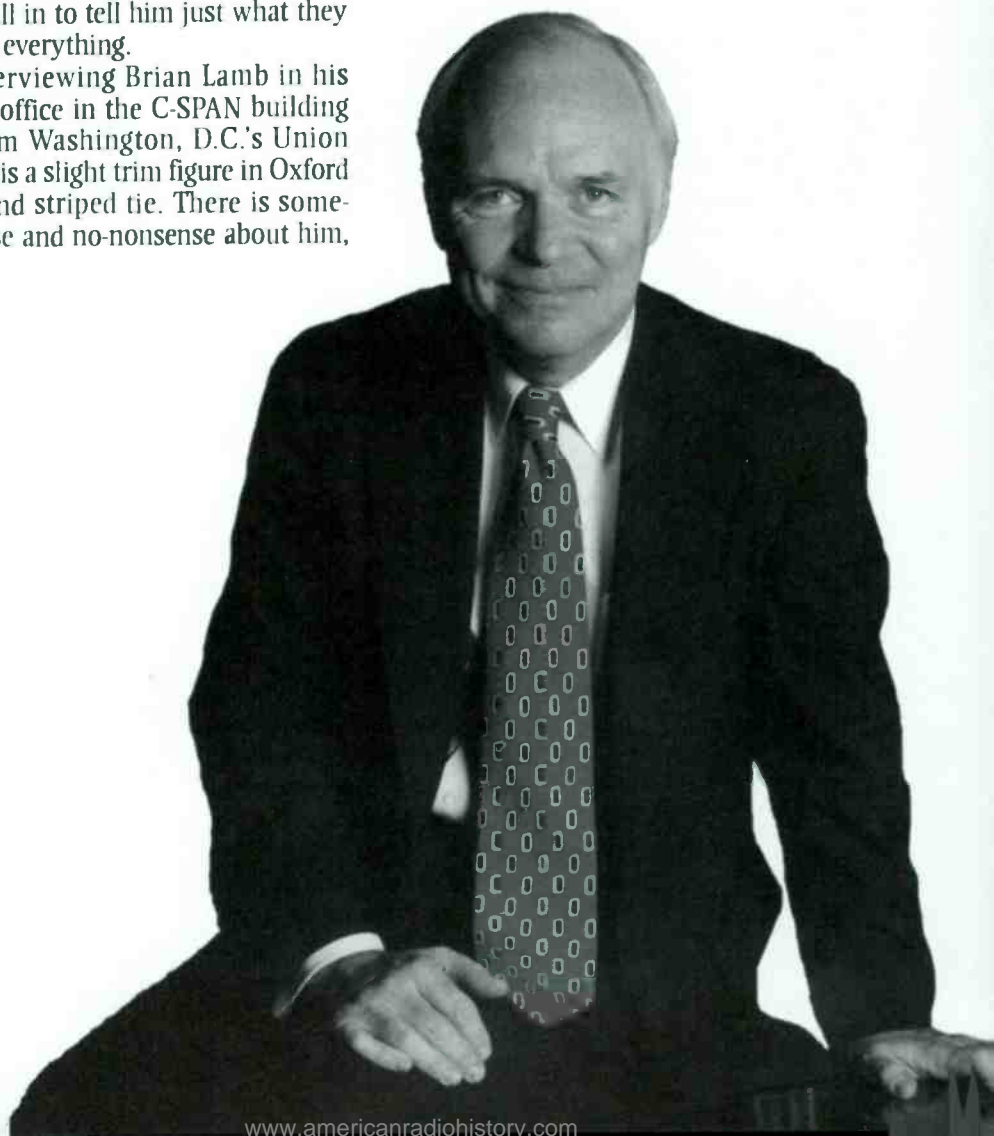
A note to C-SPAN “information junkies:” the mask of detachment which Brian P. Lamb wears on camera conceals an impassioned advocate underneath.

He reads, he thinks, he interviews, he empathizes, he plans for the future . . . but, above all, this founder and CEO of C-SPAN is listening. He listens to the varied voices of government and other establishment figures . . . but especially the voices of intelligent America who tell him where to focus his cameras. He listens avidly to the opinions of the 10% of the population he calls “information junkies” who constitute the nucleus of his C-SPAN network, many of whom call in to tell him just what they think about everything.

I am interviewing Brian Lamb in his book-lined office in the C-SPAN building not far from Washington, D.C.’s Union Station. He is a slight trim figure in Oxford grey suit and striped tie. There is something precise and no-nonsense about him,

mellowed by a warm smile and an unexpected twinkle. This is no cypher, no milk-toast, no nerd, despite the seeming-egoless figure he projects on camera where he subtly lures interviewees into forthright revelations. Ones that Brian Lamb makes certain will never embarrass the guest.

The office overflows with busts—head-and-shoulders figurines, that is. Like Lamb himself, his choices do not indicate any special political preference: there is de Tocqueville, Ho Chi Min, Gorbochev, Dirksen, Lincoln, etc. When I comment that there is no Bach or Beethoven, he defensively says that at home he has Mozart



and Beethoven. But de Tocqueville seems to be a special favorite of Lamb—there are also pictures of his chateau in France and many mementoes of the famous C-SPAN de Toqueville tour promotion.

It's hard to reconcile the dignified Brian Lamb as a teenage disc jockey in his native Lafayette, Indiana, but he was the host of *Dance Date* at the local station. Later he attended Purdue University, served in the Navy on White House and Pentagon duty in public affairs, published a newsletter called *The Media Report* and covered communications issues for *CableVision Magazine*. From that vantage point, the idea for a public network like C-SPAN emerged and he found willing backers within the cable industry . . . a fact for which he was and still is grateful.

Usually, as part of my interviews I ask the interviewee to give off-the-cuff opinions of TV personalities and TV shows. Brian is game to try but finds it impossible to make rash comments about anybody and tends to retreat to his own often-bland personal contact with the names mentioned. So, we abandon that and, instead, he is asked to react to words and comments about him and C-SPAN, the idea being to see if he is accurately defined by others. He likes that much more and most of the interview is comprised of his thoughtful reactions to others' reaction to him and his organization.

For those not familiar with the history of C-SPAN, let's get the statistics out of the way right here: Twenty-year-old C-SPAN, short for Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network, is funded by cable television stations. Accessible to 97% of all cable subscribers, it is seen by more than 22 million Americans every week, 94% registered voters, 93% who say they voted in the last election. C-SPAN provides live gavel-to-gavel coverage of both houses of Congress as well as a wide variety of public-affairs programming,

ranging from National Press Club dinners to publishing industry events. But C-SPAN 1 and 2 are always there when Congress is in session. At night, there are replays of the sessions or tapes of other events which took place during the day, or live coverage of other events. There is also *About Books*, a weekend programming block devoted to books and the publishing industry. Mr. Lamb is the host of his own book-interview program, *Book Notes*, on C-SPAN. The organization has a staff of 260 and operates 40 cameras on a budget of around \$33 million.

Here is the official C-SPAN statement of mission: "To provide C-SPAN's audience access to the live gavel-to-gavel proceedings of the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, and to other forums where public policy is discussed, debated, and decided—all without editing, commentary or analysis and with a balanced presentation of points of view.

"To provide elected and appointed officials and others who would influence public policy a direct conduit to the audience without filtering or otherwise distorting their points of view.

"To provide the audience, through the call-in program, direct access to elected officials, other decision makers and journalists on a frequent and open basis.

"To employ production values that accurately convey the business of government rather than distract from it; and to conduct all other aspects of its operation consistent with these principles."

Brian Lamb is proud of the mission and proud of the organization he has built to carry out that mission. But every day he seems to be adding more missions. Behind his seemingly impenetrable mask of detachment, there is a passionate will to bring enlightenment to people ready to recognize it when they see it.

Forthright as he is in stating his gratitude to the cable industry for its foresight in setting up C-SPAN and its continuing

support, Lamb also makes it clear that he is not so naive that he doesn't recognize C-SPAN's public-relations value to cable.

Brian Lamb says that C-SPAN wants only to hold the mirror up to our government and our institutions. He doesn't ask for public funding . . . all he asks of us is that we take a look

Are you looking?

Following is the conversation with Brian Lamb. While the chronology has been changed here and there for reasons of continuity and there has been some editing due to space requirements, all answers are verbatim.



**Unger:** *You've been described as a man without an ego. Do you accept that?*

**Lamb:** Well, I think we all have an ego of some kind that drives you, but I've always tried not to let anything I am involved in affect the way I deal with people. I don't know how else to say this. I am not one who cares about money and fame, and so that helps. But there is nothing wrong about caring about both of those, it's just that I don't happen to have that.

**Unger:** *How would you categorize what you do? Are you a host, an anchor, a moderator, a CEO or just a boss man?*

**Lamb:** I don't consider myself a boss man, although people like to have bosses that they can trust and follow. I've learned that over the years. So, I am conscious of the fact that people want leaders, and I try to lead by setting an example. You know, getting up early, coming in early, staying late—those kind of things. And also I suspect people wouldn't doubt that I believe in what I do. I'm somewhat zealous about this product, and what our mission is.

**Unger:** *Do you consider yourself a journalist.*

**Lamb:** I consider myself a journalist. I consider myself to be a person who loves discovery and likes to ask questions, and likes to learn. And it's not a whole lot more complicated than that.

**Unger:** *Envision a world without C-SPAN, what would replace it, if anything?*

**Lamb:** If the world didn't have a C-SPAN today, I think you would find a lot more interest in creating the same concept on the Internet. And the Internet in many ways today generates the kind of copy that we got 20 years ago. People often forget that they have a lot around that does the same kind of thing, something like the Internet.

I know when we started, I was very careful to say, "Look, we're not going to bring you anything really new in television. It's all been done before by people who have been in it, but we have a different economic model, and probably can continue doing what we're doing for a long time, because we're unlike the commercial broadcasters—they eventually had to start making money." And as they found in their daily programming how to make money, a lot of the public service went by the way for the very reason that after you clear all the dust and the language that people use about what television is, it's a business.

Cable television caused a restructuring. Now people do what they come into the business to do instead of having to be all things to all people.

**Unger:** *Probably the greatest damage that 60 Minutes did was prove that news could be a moneymaker.*

**Lamb:** If you call that damage. I guess I'm not worried about what the news business does as long as there is plenty of opportunity on whatever delivery mechanism for places like this to grow.

And I think that if you look at the Internet, almost anything can happen there, and no one can control it...yet... which is

good. And as long as no one can control it, and as long you don't have to ask permission of some large corporate entity in New York City, you can create, you can dream, you can try your product out, and you can live or die in the marketplace, which is what it should have been in television from the very beginning.

**Unger:** *About your ambitions for C-SPAN. I know you would like to have C-SPAN 3 and 4 and 5 on cable regularly.*

**Lamb:** I am not as interested in 3, 4, and 5 as I am in continuing to offer alternative viewing opportunities for people who are interested in public affairs.

But the cost of all this has come way down. Our budget last year was \$30 million. It'd only cost a million to do another network, and another one and another one. And instead of being locked in a system, where there are only three or four or five, the opportunity to provide diversity within a niche would be a very positive situation. It's being blocked at the moment because of channel capacity, but someday all that will go away.

**Unger:** *You seem to be very much against the "must-carry" regulation.*

**Lamb:** Well, must-carry has meant that there are two different kinds of speakers within television. One is a speaker—talking in the words of the First Amendment—one is a speaker who gets a license from the government to operate over the air. The other is a speaker that delivers a programming entity via satellite, and in the case of "must-carry" over the air is first, and over satellite is second.

There is no other business that I know of that has this kind of two-tiered way of doing business. A newspaper would be truly strained because if you came via satellite or over microwave, you would have a better position than the newspaper. And I just never understood. It's very un-American to me.

**Unger:** *If you had unlimited funds, what would you do?*

**Lamb:** If I had unlimited funds—and this probably is not a smart thing to say—there's not a lot more that we would do than we do now. In other words, there is a better way of saying we are well-funded by this industry to do the limited kind of mission job that we have. If we had more funds, you would make your picture better; you would have more cameras in the field; you would have more networks that you could service, but the concept is affordable.

**Unger:** *How restricted are you by industry funding. Are there things you cannot do or would not do?*

**Lamb:** Industry funding is not a problem. The cable television industry has funded C-SPAN and its mission quite well. Anytime we really needed something that money can buy, the industry has supported it. And nobody there interferes with our editorial product.

**Unger:** *If you were free of restrictions by the House and the Senate, what would you do?*

**Lamb:** The only part of our programming day that is controlled by outsiders is those pictures we get from the House and the Senate. We had proposed back in the beginning of 1995 that we be allowed to put our own cameras in the House and the Senate. This would not dramatically change the way people look at what we do, but it would be a more honest picture of the House and the Senate.

Now those cameras are controlled in the House and Senate by staffs in each of those institutions. That's about all that would change. But members of Congress like control, politicians like control, and this one aspect of the media they are not going to give up. In addition to that, the only other major institution that we would cover is the Supreme Court. And

that does not seem like it's going to happen very quickly.

**Unger:** *Would you accept Federal funding?*

**Lamb:** As long as I'm here, we will take no funding whatsoever from any taxpayer other than through a subscription fee that we get from the cable business. In my opinion, getting money from a government to do media work is problematic.

**Unger:** *Why did you change the call-in phone lines from Republican, Democrat and Independent to Liberal, Conservative, moderate.*

**Lamb:** I am surprised that you didn't ask why did we change from East Coast to West Coast to Democrat, Republican and Independent because people have always been upset ever since we changed the lines from East and West to political.

The main reason we have changed the phone lines is to reflect better the political makeup of the United States. At first, it was at random, and over time we found that a certain political point of view was dominating the call-in part of it.

Everything about C-SPAN is balanced. We got into the business to present a balanced picture of what was going on in the country politically, and so it got more and more difficult to keep a balance when the phone lines weren't divided in some way. There is no right way to do this, but we're trying all kinds of different approaches to it, to make sure that the public can hear all different kinds of voices.

**Unger:** *Do you think you have many phonies calling in who say they are liberals, but are reactionaries who want to somehow give a bad name to the opposition?*

**Lamb:** Some of the most disappointing parts of this experience have been the number of people who will call in and moralize about politics, but then will have gotten to the phones by telling you

that they're from a place they are not, that they are part of a party that they are not, or that they come from a political point of view that they are not. That is just frustrating and it's disappointing.

**Unger:** *But is there any solution?*

**Lamb:** Yeah, the solution is—and we don't want to overemphasize this thing—is that you would have caller ID. But then you really are acting like some kind of a Gestapo. If it gets to that point, all the fun will have gone out of it. What every other call-in show does on television is screen. They screen the calls beyond where you are calling from. They ask a lot of questions to get a sense of where somebody is coming from.

**Unger:** *To keep the Howard Stern "crazies" off the air?*

**Lamb:** I don't even care about Howard Stern. That doesn't irritate me in the least. If people feel that strongly about Howard Stern, they can call up and do that thing. It's just that we try and reach a balance of some kind, so that people will be able to hear all the different points of view.

**Unger:** *Does C-SPAN have special plans for election coverage?*

**Lamb:** Nothing unusual that we haven't done before. What we tend to do in off-year elections is carry a lot of debates held out there in the states among the Senatorial, gubernatorial and some of the more interesting House races. We try to capture what is going on in the political system out there just as it happens.

We don't sponsor debates... our role is to hold the mirror up to what everybody else is doing.

**Unger:** *Would you clarify the difference between Book Notes and About Books?*

**Lamb:** *Book Notes* is separate and distinct... the beginning of our book focus, going on ten years now. *About Books* is under

two years old and it is a way to expand coverage of books. Not with more interviews but with author lectures, events, forums, etc. We added an additional five hours a week. . . . and that's on C-SPAN2. *Book Notes* is on Sunday nights on C-SPAN1 at 8 and 11 p.m. and will continue there.

Our new *Book TV* started on C-SPAN2... 48 hours of the weekend, starting at 8 a.m. Saturday morning and ending at 6a.m. Monday. There will be eight hours of fresh programming, repeated twice, focusing on non-fiction, serious books about government, politics, culture, more authors, more call-ins to let the audience get in on the discussions. We're even trying to get Oprah Winfrey on to talk about her book focus.

**Unger:** *I know that C-SPAN 1 covers the House whenever it is in session and other events in the evening; and C-SPAN 2 covers the Senate in the same way. But what is C-SPAN 3?*

**Lamb:** It is another station available to around a half million people, only a daytime service. Hopefully it is the beginning of another channel. It doesn't cost us a lot of money and allows us to program more daytime events . . . but there's no room out there.

**Unger:** *And radio?*

**Lamb:** We own WCSP-FM in Washington DC. It airs the same kind of programming you see on C-SPAN. Sometime in 2000 it will be going on a new national satellite radio service offering 100 Channels primarily to listeners in cars.

**Unger:** *How are decisions made as to what you cover and what your projects are?*

**Lamb:** Everything that we cover here is decided by our editorial board, which I'm not a part of. Our Vice President of Programming, Terry Murphy, is in charge of that group and they meet every day,

twice a day, look through all the different events and make a decision based on balance of what they covered in the past. And when it comes to projects like de Tocqueville, or Lincoln/Douglass, that's a complicated process and we get the whole company involved in it. In the case of the Toqueville project, we sent a whole bunch of people over to Paris, and throughout France to retrace the steps of Alexis de Tocqueville in his own country before deciding whether or not we should do it as a project. These are long, hard, complicated projects, and when we devote a whole network to retracing the steps of de Tocqueville, we want as many people as possible to be a part of that decision process.

**Unger:** *Are you inundated by PR people with ideas for coverage?*

**Lamb:** Our network can't possibly come close to handling the number of requests we have from people to cover their events. You might have as many as 80 to 100 choices a day, and only be able to cover ten of those.

**Unger:** *If some people or organization want to let you know about what they're doing, what is the procedure?*

**Lamb:** They definitely should not contact me personally. I want them to go through the editorial process and not have my name on it in any way. All they do is contact our assignment desk, tell them what's going on, and let the editorial board decide what they're going to cover. It's just like any other journalistic institution.

**Unger:** *Do you feel you're in competition with CNN?*

**Lamb:** The question really should be placed with them, because they're the ones who have to worry about audience numbers and eyeballs for advertisers. It is very importantly for us to be an alternative. If we are doing exactly the same thing

that other institutions are doing, we're making a mistake.

There's something that grew up in American television that said CBS, NBC and ABC all had to cover everything at the same time on the same day. And that seems to me to be a big mistake. And the only reason they have that kind of habit is that it grew out of early years because there were only three networks.

Now that there are 200 opportunities to watch television on satellite or cable systems, it seems a bit silly that every network should be covering the same thing at the same time. And I'm surprised at how often the the cable news networks—MSNBC, FOX and CNN—are covering the same event. My reaction when I see them all doing that is that we shouldn't be doing it. And often what we do here, though, is cover events that go on in the daytime when there are very few people watching television, and put them on videotape at night, so that people who are working every day have a chance to see these same events in their entirety. And that's the real service that we offer.

**Unger:** *How do you feel about National Public Radio?*

**Lamb:** Listen to it all the time; had a lot of NPR people on our shows from the very early days. They're very interesting guests. It's an important service.

**Unger:** *Would you like to be covering the Supreme Court?*

**Lamb:** We would love to cover it. We would carry all of their arguments. They only have about 80 a year, an hour long. It would be very easy for us to incorporate that in our main network, but there is absolutely no interest on the part of the Supreme Court to put themselves on television.

**Unger:** *Is there any way you could force the issue more?*

**Lamb:** You cannot force the issue. It's entirely the decision of the Court. It's a separate and distinct branch of Government and nobody else can tell them what to do.

**Unger:** *Would that be your Number One wish?*

**Lamb:** Only one of many that we'd like to do, including a lot more international coverage. We would like to show our audience on a daily basis some of the parliaments around the world and what they're dealing with, what the issues are. Seeing the Supreme Court on television isn't going to change anybody's life; it will add to your educational experience and your ability to understand how the system works, but it's not the most important thing in the world.

It's just a very important part of the separation of powers, and the checks and balances that we have in the United States, and the public ought to have the right to see it. It should be on television, and there is really no good excuse for the Supreme Court to keep television cameras out of their chambers, because it's not a criminal proceeding, it's an appellate process. And those arguments are just show-and-tell anyway because so many of the decisions are made on the briefs that the participants file in court in the first place.

## DEFINING BRIAN LAMB?

**Unger:** *Let me quote some things which have been written and spoken about you and C-SPAN. Do they define you? "Inhabits a murky space between government and journalism." I forget whether that was about you or C-SPAN.*

**Lamb:** They are talking about C-SPAN. Well, we can't even come close to being associated as a government or with government. It's just that we carry a lot of what government does, but most of what we do here is totally independent of the govern-

ment. Decisions reached here—85% of the decisions here—are where we will spend time. They are decisions that we make. We just decided along the way that we would carry the House and Senate as a public service, realizing that it has order, it has parliamentary procedure, it has two different sides usually represented in one way or the other, and that they are the elected representatives of the public, and the public has, in effect, the final say as to who stands up on their feet and talks. That seemed to be not much to give up for being able to go on and cover all the rest of the things that we do.

What is journalism? In some ways, C-SPAN is the purest form of journalism. People like to define it as where they sit in newsrooms, make editorial decisions, pass on what they find to be important or relevant. And that's exactly what we do here. We make decisions every day as to what events are going to be covered, what speeches, what hearings, and we just happen to put them on in their entirety, and allow the American people to watch, to be their own journalists, to decide what's important. It makes a lot of journalists mad when they think that the ability to filter and select what is important is no longer their responsibility.

I think anybody in this business today must relook at what they really are in a world that's changed dramatically in the last 20 years.

**Unger:** *That brings up "a public service which strangely belongs to the profit-making cable industry."*

**Lamb:** No one ever said that any kind of industry couldn't do a public service and many industries do public service work all the time that has nothing to do with television. An example would be the Hershey Foods Corporation: Milton Hershey, years ago created a trust that uses its profit to run the Milton Hershey School In Hershey, Pa. where thousands of needy

kids are brought in to be educated and have a home and eventually are sent out into the work world.

Cable television never was asked to do public service, unlike the broadcaster who is licensed and required, at least in the old days, to do public service. But the cable industry came along and said, "This sounds like something of value, both to us as an industry and to the country at large." So that's how you get C-SPAN doing a public service.

**Unger:** *If the C-SPAN ever lost the support of the cable industry, do you think the broadcasting industry might step in?*

**Lamb:** I would be very surprised if the broadcasting industry would step in to do C-SPAN . . .

**Unger:** *Broadcasters will not do the same material. There is no way they would ever cover the same things. I once talked to Grant Tinker about PBS. And he thought that because PBS was doing so much of what commercial broadcasting should be doing, it was up to broadcasters to support PBS.*

**Lamb:** PBS has become more and more commercial as the years have gone on. They do public service, but not a great deal of it. I think they would probably say the whole network was public service, but I think if you look back over their history, they do less and less public service than they have ever done. PBS had an opportunity to do what we do at C-SPAN 20 years ago, and turned it down. Didn't want to do it. Congress asked them to get involved in it, and they said no.

If the cable industry were ever to abandon us, and I suspect it will not happen, my guess is, more than anything else, that there would be a different kind of delivery system at some point along the way, and it might be the Internet where it would end up being covered.

But there is not in this country an overwhelming interest in things public service



or public affairs. Our polls show that, and you don't have to go to our polls; you just go to the election statistics of the last several years. Only about 48.9% of the American people voted in the '96 election. And only 36% of the people voted in the '94 off-year elections. So you're talking almost 60% of the American people who we know don't watch C-SPAN, and they don't vote. There is not an overwhelming amount of interest in things political and political affairs in this country. It's unfortunate and it's disappointing, but it's a fact, and it's a free country.

**Unger:** *"Brian Lamb: Mild as lamb's milk?"*

**Lamb:** Well, on a day-to-day basis, I am a fairly mild-mannered person. But I am somewhat passionate in what I believe in, and people who know me know that that's not a very honest characterization because I can get quite heated when I feel that people are implying the system is being unfair in letting people have their say-so. That will make me fairly enraged when I feel people's voices are being stifled.

**Unger:** *"Strives to keep himself free of bias and avoid the cult of personality."*

**Lamb:** It's been kind of a subtext to what we do in C-SPAN, and I'll admit to setting out to prove that television journalism does not have to revolve around a personality. I've never quite understood, in a business that was supposed to be a public service, how it became so personality-oriented. But it did. And we have been able at C-SPAN so far to avoid that. But even when you avoid it, you begin being called a personality because you are avoiding it. So, it's a very frustrating thing that you can't just keep human beings and their particular points of view or personalities out of it, but that's human nature.

**Unger:** *Well, that brings up the next quote: "If C-SPAN is like anything, it's most like*

*Lamb."*

**Lamb:** I think what we do here reflects a certain kind of thinking in the United States that I might reflect, and that's hard to put your finger on. The people that watch us the most and use us the most all have the same basic approach to the way we do things: they like the fairness of the place; they like the lack of political side-taking; they like the opportunity to hear other voices; and there are lots of people in the country that feel that way. A lot of those people, by the way, are in journalism in the commercial television business.

They realize how we are the alternative, and by us being here, that allows them to go on and do whatever they want to do. I think that's the proper mix.

**Unger:** *Here's a nasty, but amusing one: "An electronic elder-care center."*

**Lamb:** Totally misrepresentative of the audience! A lot of wonderful elderly people spend lots of time with this network. And as my father, who is deceased, said to me many times: "In order to watch C-SPAN and enjoy it, you've gotta have time."

But every single poll we've taken shows us that over 70% of our viewership is under 50 years old. And what people hear often are older voices on our call-in shows in the morning because they are folks who might not have to go to work. But I think it's an insult by a journalist or a feature writer to call it an elder-care center as if that's wrong, as if that's a negative, as if that's a slam. Whoever wrote that, some day will be glad to be alive and glad to have an opportunity to think for themselves, and have a place to go be stimulated.

**Unger:** *"C-SPAN does not compete with anyone."*

**Lamb:** We don't compete in the way everybody else does—eyeballs for advertisers. And again, that's the way our

system has evolved and I find that to be fine.

We compete for channel space at the moment. There will come a day when we won't even do that, because there will be enough channel space there for everyone. That's not in the foreseeable future, it's in the distant future. And that's why I keep referring to the fact that on the Internet, anybody can speak.

And we speak on the Internet, too. Our cable channels are on the Internet—the video and the audio.

**Unger:** *"In person, Lamb is affable, engaging and opinionated; on air a mask of detachment."*

**Lamb:** I'm strongly opinionated not necessarily about politics, but about a lot of things. I mean, I have strong views, and I don't mind telling you my views as long as the population at large doesn't have to sit and listen to them.

If you tune into C-SPAN and you see our hosts here, and you say things like "Why don't they be quiet!" "Why don't they get out of the way!" "Why don't they stop giving their opinions!" then we're not doing our job.

**Unger:** *Would cable people like to take your channels back?*

**Lamb:** Oh no. I tell you, and I want to make it clear, that most people that I deal with in the cable business love what we have done together. They are proud of this channel, and in a long run, I think will stick by it for a long time.

There are people always in any industry that the only motivation in their life is making money, and those are the kind of people that would like to get rid of us, but the percentage of people like that is few.

**Unger:** *"C-SPAN is journalism in the raw, with a certain Zen quality" and "Is C-SPAN really journalism. It rejects editing and analyzing."*

**Lamb:** Well, in the second part, we don't reject analyzing by others—we have our callers that analyze, and our guests at the set that analyze. We reject our own C-SPAN employees from analyzing.

The Zen-like quality of it is a writer's view. A viewer who is sitting and watching the difference between what we do and what everybody else does will see a dramatic difference between what you see on C-SPAN and every other channel. We don't move very fast; we don't have lots of music; we don't promote heavily. There's definitely a different feeling, a physical feeling to watching C-SPAN and every other channel on your television set, and that's where that Zen business comes from.

**Unger:** *"C-SPAN is communicating what government is all about."*

**Lamb:** It's communicating what Government is doing. It's also communicating what ideas are being discussed because I like to say that we're an ongoing political conversation. It never stops; it's always substantive and it's always about ideas and it's always people other than our people that are doing the discussing.

**Unger:** *"No other network has done so little to call attention to itself."*

**Lamb:** Yes, and unfortunately, that's true in today's modern time which makes you your own worst enemy. In recent years we have started trying to call attention to ourselves more and more by spending more and more money on advertising. We're always competing for channel capacity, and if people don't know you're there and don't understand what your mission is, and don't understand your relevancy, then you may someday wake up and not matter.

**Unger:** *"C-SPAN watchers are the kind of people who give money to politicians they like, send angry mailgrams to ones they*

*don't like."*

**Lamb:** C-SPAN viewers are voters—close to 95% of our viewers vote. I think that says it all in a society where only about a third of the people vote in off-year elections, and less than half the people vote in the Presidential elections. This is a committed, involved, voting audience,

**Unger:** *"Brian Lamb is monkish."*

**Lamb:** I think that's the view of people who watch me on the screen, because I don't—it's not always—but I often don't show much personality.

**Unger:** *"He refuses to convey the slightest hint of his own views, or whether he has any."*

**Lamb:** That is true up to a point. I think if you watched me over the last 20 years, you get some sense what I will say, what this place is about, and what we're about. There are certain characteristics about me that you can't shield from the audience.

I have a certain look to me; I come from a certain part of the country. I come from an Irish background—all these little things. And that all adds up to some kind of a profile. But it really is a goal of mine and everybody else that works here, that you don't get any sense of what we think politically.

I've watched other hosts here, and I have no idea where they are coming from. I don't know what they think, I don't know who they wrote for, and I think that we've been fairly successful in doing that. That seems almost to be too big an issue. Sometimes I want to say to people: "Well, if we all of a sudden gave you what our views were, would that make you happy?"

**Unger:** *If you were going to call in to C-SPAN, which line would you call in on—liberal, conservative, moderate?*

**Lamb:** Well, I wouldn't call, first of all.

**Unger:** *That was a tricky question.*

**Lamb:** It was a good question, too! I wouldn't call on any of those lines. I wouldn't, as long as I'm here, designate one of those lines as something I would call in on. And I think that in actuality, if I were to answer that question, I think I could answer it and still not indicate one way or the other. I think I would probably end up on all three lines at any given time—depending on the issue, the day, all that stuff. I could definitely see myself calling in on any of those phone lines.

**Unger:** *"Never challenges people."*

**Lamb:** I ask a question two or three times to see if somebody really wants to avoid answering it, and then eventually give up. I will give up because it's obvious to the audience what the person is doing, but it's not my philosophy to challenge somebody.

**Unger:** *"Chatty and Unflappable."*

**Lamb:** I do like to talk with folks, but am not unflappable. Have flapped from time to time on the air, mostly over someone who accuses us of being unfair. Of all the things that can get the hair on the back of my head standing up is to say that this network is unfair, or that we are treating somebody wrongly.

**Unger:** *"C-SPAN is astonishingly inexpensive by cable and broadcasting standards."*

**Lamb:** Everything about this network is inexpensive. Inexpensive relative to everything else done in television. Is it inexpensive relating to other industries? In many cases, everything here is more expensive than others, but not as it relates to television.

**Unger:** *"Lamb has withdrawn from day-to-day management decisions."*

**Lamb:** Well, better stated, I have withdrawn from day-to-day editorial decisions. We have two very competent chief operating officers here, who have been asked to

run the company on a day-to-day basis. And they are now experienced, judicious, measured; they believe entirely in our mission and philosophy. And I felt some years ago that if I was going to be a good CEO, I'd get out of their way.

**Unger:** *You've said: 'If I walk out of here tomorrow, the place would survive.'* ”

**Lamb:** If I walk out of here tomorrow, the place will not only survive I think you will not notice any change other than those people who saw me do air work from time to time. And most people watch this network, not for any of our interviews, but because they are going to see events happens; they are going to see them in their entirety, and if that ever went away, then you would find revolt by the audience.

**Unger:** *C-SPAN has helped ease out of power a generation of American politicians whose gift for TV was limited to delivering prepared speeches.* ”

**Lamb:** I think that there's been a huge sea change in the country, but that happens every so many years. Probably more than anything else what's changed in politics is not that C-SPAN has been added as much as power has been defused, and that the public no longer gets all its news from three commercial television networks.

They don't get their viewing from three commercial television networks, and we are now a much more decentralized country when it comes to viewing habits. And that has had a much greater impact on the body politic than anybody has ever thought of, or measured.

**Unger:** *“C-SPAN—the electronic Town Hall.”*

**Lamb:** I completely accept that characterization. I think it would be more interesting if more people participated in it.

**Unger:** *“Lamb never utters his own name*

*on air.”*

**Lamb:** That's true. And it's not really as big a deal as it sounds, it's just that we don't introduce any of our hosts by their names; we superimpose their name on the screen. We'll never see something like, “This is Art Unger and I'll see you tomorrow.” It's just not what we do. We're not trying to build personalities. When you are trying to depersonalize it, you do all kinds of things that every other form of television communicator would never think of doing, because they are trying to personalize. They are trying to make someone famous and interesting, and someone that people will come watch; and we're trying to do the opposite. We're trying to give you events, tie it together, act as glue, keep it all moving in a certain direction without becoming the reason why you tune us in.

**Unger:** *“Members of Congress really don't want to be seen and heard like they really are.”*

**Lamb:** We allow politicians to speak back to their constituents unfiltered. They like that, especially in their early years. As time goes by, they begin to play in a different league. The longer they're here and they become committee chairpersons, then they begin to play in the personality-based information shows. And they become less and less enamored by what we do. But every single time that there's an issue that nobody else is paying attention to, and we're the only place that they can get the word out, we become valuable to them. They have kind of a strange relationship to what we do. And as time goes by, control means everything to a member of Congress. And we do not guarantee them that they can control their image, because as they go through their daily lives, we're there a lot, picking up what they do, not in a 30-second sound bite environment.

So it gives that 10% in the society that's

interested in every day's activities as far as government's concerned, a chance to be there and be involved, and to not miss much. And people living far away from Washington can be every bit as much informed as people who live and work in this town—and in many cases, more informed.

**Unger:** *"Book Notes is one of the best things that happened to the world of books in this decade."*

**Lamb:** It might be one of the best things that's happened to the book on television. The best thing that happens to some of the books in the last ten years, if I were to judge it, would be the proliferation of titles—the increasingly sophisticated way of printing, the ability to distribute books faster, to have more book-store outlets. And I think our only role in that is that we've added television to that, and we're not the only ones in this society that have. We've probably done more on television for the serious book, than any place in the media.

**Unger:** *The intent of C-SPAN, although Lamb doesn't boast about it, is to educate."*

**Lamb:** Well, I can only tell you my own personal experience about being around this network is that you can't possibly not learn as you watch it, as you are involved in it. And I think that the overwhelming function of a network is to inform and to teach. And I don't mean that we personally teach, but having it available is a great teaching tool. or a learning tool—any way you look at it.

**Unger:** *"The Mr. Rogers of grown-up TV."*

**Lamb:** I don't think so. Mr. Rogers is in fact a real teacher, has been over the years. What I do more than anything else is question.

**Unger:** *"One of the last outposts of civilized conversation."*

**Lamb:** Well, there's a lot of civilized conversation on radio. Radio has been a very important medium in this country. A lot of it I don't personally like, but again there is choice there.

It's going to get better in radio when they go next year to satellite radio, and you're going to be able to hear another 100 channels on the satellite in your car or at home. And we're going to be up there with our radio station.

I think that one of the things that we do many days is be very civilized. But the nature of debate and all sometimes makes it uncivil, so people would view what we do is allowing politicians to be very uncivil. But civility is in the eye of the beholder, and a great deal depends on what year you're talking about—whether it's 1998 or you can go back to the year 1828, and you can find that people back in those 1800s were a lot less civil than they are today. But people think that this is one of the more uncivil times in history.

**Unger:** *"C-SPAN—a democratizing force for journalists."*

**Lamb:** I like that characterization, and I think it's true. A journalist, first and foremost, is inquisitive. Secondly, he always wants to be part of an event. I've always felt that that's half of it. You get to go and see it for yourself. And then thirdly, you get to pull from whatever you've seen what you think is important and pass it on. That's the kick of it all.

You put your name on it, and people come up to you and they say, "Gee, what was it really like while you were there? What happened that we didn't see?" and "What happened that you didn't tell us about?"

So, today, if you live anywhere in the United States and some overseas, you can watch all kinds of political events that journalists appear at and then report on, and you can have the same experience. There are a lot of people besides journal-

ists who watch our network and are every bit as plugged in as a lot of journalists used to be 20 years ago.

**Unger:** *"A precarious status as a charitable gesture of an industry in perennial need of profits."*

**Lamb:** Not a bad characterization. It's seems like we never quite get our sea legs, although our finances have never been in jeopardy, and we survive every crisis that comes along in one form or another, although not perfectly. In the years of our existence—over 20 years—we have been dropped or cut back more than any other network that ever tried to get in the business. But 20 years later, we're here, and our books are balanced, and we have money in the bank, and we are functioning daily with 260 employees with a \$33 million budget, and so, I guess it's just the nature of the beast.

The industry has changed dramatically, but it also has been very successful. After the prediction of the 1992 Telecommunications Act that everything was going to change dramatically, here we are a few years later, and the business has never been stronger. We're tested more though, than any other entity in the programming business.

**Unger:** *"... Lets the viewer dangle without any direction, while pretending to help."*

**Lamb:** Well, that's an interesting way of looking at what in effect is an opportunity for the viewers to make up their own mind, and to figure out the right answer on their terms instead of a journalist's terms.

I mean what is right and wrong? What is up and down? And here, we don't help you make that decision other than show you the event, and you have to decide for yourself. And people have a lot of fun, and a lot of good experience doing it on their own.

**Unger:** *"Leans left, leans right."*

**Lamb:** We don't lean in any direction. Unfortunately, for a lot of people, we lean establishment. And because we cover so much of the Government establishment, we tend to reinforce the establishment, but having said that, you'll find more diverse views here, than any one single place in American media. You can find them way over on the left and way over on the right—the libertarians, the Greens, the taxpayer parties are all represented. The Natural Law party gets more space here than anyplace else in American media.

**Unger:** *That brings up "never tells anybody to shut up, even when they deserve it."*

**Lamb:** I'll buy that.

**Unger:** *"Shipwrecks viewers in the polluted sea without a lifeboat."*

**Lamb:** I'm not sure what that means. I think sometimes writers try a little bit too hard to characterize what we are. The problem is, all these writers are trying to write about us as we relate to what other television entities have done in the last 50 years. And that is like trying to talk about the Internet and relate it to anything that's ever happened in the past, and trying to apply rules to the Internet that you might have applied to radio or television, or newspapers, or magazines.

**Unger:** *"Smug and self-satisfied." You see, I get to repeat all kinds of insulting things.*

**Lamb:** I think that might come from the appearance rather than the actuality because in fact, if you're part of a non-profit television entity like C-SPAN, it's very hard to become self-satisfied because you're never quite fully accepted in a society where money is everything.

And "smug" I don't understand. I don't consider myself to be either one of those. But you know, there are three different images that one has in life. One is who

you think you are: another is who the person looking at you thinks you are, and the third is what you really are. And so, depending on how you're looking at it at any given time is what you see, and I can only say that if someone thinks I'm self-satisfied, they don't understand me. If they think I'm smug, I apologize.

**Unger:** *"Can easily be used by powerful Congressmen to serve their own questionable purposes."*

**Lamb:** Anybody in the system can easily be used by a special interest group to satisfy their own desires, can easily be used by a viewer to find an answer to a question that makes them feel good, can easily be used by a journalist to make him as informed as anybody in the system. And you can apply any kind of a definition on this network if you want to, because it's no frills, it's as it happens, it's not up to anything other than what you see. That's what's frustrating in a telecommunications system that is driven by the bottom line and an earnings-per-share for a stockholder.

**Unger:** *"In the long run, C-SPAN will need non-reversible subsidies to maintain real independence."*

**Lamb:** I doubt that. In the long run, we might need a different system of underwriting or financing, unless the whole business changes dramatically—and there's no evidence right now that it will.

Our cost is enough below our value that the financial part of what we do is not a threat. That's what we're always watching. If we spend more money a year operating than people think we're worth, then they'll start to question, and they'll start to lose interest. But we have so far avoided that.

**Unger:** *"Because he is shy, people see him as eccentric."*

**Lamb:** I am not shy. I'm an extrovert of some sorts. I don't consider myself overly

social. I'm only eccentric to someone who doesn't live like I do.

You know this is a society where most people are married; I'm single.

This is a society where you usually declare your views, and everybody knows what party you belong to and what you think; I stay neutral.

This is an industry where personalities are what people favor; I'm trying not to be a personality. So that might make me more eccentric in image than I am in fact.

**Unger:** *"C-SPAN is what TV would look like if you took profit out of it."*

**Lamb:** Or, you could also say, we are what TV would look like if people who dreamed about the public-service aspect of it could have their say. But TV is a business. It is a for-profit business. And we, interestingly enough, in a for-profit world, are a philanthropic, of sorts, offshoot.

If you leave the American business persons up to their own instincts, they will do philanthropic things. It's when you force them to do things that they will fight you. That's why Government mandating this kind of a place will lead to nothing but people's rejection, rather than people's acceptance.

**Unger:** *Here are two comments about Book Notes, one positive and one negative. The positive: "Long before our business discovered reading and the mass market for books, a man deserving of a special kind of journalism that let writers talk, and talk, and talk, with little or no interruption appeared on C-SPAN."*

*The negative is: Writers never talk about their creative process, just about the physical side of work.*

**Lamb:** Well, first of all, Oprah Winfrey has done a terrific thing by getting involved with books. We're in two different worlds, and she deserves an enormous amount of credit, which she gets for stimulating her audience to read and becoming

involved with the printed word.

*Book Notes* is a very simple program with a simple mission. It's like anything that television does, subject to analysis. But what you see is what you get.

It was never meant to be anything more than authors who had written hardback books, non-fiction, talking about what they'd done. And it's a learning experience.

**Unger:** *"C-SPAN has three roles. It informs the general public, informs other media, and informs the political process itself."*

**Lamb:** I think that the word "inform" is a good one. I think it was Woodrow Wilson who said, "Half of Congress's responsibility to the democracy is the informing function."

If he was accurate, then our role is a very important part of that whole process. For those who want information, and who want to understand how it works, we are, the echo for informing yourself as to what's going on here.

You need more. You can't get it all here. You can't even come close to getting it all here, and the person that says "This is truth" on C-Span is making a mistake.

Truth is somewhere among the commercial, over-the-air-television networks, the cable channels, CNN, CNBC, MSNBC, Fox News, the newspaper of the day, the newspaper of the weekly magazine, the specialist trade publications, the radio talk shows, the newscasts on the evening news whether it be radio or television, the newsletters, and us. It's somewhere in that mix. It's not in any one place, and people make a big mistake by concluding that any one of us is Truth.

## BRIAN ON BRIAN

**Unger:** *Would you say you are a happy person?*

**Lamb:** Yeah, on most days, I am happy to be doing what I'm doing. I never realized

how difficult this kind of a project would be. I thought after 20 years we wouldn't still be fighting for our right to exist; that we wouldn't be constantly competing, not for channel capacity, but for the right to be treated equally with others.

I think that that's the most frustrating part of this work. There are days when I say: "Why don't you just let us do our job and stop interfering with our ability to be a First Amendment speaker. And stop creating two classes of speakers: the over-the-air broadcaster and the cable channel. And that is more frustrating to me as a person that it should be.

But on a day-to-day basis, I'm happy. I've been healthy, we've had a relatively successful run here, and I guess the answer to the question is: "yes."

**Unger:** *Is there any television show that you schedule in your life, that you stay home to watch?*

**Lamb:** I watch Don Imus a lot in the morning on MSNBC. We had an earlier experience with him when we simulcast his show back in 1993, '94, and '95 in the early days of the whole idea of simulcasting radio shows. We started with Larry King back in 1980.

I will watch a lot of different shows when I'm around, but it's not that I have to watch them—*Crossfire*, the Sunday shows on the weekend. Our radio station in Washington carries all of the five weekend network television shows on radio starting at noon and going to 4:30 in the afternoon. It's the only place it's been done in the history of broadcast radio and television.

I'm an information junky. I watch a lot of overnight television. I get up early. I watch all the networks' overnight stuff. I'm more likely to see 3:30 AM network television show than I am the evening news show.

**Unger:** *Does that mean that you don't*



sleep well.

**Lamb:** No, I go to bed early.

**Unger:** *You go to bed early, wake up early, you listen to news programs, you come here and work. Do you have a life outside?*

**Lamb:** Oh, yeah. The story of my life is friends. I spend a lot of time with lots of friends, and that's what it all boils down to—friends and family. I have a brother and his kids, and I have some family in the Washington area.

My other life is not very complicated. I like doing nothing more than just being around people that I know well, and I don't have to worry about what I'm saying, and all that. That's what my life is all about. I'm not a big skier, I don't play a lot of sports. But I read a lot of books. I do a lot of traveling with the job, and I meet a lot of interesting people in this job, and so when a week is over, I'm looking forward to being around people I know very well, and don't have to worry about anything but just being one of them.

**Unger:** *What do you think is the most important thing you've said here? The one thing to come out of this interview that you would like to focus on?*

**Lamb:** Well, I would hope that people would have a better perspective. There tends to be a lot of misunderstandings about what we are, and how we got here, and who supports us, and what it takes to be successful in an organization like this.

I guess that I would hope that over the period of the last hour or so, that people would have a better understanding of what our philosophy is, how we stay in business, what our motive are.

One of the biggest frustrations for people is that they get disappointed; they have bigger expectations than are realized in the end. And I just hope that people see that this is a no-frills project. I think we are here out of the goodness of our business executives who get very little credit for

doing something like this. It's always been part of my frustration that people don't think people in business do anything right, anything good . . .

**Unger:** *Are you talking about the broadcast business or the cable industry?*

**Lamb:** The cable business. Over-the-air broadcasters have been given a lot of credit for doing great journalism. It's a business that loves to tell each other how great they are. And the cable business has been criticized a lot. In my opinion, the individuals who made this kind of a place happen in an atmosphere where it wasn't required by law, that there's no taxpayer money involved in it, has not really ever been given the kind of credit that's necessary for people to keep going in things like C-SPAN. If you do philanthropic works, and people don't give you a pat on the back from time to time, you look around and say, "well obviously, nobody cares." It's been a very interesting 20-year learning experience as to what really matters in American media.

**Unger:** *As an important public-service cablecaster, do you have any advice for commercial broadcasters?*

**Lamb:** No, I think broadcasters, as always, are going to do what they have to do in order to keep their companies solvent and profitable. And the last thing they want to hear is advice from me. ■

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**During many years of covering television for *The Christian Science Monitor*, Arthur Unger won national recognition as one of television's most influential critics as well as for his revealing interviews with theater, movie and TV personalities. He is now preparing a book of memoirs. The Arthur Unger Collection of 1,200 audio tapes is now housed at the Performing Arts Branch of the N.Y. Public Library and at The Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University, New York. All interviews including this one, will be available for listening shortly.**



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# The Man and His Message

## Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding. A Biography.

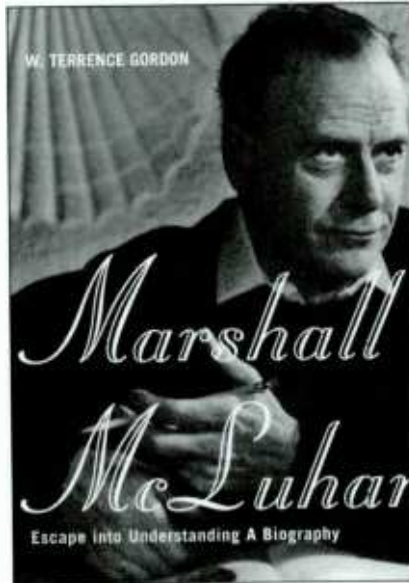
by W. Terrence Gordon  
New York: Basic Books, 1997.

By Michael Real

The best know and most controversial media theorist of the twentieth century was, without question, Herbert Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian professor of literature who became himself a major icon of the popular culture he probed so vigorously.

His original sayings are part of the folklore of our time. "The global village." "The medium is the message." "Hot or cool media." "Print vs. electronic culture." Even generic phrases like "the media age" or "electronic culture" became current largely because of McLuhan's probes and prominence.

No one before McLuhan had so enthusiastically questioned the scale of change brought about by the expansion of new media in the middle of the twentieth century. The first mention of McLuhan that I heard was from a professor of literature who remarked in the early 1960s, "This McLuhan claims that the changes underway today are much more revolu-



tionary than anyone realizes."

A new authorized biography recalls the insights and influence of Marshall McLuhan around themes central to the lives of most readers of *Television Quarterly*. What is the place of media, especially television, in creating the lives we live today? To what future is our current technology carrying us? How do we process media experience, and how does it process us?

In his new book, W. Terrence Gordon, a professor of literature at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, chronicles the curious story of how McLuhan's name became interchangeable with all the qualities and controversies of contemporary life. When Goldie Hawn impishly giggled "Watcha Doin Marshall McLuhan" on *Laugh-In* or when Woody Allen hauled Marshall McLuhan from behind a movie sign to shut up a pretentious blowhard in *Annie Hall*, no one in the popular culture audience failed to

## Review & Comment

recognize the name of the anointed prophet of the newly-recognized media age.

In completing his doctorate at Cambridge University in 1944 as an ambitious naif from the provinces, McLuhan's hyperactive mind found its focus. Gordon's exhaustively researched biography notes how McLuhan learned at Cambridge to question the many layers of meaning and evocation present in cultural products, most properly, English literature masterpieces.

Within a few years, engrossed in teaching and writing about the intellectual and interpretive challenges of Poe, Joyce and Shakespeare, McLuhan nevertheless hungered for a larger public impact. Moving among teaching assignments in the United States and Canada, he began examining everything from the comic pages' Dagwood—to him the epitome of the loss of masculinity in a somnabulent society—to Superman, Tarzan, Li'l Abner, advertising, and the culture and technology that produced these revealing types.

McLuhan's first book circulated through many long drafts under the working title "Guide to Chaos" and was finally published in 1951 as *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*. He railed against the mechanization of life even as he consciously attempted (but often failed) to avoid value judgements: "Know-how and technology isolate man at work and play . . . By making each cell (home, hotel, blonde, car) in the world exactly alike, technological man manages to create the illusion of being at home everywhere and with everybody. At the same time he has created a bright and salubrious hell from which, as Sartre noted, there is 'No Exit'."

Trying to deal with the problem of supporting his six children on a professor's salary, McLuhan in 1956 created Idea

Consultants to capitalize on his many ideas for products such as bandages on an adhesive-tape dispenser ("Peel-Aid"); talking letters via plastic records; even a promotional device for displaying *Life* magazine, a publication he had excoriated in *The Mechanical Bride*. He made nothing from Idea Consultants.

While he maintained a lively correspondence with Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, David Riesman, and other leading intellectuals, in 1957 McLuhan also developed a proposal for a Broadway show as a vehicle for reducing American-Russian Cold War tensions. It was never scripted or produced.

Instead, it was his "cresting enthusiasm over media studies," as Gordon notes, that brought McLuhan to public attention and made him the successful and recognized thinker that McLuhan knew from the start he deserved to become.

By the time *The Gutenberg Galaxy* appeared in 1962 and *Understanding Media* in 1964, McLuhan had centered his attention on how media and technology shape human consciousness and society. Eager to provoke his readers, as well as to shed light on the most prominent ideas and trends in society, McLuhan would remark after developing a bold metaphor or provocative connection, "Ha! This will really get them."

McLuhan's major achievements were fueled by a multi-year Ford Foundation grant in 1953 that led to the historic collaborations of *Explorations in Communication*, by a grant from the National Association of Educational Broadcasters in 1959, and by the establishment of his Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto in 1964.

Prior to McLuhan, thinking about mass communication was polarized between behavioral effects research and mass soci-

## Review & Comment

ety critiques. McLuhan threw open the doors of media understanding by connecting changes from oral to print to electronic media with every aspect of personal and social life throughout human history. Who today doesn't sense that the Internet is more than a new message system: that it is shifting ways that people interact, information they relate to, their sense of belonging to groups and the world. McLuhan would have a field day with the World Wide Web as another dimension of his emerging global village.

As *Understanding Media* passed 100,000 in sales, it was clear that McLuhan's sharpened "mosaic" method was striking a responsive chord. He recommended dealing with information overload by searching for pattern recognition. He also insisted that forms of media and all technology are more than mere instruments for message transmission or labor saving devices.

For McLuhan, a medium is *any* technology, an "extension of the human being." The wheel extends the foot, clothing extends the skin, the book extends the eye, the radio extends the ear. We shape technology and then it shapes us.

Vaulting right past the debates over media violence or sex or lowbrow content, McLuhan argued that the medium itself is far more profoundly influential than any particular content it might convey. The book shifted sensory perception from the ear (oral culture) to the eye (print culture) and led to linear reasoning, bureaucratic social organization, and even far-flung European colonial empires. With broadcasting (electronic culture) the full range of sensory perception was rediscovered, creating in-depth wrap-around awareness of tribal membership, compellingly emotional Dionysian music, and other right brain functions to complement the

left hemisphere activities of language and rationality.

For McLuhan, media influence how we experience the world, how we interact with each other, and how we use our physical sense. But because a new medium does not actually replace a previous medium—instead it interacts with and complicates the older media—the specific influence of a new medium can be difficult to detect.

The complexity and confusion of contemporary life inspired rather than intimidated the esoteric academic from the North. Gordon notes how from his earliest undergraduate years in Winnipeg, Manitoba, McLuhan enjoyed sailing and was captivated by Edgar Allan Poe's story "A Descent into the Maelstrom." He would cite the story many times in his writings and lectures.

In the story, three brothers are caught in a huge, dreaded whirlpool in the Arctic Ocean. Two perish, but one, fascinated by the patterns in the great funnel, detects a strategy for survival, lashes himself to a barrel, and actually rides a selected portion of the wild forces through and out of the maelstrom.

It was exactly this "pattern recognition" rather than empirical research or sequential reasoning that McLuhan employed to understand media today and to discover its true threats and promises. But, because he made "probes" and sought to discover unsuspected connections, his work was often a jumble of failed speculation and unverifiable claims, together with amazing insights. This gave rise to polarized reactions; the pop guru was suspected of McLunacey.

McLuhan's controversial star rose in the 1960s until 1967 was "The Year of McLuhan." He was the keynote speaker for national and international meetings of

## Review & Comment

advertisers, marketers, writers, telecommunicators, broadcasters, academics, and all forms of business. He was the subject of an NBC television special, he collected honorary doctorates, he was offered generous book contracts. His writings became bestsellers in Japan, and Fordham University brought him to the U.S. for the year.

But McLuhan's health also began to deteriorate in 1967. Long subject to occasional unexplained blackouts, he was forced to undergo surgery to remove a brain tumor; the operation was scheduled for five hours but took 21 hours. It was successful and for another decade McLuhan thrived as a lecturer, writer, and controversial but much sought-after consultant.

In 1976 a mild heart attack slowed him only briefly, but on September 26, 1979, a massive stroke left him a speechless aphasic never able to utter more than a single word at a time and that with effort, sometimes accented with evidence of his always enthusiastic mind in an "Oh, boy, oh, boy, oh, boy." He died in his sleep on the last day of 1980 at the age of 69.

This authorized biography by W. Terrence Gordon does more than remind us of an intriguing media theorist. It also recalls how momentous are the changes surrounding us today and how deeply we need those like Poe's sailor McLuhan, a seer able to make sense of the chaos and point ways through it. Are globalization and media proliferation moving us in constructive directions? And with what unidentified consequences?

Gordon's book is too be heartily recommended. It is meticulously researched and effectively presented. But it is not without weaknesses. It carefully traces the intellectual influences on and development of

Marshall McLuhan, but it spends little time on the larger context of civil rights struggles, counter-cultures, anti-war movements, internationalization of media, and more that made the 1960s and 1970s uniquely confusing and suggestive of McLuhan's probes.

More disappointing is the final chapter, a speculative debate, "Is McLuhan a Linguist?" Unless you're a linguist, skip it and the too idiosyncratic chapter preceding it, "McLuhan's Legacy." Philip Marchand's excellent 1989 work *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* is less definitive biographically but is in many ways superior intellectually and receives not even a citation in this new work.

Despite any shortcomings, however, Gordon's 298 pages of biography, accompanied by eight pages of pictures, will be a major force in forever fixing the life and work of Marshall McLuhan in our memories.

We seem on the verge of a major McLuhan revival, one in which his insights will be separated from his mistakes far more effectively than he ever managed himself. Grab any of the new materials becoming available, including those from Marshall's son, Eric McLuhan, or some of the classics. (My favorite is the 1968 *Playboy* interview which may be the best single overview of McLuhan's principle themes.) And immerse yourself in that "escape into understanding" (the subtitle of Gordon's book) of media, messages, sensory space, technology, resonance, and interconnections that made Marshall McLuhan's a name to be reckoned with and a mind to be grateful for. ■

**Michael Real** is Director of the School of Communication at San Diego State University. His most recent book is *Exploring Media Culture*.



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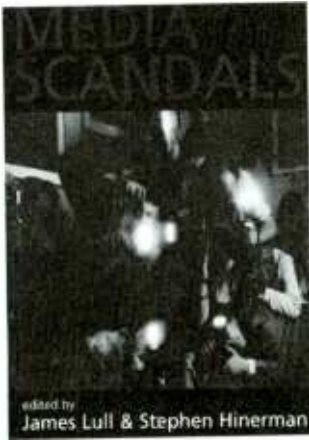
# Review & Comment: Books in Brief

By Fritz Jacobi

## Media Scandals: Morality and Desire in the Popular Culture Marketplace

Edited by James Lull and Stephen Hinerman  
Columbia University Press, New York

With one or two glaring exceptions, this sociological study by academics, edited by two San Jose (California) State University communications professors, is mercifully free of academic jargon. The editors note that the media "not only have the ability to ignite and fuel scandals, they can also relativize, downgrade and extinguish them." John Thompson, a Cambridge (England) sociologist, whose contribution includes some delightfully juicy footnotes, posits that "scandals can have a corrosive impact on the forms of trust which underpin social relations and institutions."



Longer on analysis and dissection than it is on prescription or recommendation, *Media Scandals* nonetheless adds to our store of wisdom with such insights as those of anthropologist S. Elizabeth Bird, who notes that "Media scandals . . . often are making an overarching statement about right and wrong . . . The Hugh Grant story [about his being caught in a limousine with a prostitute] was so huge because it was both excessive and incongruous."

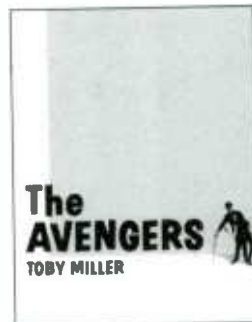
What makes this book worth the price of admission is an essay by Laura Grindstaff, a sociologist (who doesn't write like one) at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. She takes us behind the scenes at a couple of daytime television talk shows where she worked as an intern. She equates the climax of these shows (one of which is clearly Jerry Springer's under a pseudonym) with the "money shot" in a pornographic film. "Like pornography," Professor Grindstaff writes, "daytime talk is a 'scandalous' discourse with a bad reputation in which people display their private parts in public."

## The Avengers

By Toby Miller

British Film Institute, distributed by University of Indiana Press, Bloomington

There should be a special circle in Hell reserved for writers who use the words "deconstructing" and "post-modern" more than once in every 20 pages of text. In this heavily illustrated, elegantly produced, frequently entertaining paperback, an Australian/British pop culture and media critic who teaches at New York University uses scholarly criteria to explain the extraordinary popularity of *The Avengers*, an ITV series launched more than three decades ago.



It was one of Britain's first commercial TV success in the USA. Described variously as "James Bond meets 'The Perils of Pauline'" and a series "about a man in a bowler hat and a woman who flings

## Review & Comment: Books in Brief

men over her shoulders," *The Avengers* connected the thriller to satire and in the process garnered huge audiences.

The author provides some illuminating insights into the underlying reasons for the program's appeal, but his explications are often marred by such pompous sociological tawdler as "In TV terms, the postmodern deposits us in a superfluity of screen palimpsests that are excessive for the needs and capacities of a single story" and "The search for truth in origins is asymptotic and endless, so let's make self-importance our sin and bizarre intertextuality our pleasure." Self-importance, indeed!

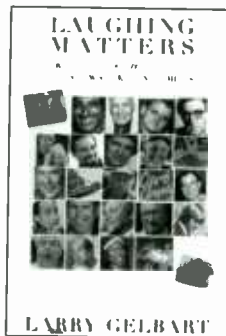
Despite this kind of turgid nonsense, Miller does manage to show how *The Avengers* affected many aspects of life, including fashion, at the height of its popularity: "the combination of exaggerated civility, casual violence and sexual subtlety," he writes, "all accomplished on a spectrum of style, appealed to a broad cross-section of accepting and skeptical viewers." In the end the author achieves his goal of demonstrating "how the multifaceted ethos of the programme worked: in short, why so many people found fun in it."

### Laughing Matters: On writing *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Tootsie*, *Oh, God!* and a Few Other Funny Things

By Larry Gelbart

Random House, New York

That ancient chestnut about mixed emotions—i.e., watching your mother-in-law drive your brand-new Cadillac over a cliff—applies, in this reviewer's opinion, to Larry Gelbart's frequently hilarious but sometimes eye-glazing volume. Readers whose memories go back five decades will find his early reminiscences fascinating: working for Ed Gardner



(*Duffy's Tavern*) as a teen-ager; writing for Sid Caesar ("very much like going to work every day of the week inside a Marx Brothers movie"); the genesis of *M\*A\*S\*H* (noting that many of the actors had stage training, "their re-

spect for the text was exceptional.") Equally mesmerizing are Gelbart's later descriptions of his Broadway experience, particularly in connection with *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

The trouble with *Laughing Matters* is that there is not so much to laugh at here. The book combines memoir with a hodgepodge of reviews, talks and other previously published items loosely strung together by veteran editor Sam Vaughan, a kind of one-man Greek chorus whose transitions sometimes serve as useful connective glue and at other times are intrusive. Gelbart's tributes to such showbusiness colleagues as Milton Berle, Jack Benny and George Burns are generally more pompous than they are entertaining. A chapter "on writing," a congeries of off-the-cuff observations, just doesn't quite work.

Yet there are flashes of Gelbart's inimitable brilliance that make this book a treasure. "It was a matter of life intimidating art" is how he describes the harsh temperature changes at the Fox ranch in Malibu Canyon, where *M\*A\*S\*H* exteriors were shot. Jack Benny's "look of pained innocence" was like "the expression of a calf who had just found out where veal comes from." About Broadway: "One picture may indeed be worth a thousand words, but by my emotional arithmetic, one play can be worth a thousand pictures."

Gelbart is at his best when he's being bit-

## Review & Comment: Books in Brief

ter: "Having John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd help with a script was like throwing a party and having the Borgias as your bartenders."

Mixed emotions or not, I wish I'd said that!

### Public Radio and Television in America: A Political History

By Ralph Engelman

Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA

### Made Possible By . . . The Death of Public Broadcasting in the United States

By James Ledbetter

Verso, New York

These two excellent if depressing studies can take their pace alongside *The Vanishing Vision*, James Day's definitive 1996 inside story of public television. Engelman, a journalism professor at Long Island University (which administers the George Polk Awards), wrote this extraordinarily probing account at the height of the Republicans' recent efforts to destroy public broadcasting; he spans the entire history of noncommercial broadcasting in the United States, starting with the role of amateur radio operators before World War I. Ledbetter, a staff writer at New York's *Village Voice*, focuses dramatically on Washington's pressure on public broadcasting and the consequent baleful effect of corporate under-

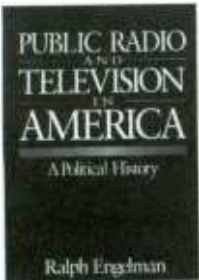
writing on its objectivity.

Engelman provides fascinating if little-known nuggets of historical information and his work should be essential reading for all broadcast scholars and historians. "During the early and mid-1920s," he writes, "commercial broadcasting remained a controversial experiment during a period in which over 200 non-commercial stations were on the air." Congressmen backed away from broadcast reform because of perceived threats to their careers. Sound familiar?

"David Sarnoff told a nationwide audience over NBC in the late 1930s that commercial broadcasting was a natural outgrowth of private enterprise, the basis of American freedom," Engelman says. "By the late 1940s, challenges to the network and advertising-dominated broadcasting system were outside the pale of legitimate discourse."

While it might appear that the author allots disproportionate space to Pacifica Radio (he served on its board), *Public Radio and Television in America* is an absolutely first-rate history. Engelman makes everything come alive. The story of National Public Radio is particularly well told. Although attacked both from the left and right, "Within a two-decade period NPR became a formidable network and the primary national force in noncommercial radio." In the end it is disappointing that the author concludes with more recapitulation than recommendation, but the problems of public broadcasting can be so overwhelming that it may be carping to voice such a complaint.

"The political and financial constraints imposed by the Nixon administration provided an opening for an increased role for corporate underwriters in public television," Engelman writes. "The commercialization of public television took a quantum leap forward during the Reagan administration,



## Review & Comment: Books in Brief

which placed a premium on market solutions and deregulation.”

This is where Ledbetter weighs in with his brilliant depiction of public television's core problems: lack of financing, lack of local programming and Washington's sinister influence. Covering in greater political detail many of the same events as does Professor Engelman, Ledbetter spotlights the interplay between American politics and the public-broadcasting world in the belief that “pressure from Congress, the White House, and a few special-interest groups plays a much greater role in shaping and determining the public broadcasting schedule than is generally recognized.”

Ledbetter provides a compelling, convincing and thoroughly disturbing description of political intrigue and other shenanigans. Nixon “deliberately plotted to use CPB appointees as spies, to quash public TV content he and his allies disliked,” Ledbetter writes. “Even more than his veto, Nixon's perversion of the CPB board was his most damaging and most lasting contribution to public broadcasting.” Like Engelman, Ledbetter attributes the rise of corporate underwriting to Nixon pressures. Even the acclaimed *Newshour*, he says, fails to air views that might upset the program's underwriters.

Again a quibble: the subtitle—“The Death of Public Broadcasting in the United States”—is somewhat misleading. It's really a come-on to the reader. The word “perversion” might be more accurate than “death,” because it's clear that the author hasn't abandoned all hope for public broadcasting. He concludes with a series of valuable recommendations for the reform and salvage of the enterprise. This is an important book. It's just sad that the publisher chose to set it in pale-gray 10-point type, rendering it just about as legible as if it had been printed in invisible ink.

### Those Who Trespass

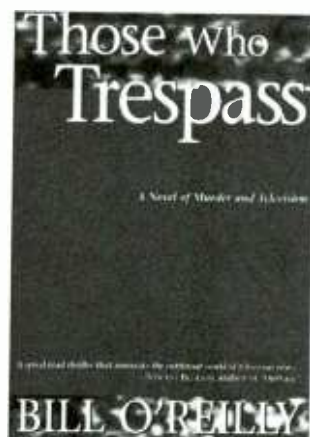
By Bill O'Reilly

Bancroft Press, Baltimore, MD

Here is a slick thriller by a veteran TV journalist (FOX News Channel) about a veteran TV journalist who wreaks vengeance on four imaginative ways. Written in fast-paced if somewhat pedestrian (jogging?) prose, this is a real page-turner which accelerates in tempo and suspense, building to a climax marred only by a television cliché

that will not be described here in the interest of not revealing the plot.

With the exception of the Irish-American investigating cop, who comes across as a real, idiosyncratic individual, most of the principal characters are two-dimension-



al, stick figures. The victims, all of whom once wielded the power of life and career death over their underlings, are corrupt as well as hateful; one of them even cooks audience research to ruin a subordinate's life. Nevertheless *Those Who Trespass* is a diverting entertainment that won't strain a muscle of the reader's brain. ■

**Fritz Jacobi started work in public broadcasting during the heady days of President Johnson's administration and left right after Ronald Reagan was inaugurated. Jacobi has waged war on academic jargon at venues ranging from the National Education Association to Columbia University's business school. He is now trying to teach English as a second language at a New York City high school.**

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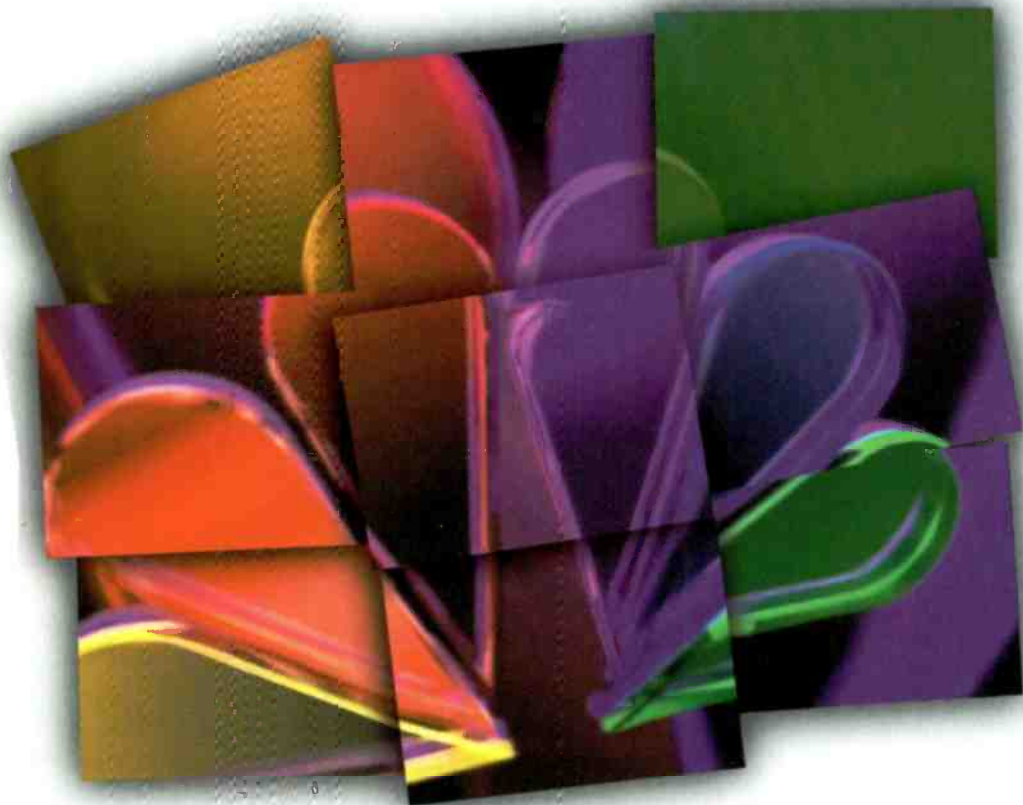
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*In Memoriam:*

# Harriet Van Horne

1920-1998

She was the first Editor appointed to guide the editorial destiny of a newly reconstituted *Television Quarterly* when this journal entered upon its second existence during the Seventies. Harriet Van Horne brought to the assignment journalistic and writing skills honed by a professional lifetime of experience chronicling the heady adventures of a new medium.

She wrote an immensely popular daily column for the *New York World Telegram & Sun* and later, a general-interest column for the *New York Post*. Those early years encompassed the so-called "Golden Age of Television," which she equated with "a less precious metal." Harriet's wit, her graceful and easy prose, made her columns a must-read.

Born in Syracuse, New York, she began as a reporter for the Connecticut newspaper *Greenwich Times*. She was appointed Editor of *Television Quarterly* by the legendary Hubbell Robinson, who served as Editorial Board Chairman. She was married to the late David Lowe, an Emmy award-winning documentary producer for the CBS Television Network.



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