

◆ THE 100th ISSUE ◆

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## **A CANDID TALK WITH BRYANT GUMBEL**

*By Arthur Unger*

## **THE FRIEDA HENNOCK STORY**

*By Henry Morgenthau*

## **WHAT'S HAPPENED TO TV STANDARDS?**

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## **TALKSHOWS, FOR BETTER OR WORSE**

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# the 100th

*Those who are associated with the planning of this Journal believe it is time for a penetrating, provocative and continuing examination of television as an art, a science, an industry, and a social force.*

*Accordingly, our purpose is to be both independent and critical. We hold that the function of the Journal is to generate currents of new ideas about television, and we will therefore try to assure publication of all material which stimulates thought and has editorial merit.*

*This Journal has only one aim—to take a serious look at television.*

—Television Quarterly,  
February, 1962, Vol.1/No.1

**O**ne hundred issues and thirty years ago, the prime time network lineup provides more than material for a round of TV Trivia. The lineup of shows in some ways was not better than today's, and in certain ways not as good. It is remarkable though how many survivors there are, and how much is still familiar.

Some of the programs, some of the stars, still twinkle up in that wonder-

ful land above the sky that is rerun heaven. Who among us who worked in television during those not-always golden years would have dreamed that reruns would have such long lives? Lucy, yes. But *Gilligan's Island* and *The Brady Bunch*?

Notice the abundance of Westerns—which now seem to have gone the way of Custer; why they went that way no one seems to know. Remember *Wagon Train*, *Gunsmoke*, *Marshal Dillon*, *The Rifleman*, *Bonanza*,

# ISSUE

## *The Virginian, Have Gun Will Travel?*

Variety shows, now among the missing, were a popular format, including *Ed Sullivan* (a recent retread!), *Gary Moore*, *Andy Williams*, *Sing Along With Mitch* and *Lawrence Welk* (surviving, surprisingly, on many PBS stations). TV was also enriched by the great comics like *Benny*, *Gleason*, *Skelton*. And *Lucy*. And *Hope*.

The 1962 Emmys reflect impressive **achievement**. Substantial documen-

taries were frequent on all three networks, partly in reaction to Minnow's "Vast Wasteland" speech. NBC's classic documentary *The Tunnel* won Program of the Year award, the first time it went to a news program. This was about the time TV journalists and programmers were debating whether the standard quarter hour evening news programs should be extended to a half hour. *Huntley/Brinkley* with the old fifteen-minute version, for the fifth year,

placed first in the regularly scheduled news category. Other Emmy winners included *The Dick Van Dyke Show* for comedy, and Julie Andrews and Carol Burnett's Carnegie Hall special in the music class.

Sometimes in those days, if you were a TV pro, you might take time out to speculate on what the future was going to bring to the medium. Few of us ever expected that CATV—Community Antenna Television—would become big league Cable, that amazing national phenomenon. Satellite was coming into use, but infrequently because of the expense and complex problems. But who would imagine that in the Uplink/Downlink minicam world of today, long-line and microwave would become passé, and local stations would have satellite facilities.

What soothsayer in '62 could conceive of CNN? And all the other electronic wonders that have become as commonplace today.

Which futurists expected local news to boom as it has? The '60's, for the most part, were still the years of skimpy local news—little or nothing in the morning or midday, a half hour or less in the late afternoon, and the "big" 11 P.M. program, with its rigidly segmented blocks of ten or fifteen minutes of news, and five of weather, five of sports. In the pre-minicam era, all local news was shot on 16mm film, and most stations had their own in-house developing facilities.

Were there '62 broadcasters who foresaw the decline of the regular networks, changing affiliate relations, the rise of the independent stations, and even of a Fox-like fourth network—and a sitcom world of heroines like Murphy and Roseanne that would shock the likes of Harriet, Ozzie or the Beaver?

In any case, who is brave enough to predict the shape of things to come by



the time this publication reaches its issue number 200?

Meanwhile, we'll try to deal seriously with the issues, problems and ideas which interest all concerned professionals, whether they're in front or behind the camera, noncommercial or commercial, cable

or broadcast.

Despite all the splendid electronic tools technology has given us during these last three decades, it seems to me that the play—the program, the show!—is still the thing now and especially in the 100-channel and 500-channel era promised for tomorrow.

As *Television Quarterly* continues to examine the contemporary scene, we'll also continue as we have recently to look at the past; an objective not included in our first prospectus. We assume a responsibility to function in part as a lively and informal history of our medium. Television does have a meaningful past, worth documenting, especially by some of those who lived it, and can help illuminate our times. The corporate memory is short.

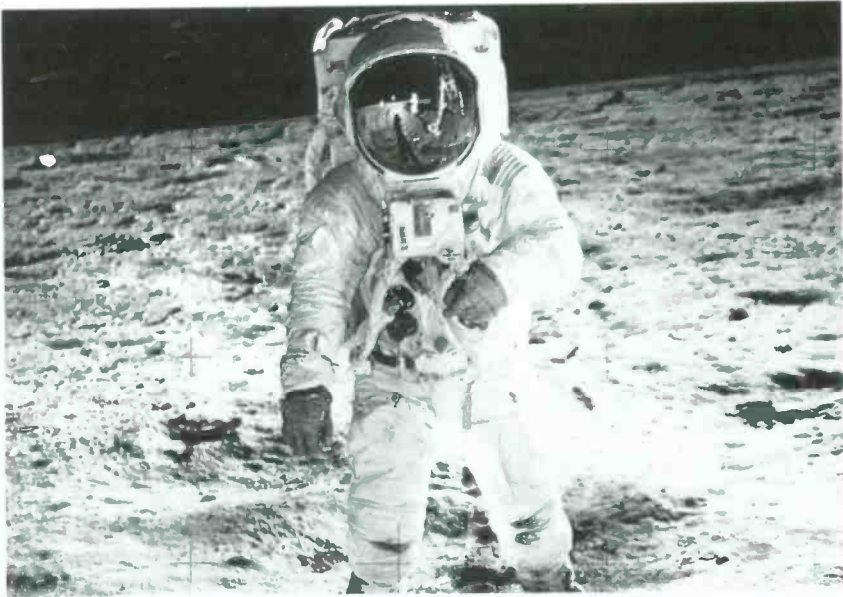
A salute is in order now, to those who helped shape this publication during its formative years, including its first editor, William A. Bluem and later Hubbell Robinson and Harriet Van Horne. My thanks, of course, to our editorial board, especially TVQ's Chairman, Herman Land, Frederick Jacobi, Arthur Unger and Bert Briller.

—Richard Pack  
Editor





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# BRYANT GUMBEL: NO MORE MR. HUMBLE

*Television Quarterly's* special correspondent, Arthur Unger, chats with *Today* host Bryant Gumbel about co-hosts, news vs. sports, and racism which causes him to be judged by blacks-only special standards.

**BY ARTHUR UNGER**

"**H**umble Gumbel" has long been the prime Bryant-Gumbel-bashing put-down. It's the easy if obvious nickname some sarcastic critics have used to attack what they call his arrogance, sexism and "egomania."

After a study of clippings about *Today* host Bryant Gumbel, a review of many of his interview tapes and spending some time with him myself, I have come to the conclusion that while there may be trace elements of sexist egomania,... there is also beyond the superficial character analyses, an intelligent, supremely confident, extremely competent professional who does a superb job hosting the longest-lived morning show in television. In its 41st year, *Today* is

very often back on top of the morning competition with an average of 3 1/2 million viewers per day, proving itself to be NBC's most consistent long-range moneymaker, a news-oriented show which counter-balances a great deal of the NBC News deficit.

While Bryant ascribes much of the criticism to racism, he hesitates to state it baldly. When I say it, he tells me "You can say that, I can't."

But he did say unapologetically: "They call me arrogant; however, if I were white it'd be 'confident.'"

Most of our interview took place in his book-lined, dark-green-carpeted *Today* office, lined with wood-paneling and bookcases. There are pictures of his wife and children—a son and a daughter. There are many varying-sized teddy bears, a bubble-gum dispenser and a huge baseball bat. On the wall are two signs—one says "Gumbel Lane" and the other a forbidding "Quiet Zone!"



Bryant is nattily dressed in a dark suit, a pin-striped shirt and a colorful but dignified tie. The big wooden desk is neat and organized, and when I comment upon it he admits that it is usually a mess but he piled everything up in anticipation of my visit. As he searches for a missing document unsuccessfully, I try to put him at ease by quoting an anonymous philosopher: "It takes an orderly mind to maintain a messy desk." He laughs and remarks that his desk at the moment is neither orderly nor messy. I tell him to take his time searching and I will look over his official bio and ask my questions slowly.

According to the biography, Bryant joined *Today* on January 4, 1982. He became known to the viewers through his thrice-weekly sports reports. Before that, he was sportscaster for the NBC affiliate in Los Angeles and in 1975 hosted the NFL pre-game show. By 1972, he was also the host of

NBC's coverage of major league baseball, NCAA Championship basketball and National Football League games.

Born in New Orleans and raised in Chicago, he is the son of a housewife and a judge, a man who worked his way through law school while supporting his family. Recently, when a sports magazine did a negative profile of Bryant, they noted his reverence for his father and assumed he hated his mother. Bryant resents that and was quoted in *American Visions* as saying "It seems to make a number of people uncomfortable with the idea that a black man can look to his father as a role model."

With a major in Russian history, he earned a liberal arts degree at Bates College in Maine, next went on to become the editor of *Black Sports Magazine* and then was offered a job with KNBC in Los Angeles as a television sportscaster. He has acknowledged that he must have gotten the

job because he was black: "There has to be a logical reason why KNBC would have reached cross country to take somebody who was 23 and had never done a minute of television. That's probably the most logical reason" he has said.

Since he joined *Today* he has done everything from Super Bowls and World Series to superpower summits, political conventions and world-class interviews. He has won many news awards—the Overseas Press Club Edward R. Murrow Award (In the interest of full disclosure, I must admit that I was on the jury which chose him), and a 1991 Emmy for his interview with Senator Ted Kennedy.

He was once the target of every gossip column when a confidential memo he wrote at the request of the *Today* executive producer was found in the computer files and leaked to TV reporters. In the memo he critiqued members of the staff rather harshly, but especially went after weatherman Willard Scott, although not Jane Pauley.

I asked him: "Now that some time has passed since that infamous memo, do you have any regrets?"

I expected him to say that since he had been asked to write the memo, it was perfectly legitimate for him to say what he did. Only, if there were to be a next time, he wouldn't leave it in the computer.

However, he looked at me quizzically. I was, after all, probing a hurtful wound.

"You know, Mr. Unger, (he insisted upon the formal salutation although I was calling him Bryant) "the statute of limitations has long since run out on that. And everything that has been written, said, etcetera, has already been done and I don't want to be a party to keeping it alive. I realize that other people have varied interests in doing so, but I don't. And so, it's all a matter of record by now and I no longer talk about it or think about it."

It was clear that the matter was

closed and I would be on shaky ground for the rest of the interview if I pursued it.

But, I thought I'd try another controversial subject while I was at it.

"In the recent book *Inside Today* by Judy Kessler, a *Today* talent coordinator, she accuses you of harassing women on the show verbally and even physically, referring to Jane Pauley in very vulgar street language, to say the least; and speculating on the sexual availability of most of the women on the show. To me it sounds like locker-room jock talk—all talk and no action. How do you react to that?"

He looked at me with annoyance and hesitated for a moment as I could see him pondering what kind of interview this was going to be. "I think it's laughable," he said. "If you talked to anybody I've ever worked with, they would die laughing. I've been here 11 years; this person was here for 18 months—the first 18 months of my 11 years—and claims to be an expert on everything that has happened since. I tend less to blame the author than I do the market place that seems to create an atmosphere where such things are expected to sell ... be it that book or the one on Ted Kennedy or any other one."

We talked a bit more about it but, basically, Bryant was determined not to pander to what he considered prurient interests, and I respected his firmness ... stonewalling, if you will, but honestly refusing to discuss what he considered subject matter not proper for a serious professional journal.

In many ways, Bryant Gumbel is up against the same sort of prejudice which successful women executives are up against: if they are assertive, they are called bitchy; when he is assertive, he is called arrogant. Despite personal charm, innate intelligence and sound authoritativeness, he is perceived by some to be an aggressive, arrogant, egomaniacal prima-donna.

Does white America demand that

its African-American stars demean themselves by acting like servile Stepin Fetchits?

Well, there is no trace of servility in Bryant Gumbel. He is good at what he does ... he knows it and doesn't hesitate to proclaim it. He makes no excuses, offers no apologies for his utter professionalism and personal perfectionism. He is proud of being Bryant Gumbel and insists that "what you see on *Today* is what I am." No more; no less.

Following is the interview with Bryant Gumbel. There have been some cuts for length and a few changes in chronology but all his answers are verbatim:

**UNGER:** *It seems to me that there is an enormous amount of Bryant-bashing going on; I read many press clippings about you and I couldn't quite figure out why. When you are aggressive, it's called arrogance. Could it be that there's a certain amount of racial prejudice in the Bryant bashing?*

**GUMBEL:** You can say it, but I hesitate to say it. I have never charged that, but I think any objective observer would have to look around at American life and realize that race plays a part in virtually every judgment about anything that happens in this country. To suggest that it plays no part in perceptions of Bryant Gumbel, would be both naive and erroneous.

**UNGER:** *Somebody once said that Gumbel is a Neanderthal in his attitude toward women.*

**GUMBEL:** Jane Pauley said it in the first summer we ever worked together back in '82. And she said it in jest and has said an awful lot of things to the contrary ever since. What normally happens, unfortunately, is that because people look at what one clipping says—they go and read it, they write it up in the second clip. So, the third writer comes along, finds the

first two, sees the quote repeated, so repeats it again, and so forth and so on. As a result, it gains a life of its own whatever the veracity of it. It's an unfair characterization.

**UNGER:** *Can we talk a little bit about the *Today* co-hosts?*

**GUMBEL:** Sure if you'd like. I've never done comparisons on them and I won't, but I'm more than happy to talk about it.

**UNGER:** *After Barbara Walters, there was a flow of people, and everybody now says Barbara Walters was responsible to a great extent for the expanded role of women in television, especially in morning news. And they compare everybody to her. How do you feel about the Jane Pauley/Deborah Norville/Katie Couric controversy? Do you think it reflects an attitude towards women?*

**GUMBEL:** I'm a huge Barbara Walters fan and always have been. She's a friend. I think she's a terrific professional. I think she's a wonderful person.

Jane and I worked together for eight years. She was, and continues to be a very good friend. We just recently had dinner together. Gary Trudeau, Pauley's husband, just called a couple of weeks ago, so this idea that we are enemies amuses the both of us in a sad kind of way. Jane left the program at a time when the program was struggling. Jane felt uncomfortable because a new person—Deborah—was on the set and seemed to be infringing upon what was Jane's area.

And to compound matters, people were writing that she was going to push Jane off of that set even though the evidence did not suggest that was a valid charge.

So Jane rather than say, "Hey, I'm not going to stand for this public humiliation" or "I'm not going to watch everybody fight for my side," or "I'm not going to watch everybody

speculate how much I am or not being pushed out,"—said, in effect, "I'm outta here! I'm gonna do something else." And that's terrific. I applaud it. And the funny thing is, nobody wants to believe that's what happened. But as is often the case with truth, people don't like to believe the truth. But that's what happened, plain and simple.

Deborah Norville came on. Judgments of Deborah were influenced enormously by the atmosphere when she entered the play. I would dare say that it's very difficult to give an objective assessment how Deborah did or didn't do. She came in at a time when she was expected to start perfect and get better. The criticism made her tight. As she got tight, her performance did not benefit. It became pretty clear that it wasn't going to work.

**UNGER:** *Things have changed since Katie Couric took over?*

**GUMBEL:** I think it's pretty clear to anybody who watches us work that Katie and I have a great deal of affection for each other. You know, I think her enthusiasm and her curiosity and her personality—it's pretty clear that they rang true with the American public, and it makes it easier in the working environment. We're good friends. We like each other. We have a good time with each other.

I think her work is exceptional. You have to realize that Katie had not done any hosting of a live program up until two years ago. So, much of this is learned on the fly for her. Again, I think her enthusiasm and her curiosity are serving her well. I mean she's doing terrific. Katie has been on *Today* for some time now—ever since she came on board it has worked.

**UNGER:** *Worked for the audience or worked for you?*

**GUMBEL:** Both. I don't think you can have one without the other. In a personal sense, I have always found it

somewhat discouraging, offensive—whatever word you want to use—that the question was always, "Well, how does Bryant Gumbel get along with this co-host?" The question never was, "Well, how does Ms. Co-host get along with Bryant Gumbel?" It was almost like it was always incumbent upon me to make sure that it worked, and if it didn't, then it was Bryant's fault.

**UNGER:** *Do you agree with the attitude toward the Today show that it has to work as a family or else it can't fly?*

**GUMBEL:** I think that all research points to the fact that people in the morning want to feel that familial atmosphere. On the other hand, I would also think it real naive of anybody in any office to suggest that you can have just love each other day in and day out for 10-15 years—whatever it is. That's absurd. You know, Barbara Walters will tell you that she and Frank McGee barely talked. Did it affect either of their performances? I don't think so. But, my God, if that happened today, my goodness Lord! I mean, can you imagine *Today* if Katie and I didn't talk to each other?

**UNGER:** *Do you think that it's because the television press is more intrusive?*

**GUMBEL:** Yes! (chuckle) There is a preoccupation with who we are as opposed to what we do. And, I think it's injurious. I think it's invasive. And I think it unwarranted. We really are much less important than politicians give us credit for. And we are much, much more private than most of the public gives us credit for. Most of us are very boring.

**UNGER:** *You mean, as individuals?*

**GUMBEL:** Yeah. Most of us are terribly boring. Honest.

**UNGER:** *Do you consider yourself boring?*

**GUMBEL:** Oh, yeah. Look, when I'm

away from here, I'm somewhere between a hermit and a recluse. There's nothing fascinating about my lifestyle.

**UNGER:** *A piece I read said you were the loveliest and most wonderful and misunderstood person in the world.*

**GUMBEL:** It's ever amusing to me. I'll give you an example that I quote a lot of times about how things go and why I think certain things are cast in stone and so you're sort of against the tide trying to reverse them. The first year of the golf tournament I was doing down in Florida I invited members of the local press to come on out and play golf, and then I'd play a couple of holes with each. And there was one particular writer down there who brought his 12-year-old son along and introduced him. I took his son under my wing, and I was very nice to him for the whole day, not for any reason except that I happen to like kids and he was about the age of my son. The guy went back and wrote a column that said, in effect "What a phony Bryant Gumbel is. I had read about what a jerk he is, and he was nice all day. So he must be a real phony." It was really kind of sad.

It was like, "Alright I've read the evidence, you know, and I've watched him on TV and I don't like what I see, and so when I meet him in person and he's real nice, this must be the phony act," I kind of threw my hands up in the air. There isn't a lot you can do about that and so it's not worth worrying about.

I could give you a zillion examples. On one story a guy must have asked for 50 names of friends of mine to talk to. He went and talked to all of them. The article was lengthy and not one of them was quoted.

**UNGER:** *Could we talk a little bit about the other morning shows?*

**GUMBEL:** Sure. But I'm a bad one to ask. I never see them.

**UNGER:** *Not even tapes?*

**GUMBEL:** No. I'm doing other things between 7 and 9.

**UNGER:** *How do you think the Today show is different from the CBS Morning News or the ABC Good Morning America?*

**GUMBEL:** I can more easily address how we differ from ABC. GMA is run by the entertainment division. I think they make no bones about that. GMA tries for a softer focus than we have. And what they do, they do well. But I think they do a different kind of show than we do.

As for CBS, what little I know of them, I only know because I talk during the program about what the others may have on. I think their judgment on what to put on is a little strange. You know, if we have you on on Monday, they'll put you on on Wednesday.

**UNGER:** *Isn't that in desperation because they aren't Number One, getting the guests first?*

**GUMBEL:** I just don't know. And I don't want to judge them.

**UNGER:** *How about the hosts?*

**GUMBEL:** I've got nothing bad to say about any of them, really. I think the world of Charlie Gibson. The same applies to the folks over at CBS. I know it would make great copy that we're at each other's throats. It wasn't even true when David Hartman was there. I saw David about two months ago. We were on the golf course and we're fine.

**UNGER:** *Well, in the case of Good Morning, America and the CBS Morning News the male host tends to be very bland and you are not bland.*

**GUMBEL:** That's true. (laughter)

**UNGER:** *You may consider yourself boring but you certainly are not bland.*

**GUMBEL:** No, that's true. I don't try to hide my feelings. But I would also

say that ours is the only situation where one person is the host and the other one is the co-host. Although it's popular in the print media to characterize both people sitting there as co-hosts, that's never been true on this program. It is true on the others.

**UNGER:** *You say it's not true on your show. What does that mean in terms of the way the program operates?*

**GUMBEL:** It means that one person on this program is the host. And has always been. I was the host when Jane was here and the host when Deborah was here, and now I am still the host.

**UNGER:** *That means you're in charge?*

**GUMBEL:** It was the decision of management that one person was to be perceived to be in charge—that there was no question when things went—when the show was on the air of streamlining the process. Of just making sure that there was one person taking you into and out of situations. And we found that worked very well for us and thus, we've kept it.

**UNGER:** *To go back a little bit to this business of Bryant-bashing and the possibility of it having some racial origin: one of the pieces I read mentioned that some of it may be because white Americans may resent the fact that your role model was your father. African-Americans are not supposed to have strong male father figures—you know, it's the mother. The fact that you made it very clear that your father, the judge, was your role model somehow goes against the prejudices that people have.*

**GUMBEL:** Yeah, I would suggest that the problem with a writer suggesting that—the problem lies more with the writer than with most of mainstream America. It suggests that the writer is uncomfortable sitting across from a black man who maybe is an economic, social, intellectual

equal if not perhaps, in some instances, more than that. And so, there becomes that transference and he says, "Well, white America is uncomfortable with it."

I'm not about to damn white America. I'm going to damn the guy who that occurs to, because he's the one suggesting the problem.

**UNGER:** *Do you think it is in the psyche of the white American not to want to accept African-Americans as mainstream?*

**GUMBEL:** I don't know. I don't want to judge that of people because, look, I've sat across from a lot of white American writers who are very comfortable and have no problem with it. And they need not like me. There are an awful lot of guys who've written ill of me, who think my work is lousy—for whatever, I'm not their cup of tea and yet, I'd venture to say if race plays any part in it, it would surprise me.

But I do think some other particularly harsh judgments are rooted in race? Yeah, I think it would be very, very hard to understand how they could have arrived at the conclusions they have without seeing that. And I'm not going to pick and choose who was which. But yeah, I think it's very easy to dislike Bryant Gumbel—to criticize Bryant Gumbel—and not be influenced by race. But some of the real harsh, personal judgments?

If you've been a black man in this country for 40 years, you can read between the lines pretty easy and see just what's unnerving them and what upsets them. And to the extent that I love my father—I'm very proud of my father and he was a wonderful role model. And yet, there's a suspicion among the insecure or the race-oriented that if you love your father then you must hate your mother, and there's something wrong with you if your dad was your idol.

You know, it's the same mentality that says if you succeed, and if you are articulate and you're educated,



then you're trying to be white. But the reverse of that, I have always felt was insulting, because the reverse says that in order to be black, I must be ignorant and unsuccessful. And that if I try to succeed or try to be smart, then I'm trying to be white. I just reject that.

**UNGER:** *Another thing I found in a clip from an African-American publication was a quote from you saying that you did not intend to make the Today show a platform for African-American issues.*

**GUMBEL:** I've never felt that the program should be about Bryant Gumbel's likes or dislikes, Bryant Gumbel's prides or passions. The program was supposed to be a combination of many elements. And so, to the extent that some people had wanted it to be a platform for every African-American issue—and a one-sided platform at that—no, it would not be.

**UNGER:** *Have you been criticized in the African-American community?*

**GUMBEL:** No. In fact, I would say quite the contrary. I would say that the overwhelming majority of African-Americans—I'm grateful for this—take great pride in what I've been able to do. I find it amusing that people say, "Well, he hasn't been applauded by African-Americans. And yet I received the highest honors of the NAACP, the Urban League, virtually every African-American group in this country. I'm not one who measures achievements by awards, but I just find it difficult to understand how you can collect those and, at the same time, supposedly be someone that people are not proud of.

**UNGER:** *How did the Today African series come about? Did the fact that you are an African-American have something to do with it?*

**GUMBEL:** I think it had something to do with it. I mean, I never sat here and tried to compartmentalize it and

say, "Well, 20% of it is because I'm an African-American and 50% because I think it's a ratings winner and the other 30%, you know, whatever. This is something that I started pushing about four years ago and started trying to find a way to get done. My interest in doing it was in part generated, no doubt, by the fact that I'm African-American, but it was also in part generated by the fact that I thought it was time. It was worth doing. It's journalistically correct. It's breathtakingly beautiful. It's socially responsible.

From every perspective that I could look at it, be it as a black man; as the head of the *Today* program; as someone who is concerned with good ratings for our show; as a journalist who is looking for good stories; as someone looking for untapped stories; as someone interested in the pictures that we put on the air—in almost every possible way, Africa warranted serious consideration for a week-long *Today* look. And since in my time with this program, we have originated the program from North America, from South America, from Asia, from Europe and from Australia, and even in part from Antarctica, it would beg the question, "Why haven't you done Africa?"

I find it offensive when critics say, "Why are you doing Africa?" Well, when we went to Australia, nobody said, "Why are you doing Australia? Why are you doing China? Why are you doing Rome? Why are you doing Buenos Aires?" But suddenly, "Why are you doing Africa?" It's like, these people and this place doesn't deserve the same kind of status because of its own merits.

**UNGER:** *Back to some basics: Just what is it that you feel you do for a living?*

**GUMBEL:** I dispense information in what I hope is the clearest possible way for that hour of the morning and try to help people digest it as

easily as possible—that's what I do. I try to communicate/inform/entertain for two hours.

**UNGER:** *What about qualifications for that? Do you need a news background?*

**GUMBEL:** My feeling is no. While the news background certainly shouldn't be minimized and would serve one in good stead, I would suggest what is much more important is that someone have a curious mind and be willing to try almost anything and be very adept at doing live television—because having the most fertile mind in the world and not being able to articulate what's in it before a live camera within certain constraints of time would not serve you very well to do this job.

**UNGER:** *And how about your sports background. Has it been an asset?*

**GUMBEL:** Yeah. When I first took this job in January of '82—prior to it, of course, there were a number of people who were questioning whether or not I could do it coming from sports. I always felt that sports was a wonderful training ground, if not for talking about matters of the day, then certainly for doing the basics of live television because in sports you so often have to work without a net—without a script. Ofttimes without any outline. It at least allows you the experience of thinking on your feet, articulating your thoughts, clarifying situations, making yourself understood—all of the things that *Today* with a great deal of frequency is about.

**UNGER:** *You've been quoted as saying that you watch almost no television except for sports because you like the sense of unpredictability.*

**GUMBEL:** I was relating it to the evening. People would say, you know, "What prime-time programs do you watch?" And my comment was, "Virtually none." I much prefer to watch sports in the evening, because

I like the element of surprise. I like not knowing how something is going to end.

I may admire an awful lot of prime-time programs, but I can also guarantee that any on one of those prime-time programs, if the hero or heroine is in trouble in the first minute, they will have extricated themselves from that trouble by the 60th minute. That to me seems like I'm starting a book by knowing the ending, and I don't enjoy that. I would much rather invest my time watching a sporting event where I don't know how it's going to end and a lot of strange things could happen in the middle.

**UNGER:** *Do you think that sports people bring something extra to television? We have you and Bob Costas and Rooney Arledge and other people ...*

**GUMBEL:** I am reluctant to make generalizations, but I do think that those of us who do sports for a living are inclined to never see anything as so serious that we can't laugh at ourselves, look at the lighter side of something and don't get terribly uptight about something.

**UNGER:** *How about the election situation where the candidates refused—for a great part of the time—to appear on either the evening dinner-hour news or the Sunday morning shows but preferred to go on afternoon talk shows or Larry King, or something of that sort. What do you think that meant in terms of television's coverage?*

**GUMBEL:** I think there's a lot of ways to look at it. First of all, take the evening news ... they never went on those programs anyway. Now let's look at the Sunday programs. To my recollection, Ross Perot and Bill Clinton did the Sunday programs early in the campaign. It depends on your time frame, but they did them. What is new, obviously, is the willingness of the candidates to go on the popular formats be they morning or afternoon

and present themselves. I think from their perspective, you can't blame them. They are choosing it because they have an opportunity to be unfiltered if they're doing call-ins; if they're taking audience questions.

What I resent considerably, is the idea that when somebody comes on morning television, they're getting a free ride. George Bush, to my recollection, is the only one who has struck that kind of a deal limiting producers at GMA to five minutes and one question—you know, one issue. It's not the kind of deal we would sign. But I think you'd be very hard put to read the transcripts of any encounter—and I'm only going to speak for myself—that I ever had on this program whether it be with Dan Quayle, Ross Perot, Al Gore or Bill Clinton—I think you'd be hard put to read those and suggest that any of them had gotten anything close to a free ride.

I think that there's this continuing myth in Washington that if you do news in the morning, then you're pudding and that if you do it on Sunday, then you're a real hard-bitten journalist. I think that's crap.

**UNGER:** *How about this affinity for Larry King?*

**GUMBEL:** I understand that Larry takes a more easy-going approach and that he prides himself in not cluttering himself with a ton of research going into it. I understand that's his style and that's fine. I'm not going to compare it one way or the other.

But it does grate on me when embittered Washingtonians suggest theirs is the only forum that holds a candidate's feet to the fire and that every place else is just minor league. That's ridiculous. I think for so-called hard-bitten news people in Washington to step forward and suggest that what everybody else is doing is junk and only they—only they—have the right to ask real questions of real substance is at once arrogant and dead wrong.

**UNGER:** *Both Perot and Bush attacked the media. Do you think there's any validity to their accusations that the media was slanted against them?*

**GUMBEL:** Asking me to answer that suggests that I can be totally objective about it, which I can't be. I mean, obviously since I represent part of that faction being attacked. I think their logic was clear in doing it. A lot of people dislike the media, so why not join sides with them in attacking? Plus if you attack the media, who's going to attack you back? I mean, how much worse are you going to get than you're already getting? Yeah, so it's a no-brainer. It's a drop kick.

**UNGER:** *A couple of more questions about the Africa series on Today: Were you there before you were doing research for the series?*

**GUMBEL:** No. My first visit to sub-Saharan Africa was when I went to survey for the broadcast.

**UNGER:** *Did you have any feelings of roots or anything of that sort?*

**GUMBEL:** Let me answer that in a couple of ways. I think the African-American existence and the way that we came to this country—our ancestral roots—are so different that it really defies comparison with others. I think that even if one was of a mind to make it his life's pursuit to trace their heritage as an African-American, it would be very, very difficult, because when the Africans were taken and passed through the Ile de Goree and loaded onto a ship, their names were left behind. They came to this country and no records were kept of them. Documents weren't kept—unless one were fortunate enough as in the case of Alex Haley where the ancestor had been a story-teller and had passed the story on down, and allowed you to go on over that verbal record and trace it, you're running up against a dead end ... which is not to say that when one is there, one

doesn't feel a different sense than on the streets of Harlem. One of the things that was most gratifying to me was I took my 13-year-old son on this trip for three weeks. I was interested in watching his reactions to being in a situation where his pigmentation was the majority. Where one went about their daily lives and saw Africans in every aspect, and the white face was the unusual one.

**UNGER:** *How did he react?*

**GUMBEL:** It was strange. He felt a great degree of comfort despite being in a foreign country, and yet he was less enthused than I somehow expected. You know, I talked about transference a while ago. Adults do an amazing thing with kids: they always transfer their expectation to their children. And if you go, "Oh boy, look at that!" you want your son to go, "Oh boy, look at that!"

Kids don't do that: (A) because it's not cool; B) because they're kind of wide-eyed and quiet anyway. And yet, I found it really interesting: he didn't do it there. When he came back and I'd hear him talking to his friends or telling his Mom or his sister, that's when he was doing it—saying, "You should have seen this!", and "You should have seen that!"

**UNGER:** *Does he identify himself as African-American?*

**GUMBEL:** Oh, I think so. Oh, sure. If you asked him what is he, he'd probably say: "I'm black."

**UNGER:** *Which of the following would you choose to describe your state of mind: fulfilled, content, happy, satisfied?*

**GUMBEL:** I'd say "satisfied" if I were forced to choose one of the four. I'm never content. Happy is such a subjective term. I find myself happy at times and in those moments when I'm not, I think something is wrong with me. What was the first one? Disturbed?

**UNGER:** *Fulfilled.*

**GUMBEL:** Fulfilled? No, not fulfilled. There's got to be something else.

**UNGER:** *How about disturbed?*

**GUMBEL:** On any given moment, yes. Fulfilled, no. There's gotta be something else.

**UNGER:** *Okay, now that we're on adjectives, I'm going to read you a lot of negative things said about you in print and then the positive things. React to each.*

**GUMBEL:** Sure. Sure. How much response do you want on each?

**UNGER:** *As short as you can do it. A word if you can, a sentence if you must. The adjective that comes up most often is "arrogant."*

**GUMBEL:** If I were white, I would be "confident."

**UNGER:** *"Patronizing." I'm giving you all the negatives first, so that you'll feel better when I get to the positive... "Patronizing"...*

**GUMBEL:** I don't think that's true.

**UNGER:** *"Egomaniacal."*

**GUMBEL:** I have a very healthy ego which I think you have to have to sit on this side of the camera. While I've never denied having one, I've always found it kind of strange that in a business where everybody has one that is slightly enlarged, I'm the only one that ever gets accused of it.

**UNGER:** *Well, the next one is really the same thing: "Prima donna."*

**GUMBEL:** Never. Absolutely not. Quite the contrary.

**UNGER:** *"Ambitious."*

**GUMBEL:** Yes, and there's nothing wrong with that.

**UNGER:** *"Aloof."*

**GUMBEL:** I can be.

**UNGER:** *"Smart ass."*

**GUMBEL:** I can be.

**UNGER:** "Excitable."

**GUMBEL:** (long pause) Far less frequently than most people would suspect.

**UNGER:** "Stuffy."

**GUMBEL:** No. I think there's a difference between "aloof" and "stuffy". "Stuffy" assumes that one is better than somebody else, and I never do. "Aloof" suggests that you like being alone and yes, I do.

**UNGER:** *This one I'm not sure that I understand: "buttoned-down aggressiveness."*

**GUMBEL:** I wish I knew what that means. But I'll accept it.

**UNGER:** *Here's another one: "Frosty-bitten heir to the mantel of Bozo the Clown."*

**GUMBEL:** Frosty-bitten heir to the mantel of Bozo the Clown?! I have no idea what that means.

**UNGER:** *I don't either.*

**GUMBEL:** I find it hard to understand how someone who is at once passionate, excitable, etc., can also be "frosty." It's bizarre.

**UNGER:** *Here are some of the positive ones now. "Cool."*

**GUMBEL:** Less than my son's sense of the term than in the way it affects television.

**UNGER:** "Cerebral."

**GUMBEL:** Less so than people think.

**UNGER:** "Debonair."

**GUMBEL:** I like to dress well.

**UNGER:** "Heir to the tradition of John Chancellor."

**GUMBEL:** I'll take that as a compliment. John's a friend.

**UNGER:** "Perfectionist."

**GUMBEL:** Only as it pertains to me.

**UNGER:** "Supremely confident."

**GUMBEL:** I thank my father and mother for that.

**UNGER:** "Charming."

**GUMBEL:** My wife might argue.

**UNGER:** "Self-assured."

**GUMBEL:** Yes.

**UNGER:** "Most misunderstood man in television."

**GUMBEL:** I think probably anybody who is in the public eye would like to say that. In my case, it may well be true.

**UNGER:** "A heart as big as all outdoors."

**GUMBEL:** I would like to think so.

**UNGER:** *Now, this one is also one that I don't quite understand: "overwhelming sense of invulnerability." That means "self-assured," I guess.*

**GUMBEL:** Yeah, I guess that's what it means. I mean, you know what's interesting to me is that to some people you're expected to apologize for wanting to do your best. You're expected to apologize for liking your mother and father. You're expected to apologize for wanting your show to be as professional as possible. I just don't understand that. I really don't.

I think anyone around here would tell you whatever fights I may have picked over the years—and there have been a few—were always show-related. They were never Bryant-related. They were never done in the name of something for me. They were always done for the program. It was impressed upon me early that this program has a heritage, and a very rich one. The person who does this is a temporary caretaker of the program. The program is not his. And all you ever hope for is that you leave it in better shape than you took it. And if I die tomorrow, I can say that.

**UNGER:** *Do you think that Today has played an important role in informing the American people?*

**GUMBEL:** Yes, I do. I think the fact that it has been copied so much is an enormous compliment to it. I think the fact that it's been on the air for 41 years is a tremendous compliment. Someone said that it's like the original town meeting. It's the place where ideas are offered to the marketplace. They are not explored as fully as they are other places. They're not as in depth as some might like, but it's the place where you hear about ideas. It's the place where you tune to wake up in the morning to see if your world wasn't blown up. See a special reason to go work. See if there's something interesting or fascinating...

**UNGER:** *Is there something that you did on this show that you feel was the quintessential Today piece?*

**GUMBEL:** I try to be thrilled about something that happened in the program every day. Because if something in it didn't really please me, then I'd have to say, "maybe you ought to think about getting out of this." I invested an awful lot of professional and personal pride and stock into the African effort. And I have every reason to be able to say this was the best thing I ever did. But it was bound not to meet my expectations. I mean, you know, I'd been living with it for four years.

**UNGER:** *Is that the perfectionist in you?*

**GUMBEL:** Yeah.

**UNGER:** *Was it a battle to get the Today show to do it?*

**GUMBEL:** Yeah. Four years running.

**UNGER:** *Was it a major expense for the Today show?*

**GUMBEL:** Not as much as I would have liked it to be. (Chuckle) We're like every place else now. We're being asked to do more with limited

resources. But when given the choice, either you can do it for this or don't do it, then you try to do it for that. Some of the compromises I've had to make in the name of economics I don't like—some of them I hate—but I try to keep focused on the long-range project and getting it done right.

**UNGER:** *One of the reasons Bill Cosby tried to buy NBC was supposedly that he feels African-Americans are not being portrayed fairly on network television. How do you feel about that?*

**GUMBEL:** I don't know the particulars of Mr. Cosby's interest. I know only what I read in the paper. And I don't even know if that's the reason he was interested. But do I think African-Americans are portrayed fairly on television? No, I don't. I think oftentimes they are humorous stereotypes. They are only at one level. They are seen in one perspective. Do I think his complaint is warranted? Yeah, I think his complaint is warranted.

**UNGER:** *Do you think that a few African-Americans in top-level positions could do something to change that?*

**GUMBEL:** It's always dangerous to suggest because you move somebody in, or x number of people in, that you're going to see huge changes in anything. But having said that, do I think that African-Americans in a position of responsibility would be more sensitive to stereotypes and negative images? Yeah, I think that's true.

**UNGER:** *What do you feel is your future in television? Where would you like to be when you leave the Today show?*

**GUMBEL:** Wow! (whistles—pause)

**UNGER:** *Is your future in news or in sports?*

**GUMBEL:** I keep promising myself I'm going to come up with a great

answer to what I'm gonna do when I grow up. No, my future is not in sports. When I walked away from it 11 years ago, I said that was it and I feel that way. I keep on saying that retirement is just around the corner. At the end of this contract in two years I will have done this show 13 years.

Dave Garroway took me aside at a party 10 days after I took the program and he said, "Do it five years. If you do it any more than five years, you'll wind up going in the woods and talking to a moose." By the end of this contract, I will have done it 13 years. That's a long time. That's longer than I ever expected to do it, and some might argue longer than anybody ever should try. On the other hand, I would honestly tell you I don't know of anything else in TV I'm dying to do.

**UNGER:** *Would you like to anchor on the evening news?*

**GUMBEL:** Absolutely not.

**UNGER:** *Documentaries?*

**GUMBEL:** There are certain subjects that appeal to me to do but to do it on a regular basis, I'm not sure that's me. I mean, you would think that by the age of 44, I'd know what I want to do when I grow up, but I don't have a great answer for you. I really don't. This job, I enjoy. I think this is the best job in TV. Yet there are some days where you get up and you go, "You know what? I've stayed at the fair one day too long."

When that idea predominates in my mind, I guess it'll be time. ■

In seventeen years of writing about television for *The Christian Science Monitor*, Arthur Unger has won national recognition as one of the medium's most influential critics. He is also known for his revealing interviews with TV, stage and film personalities.

**PLAY  
BACK**

**100<sup>th</sup>  
ISSUE**

*"This is to be the year of the documentary. Every advance indication points to an unprecedented level of factual programming by the networks and a concomitant upsurge on the local level. Whether the documentary will prove to be a great whale of an idea or merely a 'minnow' in a sea of mediocrity remains to be seen. One thing is certain: a mere numerical increase in such programs will not in itself provide salvation for television's ills."*

Burton Benjamin,  
*Television Quarterly*  
February, 1962  
Vol.1/No.1



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# THE WORLD OF CHINESE TELEVISION

**BY JUDITH MARLANE**

**T**hree years after Tien An Men Square, there is renewed progress in Chinese television. The massive size and population of this country present the mass media with challenges of prodigious proportions. Chinese television is currently starting to evolve as a forward-looking symbol of China's move into the modern age. But the political repression continues, and the creative forces are wary of content, and tend to focus more on technique than substance.

China's recent open-door policy has resulted in a major change in television programming. After the decade lost to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when television broadcast little but hokey revolutionary operas approved by the party, there are now fresh topics and foreign co-productions. Television performs a key social function in China. Education and entertainment form the top priorities. Programming includes variety shows, traditional dramas, documen-

taries, news, foreign imports, sports, cartoons, classroom courses, children's programs and even soap operas. The world's largest television audience is finding new choices.

When regular television broadcasting began on September 2, 1958, in Beijing, there were about one thousand television sets to receive the signal. In 1989, potential viewers numbered six hundred million, two and one-half times larger than the population of the United States.

The first broadcast of international news was received via satellite on April 1, 1980, permitting some live pictures of other cultures and nationalities to be seen in China. This began to bring the Chinese people new awareness of the world around them.

Although foreign news stories may show critical issues facing the country, domestic news will not. Domestically, all news on Chinese television is "good": irrigation projects; a dinosaur exhibition; students learning computer programming; medical care for farmers; efforts to encourage seawater fish breeding. The only way problems are presented is through a

story dealing with corrections and "solutions."

For example, if an error is remedied, that is a permissible news story. But there is no dissent; no controversy. China's media is singleminded in its need to project and protect only the most positive images of its own world.

**T**he broadcast industry in China is hoping to develop and produce material that is acceptable by Western standards; it is no longer sufficient to be judged by national or even Third World standards. However, the cultural and historical need to insist on a view of China that is positive impedes this progress, and takes a heavy toll; it impacts adversely on the creative ability to use film and television with emotional impact and to portray the realities of life.

I was recently selected to serve as the only Western judge in the preliminary documentary division of the Shanghai International Television Festival. Together with eight other judges, all successful Chinese producers and directors, we screened 74 documentaries from all over the world, including entries from Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Cuba, Belgium, Canada, United States, China, West Germany, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

During our ten days of viewing and discussing these international films, a curious dichotomy became evident. Except when it came to their own country, Chinese colleagues were able to respond positively to films with emotional impact based on universal themes that transcended political philosophies, such as love,

hate and greed. They willingly solicit criticism and are eager to apply it in all categories except their own. When it runs counter to their ingrained nationalism, it is rejected.

The Chinese judges chose as their winning entry a documentary with ordinary production values about a dating service for the elderly. A *Marriage Bureau for Elderly People* was a static, distant discourse on a theme of social service; they bypassed *The Home for Abandoned Children*, a superior film with major emotional impact that told the true story of a poverty-stricken couple who raise abandoned children.

No amount of heated discussion could convince the majority of Chinese Judges that this deeply moving depiction of family love far transcended possible negative impli-

cations of abject poverty, and the reality that sometimes children are left abandoned in their streets. *The Home for Abandoned Children* created division within the ranks of Chinese producers and directors who have often known the effects of censure, and the problems of portraying ideas and events

that do not meet with government approval. This documentary was not a reality of life in China considered suitable to be seen and shared.

**T**ight controls on what people are permitted to view makes most Chinese documentaries static, unemotional and even clinical. Chinese filmmakers, including some who were judges with me, frequently have been hurt in their professional careers when they attempted to deal with material that is officially not

*Tight controls on what people are permitted to view makes most Chinese documentaries static, unemotional and even clinical.*

acceptable. Sometimes, even advanced techniques of film art are taboo.

As a result, they are more comfortable dealing with unaltered factual events, even though the results are often antiseptic and ineffective. This inhibits the power of the Chinese documentary to make an impact, squelches creativity and diminishes its appeal to a Western audience.

Chinese media experts, however, are eager to learn the latest Western production techniques so they can more successfully compete in the world market. They are capable of recognizing and appreciating well-made documentaries that communicate universal human themes. In fact, they voted unanimously for *Promises to Keep*, by Durrin Productions, a powerful United States documentary about the homeless, a critical issue presented with passion and personal impact. Since the problem was not set in their own homeland, the theme and the production was both acceptable and appreciated here. The winning film was American—a National Geographic special, *Baka People of the Forest* from WQED, Pittsburgh.

The Shanghai Television Festival has become a bi-annual event in an orchestrated effort to spotlight their country and to provide an opportunity for Chinese writers, producers and directors to study innovative media techniques from all over the world. The opportunities for their own documentaries to have significant impact will increase as they continue to interact with the West. China someday hopes to achieve recognition and distribution as their films and videos compete on the international market.

**T**he problem, as the Chinese see it, is to permit their culture to interact with the Western world without a sacrifice of their deeply ingrained political and social values. The Chinese regard them-

selves as one family. They believe in conformity and reconciliation by narrowing down differences. There is gradual progress being made on the creative front, despite China's turbulent history since the Civil War.

The uncertain course of Chinese politics coexists with the growing importance of television. Foreign programs have become a staple of daily programming. Since 1979 when Bob Hope taped his special *The Road to China*, one of the first entertainment programs made in China by a foreign company, the desire for programming from the United States has increased. Programs with nonpolitical content have been the most acceptable. American television series recently aired in China include *Dynasty* (reported to be the favorite of Deng Xiaping, China's paramount leader), *Hunter*, *Falcon Crest*, *Remington Steele* and *Matt Houston*.

The most popular programs on television generally are motion pictures. These have included *On Golden Pond*, *Death On the Nile*, *Oliver and Karamer Versus Kramer*. These broadcasts are studied by Chinese viewers as a portrayal of our lifestyles and culture. Often, this is a mixed blessing.

While in China, I had the opportunity to speak with the woman who was responsible for dubbing all films for the Shanghai Television Station. Huang Qi, a senior member of the staff, told me she had seen many American movies, and she was confused about the need that Americans seemed to have to break up their family when they go out for a job: she was using the example of *Kramer Versus Kramer* which she had recently dubbed. In China, she told me, it is very natural for a woman to go directly to work after graduation. Although women in China share a sisterhood of problems, they do not face "a sensational choice between job and family."

Huang Qi asked why it was neces-

sary for a woman "to sacrifice her family." Her questions reflected confusion and concern—largely based on her experience watching American films and the values they project to her. She felt a need to understand more about the lifestyles of American women; to reach out her hand in a bond of friendship and compassion.

In China, women evidently have less conflict in the choice between marriage and career. They believe it is natural to marry and to have a child. (The government has established a one child per family quota.) But it is traditional Chinese philosophy to have a baby, to run a home and yet have job responsibilities. This duality often brings women conflicts and guilt since they feel they cannot be good housewives as their husbands expect when they have to work long hours to fulfill job duties. Often, women in Chinese television choose to shift their job assignment so they will have more time to be with their families.

**W**omen news reporters in China also experience difficulties coping with the travel that is required. (This, too, is a problem shared by their American counterparts.) The night shifts and the constant pressures of breaking deadlines often create havoc in their personal lives. Those Chinese broadcasters in their mid 30's or early 40's seem the most torn as they struggle to lay a strong foundation for their career while also caring for small children and, in most cases, aging

parents. The extended family in China is a cultural tradition. Network and local newswomen working in television stations throughout the United States can empathize with the need to make hard choices; to establish priorities; to take on increased burdens.

The women I met in Chinese television spoke with candor about their professional lives. Chen Wen, for example, is a brilliant news reporter and editor working for the Shanghai Television Station. She was their first camera woman. She told me that when she was seventeen years old, she was forced to go to the countryside as part of the cultural revolution. Wen worked in a factory there for four years.

When she returned to Shanghai, she became a teacher of art. Then, she answered an advertisement in the newspaper for a job as a reporter, passed an examination and joined the Shanghai Television Station eight years ago. Of the Twenty-eight people working in the reporting section, she was the only woman.

Wen explained to me: "Originally, there were three other women there, but they got transferred after having children. The travel required was too demanding with a family." Chen Wen remains single.

On all her assignments, Wen feels equal to men. She says she has never experienced unpleasant times. She was pleased to admit that men enjoyed working with her. She told me they often want to protect her and offer their help. But she never permits them to take over what she accepts as her share of the job.

Wen acknowledged that men

*The match-making program "Tonight We Meet" provides opportunities for single men and women to meet while creating new views on life, love and marriage.*

receive more preferential treatment in television news than do women. Most of the technicians in Chinese television stations are men; the television equipment is considered too heavy for women. The prejudice against women in news remains.

There are distinct advantages to being a newswoman and Wen was quick to point out the benefits, as she sees them: women are more tactful in approaching people and are more sympathetic in handling human relationships, she claims, and are often able to discover details that male correspondents miss. Therefore, they are able to give their stories additional dimension and depth. Wen also believes that, "Sometimes a woman will be easier to talk to and they will get information that a man will not. A woman is easier to approach."

Probably the most powerful woman in Shanghai Television is Jin Min Zhu, Vice Director of the Shanghai Television Station where she is the administrative head. With twenty-five years of experience in broadcasting, she is a pioneer in the industry. Zhu served as the first generation anchorwoman of Shanghai Television. Married with two children, Zhu told me that she believes women are making a greater contribution to Shanghai Television than men. She says, "They have to take care of family while they have to work." This dual responsibility makes it necessary to shoulder heavier burdens and they most often make double or triple the effort of men in order to attain the same achievements.

During my conversations with some of the women who are now making important contributions to Chinese television, they were interested to learn how their experiences and frustrations compared with women who work in television in the United States. In so many ways, we are the same. The women I met in Chinese television were friendly and receptive to an exchange of ideas. They spoke

freely of their personal goals and lifestyles, although there was little talk of politics.

Over the past ten years, China's open door policy despite retreats and repression has contributed to economic progress and some nationwide reforms. In the mass media, there are major reforms being made in order to meet the current challenge and to promote the country's modernization program.

Television has recently been the instrument used to try to replace old feudal ideas that create obstacles to marriage and happiness. The match-making program *Tonight We Meet* was launched in 1990 by the Beijing Television station. The idea is more than entertainment: it provides opportunities for single men and women to meet while creating new views on life, love and marriage. It is the Chinese form of free choice through advertising. The program has been a great success and has matched up many new couples.

One of the first women to appear on *Tonight We Meet* was an attractive divorced journalist, Ren Li, who was indignant to learn that other divorced women were more interested in a man's position and material wealth. Ren believed that a woman should not depend on anyone but herself.

She came on the matchmaking program in order to tell the audience about her own expectations of marriage, saying it was not important whether or not she found a husband.


"If a woman doesn't have self-respect, she can only depend on a man." Ren stated that men always demand a virtuous wife. But to her, it was just as necessary for the man to be a virtuous husband and father. Many Chinese who heard Ren Li speak out on television called her a "brave woman." Traditional Chinese matchmaking has been given a jolt by the program. Unfortunately, I never

did find out whether Ren found a new husband.

The Chinese love to watch sports events. Each year there are over 100 games broadcast live or taped. In 1985, CBS-TV traded a package of sports programs that included several national basketball all-star and play-off games in return for advertising time on China Central Television. (Television advertising has been a regular feature of Chinese television since 1979.) Our advanced broadcasting technology including multiple camera shots, instant replay and slow motion effects literally dazzled the Chinese audiences. They are eager to learn the newest production techniques from us and adapt them to their own programming.

In 1990, the 11th Annual Asian games in Beijing resulted in an expanded effort toward providing sports coverage that included more interesting and varied technical use of cameras. They are striving to compete more effectively with the imported programs now available in China.

The Asian games were being held during my last visit to Beijing, and I was invited to attend the opening ceremonies. The grandeur, color and pageantry that was on display was impressive. But the most interesting addition to the spectacle was the appearance of helium filled yellow balloons in the shape of packages of M&M's which floated slowly upward from the floor of the arena; the ultimate commercial injected into a socialist country. The potential market for products in China is truly beginning to transform its landscape and its economy.

ffices are now set up in Los Angeles and New York by the Chinese to buy the products of the studios and independent production companies. Joint ventures with foreign companies are courted and

welcomed. The international broadcasting and communities recognize the potential market of over a billion consumers.

Television advertising is considered an effective way to begin to reach the largest consumer market in the world. Local fifteen second and thirty-second spots include ads for household appliances such as refrigerators and television sets, shampoo, cosmetics, furniture and cookies. International companies and products appearing on Chinese television include Colgate-Palmolive, Coca-Cola, Tang, Sony, Hitachi and Jeep. Dupont, Boeing and McDonnell-Douglas have used television advertising to promote their corporate image in China's modernization. Cigarette and liquor advertising are not permitted.

The door that is now being cautiously opened from within China has resulted in a large number of television documentaries emphasizing the progress that is being made here. Yet as I find at the Shanghai Festival, social and political criticism are not permissible and are not portrayed. In China today, as in the past, it is not possible to be a patriot and a dissenter at the same time. Personal suffering is considered irrelevant when compared to the prosperity of the nation.

The men and women working in Chinese television have learned that being critical of China and Chinese contemporary life marks the person as a dissenter and this creates serious problems for their future work. Such a climate keeps a blanket of fear over the creative community and the intellectuals.

It is obvious of course that the Chinese government still regards television as a useful propaganda tool and as a potential instrument of foreign policy, in addition to its money-making potential. After Tien An Men Square, there is renewed care in what is presented on the air. No one ever talks of the events of that



tragedy.

If a question is asked, it goes unanswered. To the people of Chinese television, it has become a non-event. It never happened. So while I find so much that encourages extending our hands in friendship, while there is so much I share in the feelings and concerns of the men and women working in broadcasting, there remains a distance that I found difficult to bridge.

The broadcasting community continues to go through intense introspection and self-criticism. In any case, the commitment of Chinese leaders to the development of the television industry is strong and the increasing influence of Western programming is undeniable. Moreover, the tremendous promise of the Chinese television market is gradually being recognized by multinational corporations. The opportunities for interaction in the international marketplace are creating global influences that someday will establish a fresh voice for the largest television audience in the world. As Chinese television prepares to enter a new era, it is my hope that by working with the world community, they will be able to recognize and achieve their true potential. ■

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# PLAY BACK

100<sup>th</sup>  
ISSUE

*"... I should like to see television comedy abandon its preoccupation with the split-level family on Elm Street; its fixation that only oppressively wholesome people can be fun..."*

*"I also would like to see television tackle the American family, not as a source of endless giggles—a unit whose most grinding difficulties spin off junior's marks, sister's dates, dad's boss and mother's struggle with budget—but as a microcosm reflecting the urgent and bewildering problems that confront us all in a world of shifting and transitory values..."*

Hubbell Robinson  
Television Quarterly  
February, 1962  
Vol.1/No.1

Sony LMS,  
Still Image And  
Metal Particle Tape.  
Three Different  
Technologies That  
All Produced  
The Same Result.



Many thanks to the academy for its  
recognition of our technological achievements.

**SONY**

# OF TASTES AND TIMES

Some challenging reflections on television's elastic standards and astounding practices

**BY GEORGE DESSART**

**W**e have had to learn how to version a show for American audiences." Eileen Opatut, Executive Vice President of Lionheart Television International, the BBC's syndication arm, was addressing a seminar of graduate students in New York City last May on the problems inherent in international co-production and program exchange.

"People in the US think the Brits have no standards because we aren't bothered by nudity or language. But there are any number of programs appearing on prime time in the United states that we cannot possibly present in the UK. Even the most tasteful love-making can't be shown here on broadcast television but you think nothing of seeing someone's throat being cut. That is absolutely unacceptable in the United Kingdom. Absolutely."

"*The Lost Language of Cranes* is a perfect example of how a program could be versioned for an audience with different standards. It's a very tasteful program dealing with gay issues. But we had to double shoot it for PBS. We double shot it for language and we double shot it for nudity," Opatut explained. "I call it

the 'shorts version.' On June 24th on *Great Performances* they were all wearing underwear.

"But American audiences always know what's going on," she continued, describing another episode the BBC double shot for the same series. 'It was a program on Bill T. Jones, the choreographer, and we followed him on a tour of a dance called 'The Last Supper of Uncle Tom's Cabin.' The last sequence included non-professional dancers culled from the local communities who appeared nude. They were nude for artistic reasons, not sexual. It was to show the commonality of human beings. There were all sorts of people—tall, short, fat and thin. It was very funny. But American audiences will never get to see it. We had to shoot them from the waist up."

Notions of what is appropriate to be shown on television, on what is in good taste, differ from one side of the Atlantic to the other. But just what is "good taste"? Who determines it and why aren't the rules the same everywhere and at all times?

Is good taste impossible to pin down because it is different from minute to minute? Something like *Through the Looking Glass*? Remember the Queen's mini-parable about the difficulty in fixing some thing in space and time?

*"The rule is, jam tomorrow and jam yesterday—but never jam today."*

Or do these questions of language, nudity and violence have to do with something more important? Do they speak to values?

Not long after Eileen Opatut made her observations, the airwaves and the press were filled with discussions of Vice President Quayle's suggestion that somehow *Murphy Brown* was responsible for the Los Angeles riots and that "American values" were being undermined by a "cultural elite," presumably including the heads of the networks as well as the entire creative community. The June 8 *Newsweek* cover was emblazoned in stunning graphics with the title: "Whose Values?"

As Harold Lasswell might well have pondered during those weeks, *who sets what values on which channels for whom with what effect?*

Who indeed.

**F**or many years, the major networks attempted to grapple with these questions on a daily basis. Each had renowned social scientists monitoring sex, violence, stereotyping and other questions. Each carefully analyzed audience response, not only quantitatively but in terms of attitudes toward program material. Much of this effort was discontinued in the late eighties.

When the ownership of the three networks changed, control passed, in the case of two of the three, out of the hands of professional broadcasters and into the hands of businessmen or investors with no prior experience in operating media and no demonstrated commitment to the public trust that those institutions had historically been obliged to serve. This change came about at a time when the economy in general, and the advertising-dependent businesses in particular,

were in great turmoil. Deregulation and downsizing both characterized the business climate and became rallying cries of the new media managements.

Among the first to go were those whose jobs were to monitor news operations for balance and adherence to standards of fairness, accuracy and dignity; those who tracked the number of commercials; those who analyzed and responded to the audience calls and letters.

Each of the networks had, since the 1950's, a cadre of professional editors called Program Practices at CBS or Standards and Practices at the other networks. These people looked at every entertainment program before it aired, negotiating changes to bring them into line with network standards. At its height, CBS had 80 people—down to 75 after we got out of cable. For the last seven of eight years there have been 30. The other networks reduced their Standards and Practices staffs to roughly similar strength.

In 1985, management began a process of turning over to the creative community—the network program executives and the studio's producers—primary responsibility for the day-to-day maintenance of program standards. Admittedly, there were legitimate reasons for change; compelling reasons. Unfortunately, other forces came into play: temporal, societal and managerial in their origin, wide-ranging and destructive in their effect.

The earliest changes in the networks' handling of standards and practices questions came about as a part of a process of reexamining every established system. Many had come to feel that the implementation of standards had become mired in stagnating and costly "corpocracy." Since every second of entertainment programming was treated exactly as every other, Practices/editors were required to sit through a twelve-hour taping session with nothing to do but

wait for the unlikely event that a Bob Newhart would suddenly give vent to a long pent-up desire to recite all seven of the WBAI George Carlin case proscribed words. Hardly enough to do for a well-educated professional adult. Little wonder that pettifoggery would frequently creep in, and adversarial relationships would sometimes develop between producers and their monitoring editors.

CBS was the first network to move. They initiated the process with a 1985 study and began implementing the conclusions two months before I took over the department in August, 1986. Under the procedures envisioned by CBS, the review of commercials would proceed as before, but with a greatly reduced staff. Children's programs, dramas-based-on-fact, and theatrical films would continue to be handled as before. But new prime time series would be covered only for the first few episodes. All other programs, continuing series, and daytime, would be turned over to the Program executives to watch over.

At first, the process seemed to have worked better than its critics had suspected. But 1986 was a time of accelerated change within the industry. Teams of management consultants roamed the corridors along Sixth Avenue and the street daily echoed with rumors that one of the networks had found yet another area to cut back or to dispense with altogether.

Any chance of making the new Practice's procedures work in a reasonable and responsible fashion was sacrificed as wave upon wave of downsizing struck. CBS Program Practices staff decreased by 60 percent in less than a year. The mounting concerns of affiliates and audience went unheeded. Many programs went on (and continue to go on) network television without any responsible executive, from either programming or practices, ever seeing them.

**I**t would have been a bad time for the change in procedures, even without the changes in media ownership. The latter seemed to make it nearly impossible. A root cause for the dismantling of the standards maintenance process was an unwillingness to acknowledge the nature of the business network television is in and how that business differs from others which deal with video signals.

First, in addition to the good citizenry expected from any business, broadcasting, and particularly network broadcasting, had always depended for its acceptance on its willingness to embrace a mandate to behave like a major community resource.

The newer media, on the other hand, have had no such mandate nor have they been held to the same standards. Again and again, as I went around the country, people led me to believe that while they might have no difficulty in seeing or hearing particular matter on cable, they would be appalled and highly offended were the same words and images to appear on one of the major networks. Their response was not unlike the familiar response of many who report they had no objection to the advertising of feminine hygiene and other personal products during daytime, when they are viewing alone, but are offended when the same commercials appear in prime time when their husbands or children might be present.

By their reasoning, they should be able to set their dials to any one of the network affiliates and leave them there with no worry. The sets would come on to their favorites and they need have no fear when they turned on television that anyone in the family might be offended by what came on the air.

Perhaps this is not too surprising. At least 2000 years of Western history suggests that every society tolerates certain activities, speech or images,

in places set aside for particular forms of amusement, while, at the same time, decreeing that those activities, speech or images, cannot be brought into the home. In many instances, they cannot even be spoken of in the home.

**A**s a nation which owes its very founding to a free press, we have long differentiated between freedom of expression and freedom of selection. You and I are not required to read every book, buy every newspaper, go to see every film. We don't have to be exposed to everything that has been written, said or portrayed. We can and do exercise freedom of selection. But when the media enter the home as radio and television do, that is not so easy.

Accordingly, most Americans have long recognized that someone must serve as surrogate, assuring us not only that the program selected over all others available will be that which was most likely to generally please, and will not gratuitously offend. Consistent with our ideas of freedom of the press, we have not permitted government to do this. Rather, we have insisted that the broadcasting industry perform this function. And, until recently, we have mandated that government oversee this process by making sure that those who are permitted to operate the industry, understand our wishes.

For about forty years of broadcasting, this arrangement seemed to work quite smoothly. To be sure, there were always exceptions. It would be virtually impossible in a heterogeneous, pluralistic society for everyone to agree on both manners and morality, on what is fair and what is not. But about twenty years ago, much of that society began to change. The Baby Boom generation had begun to reach college age. And thus began one of the most significant changes in manners since the time of the indus-

trial revolution.

The importance of that generation, we now clearly recognize, depends on several unique factors. The Baby Boomers came into being because of the usual dramatic increases in marriage and family formation which follows the ending of any war. But World War Two had seen the largest number of men under arms in history. That meant very many families were formed, and a record number of babies were born in the years after the war.

Second, those post-war babies were the first generation born since the advent of antibiotics and far more of them were destined to survive.

Third, society was undergoing another period of prolonging adolescence, a function, to a large extent, of the expansion of the economy, the growth of a relatively affluent middle class and the exponential increase in the length of education required by a far more differentiated workplace.

Finally, new forms of media were emerging. Most important, the long-playing record had made recorded music available to all. At the same time, the emergence of television as the dominant mass medium, had freed the older medium, radio, to follow the classic pattern of media fragmentation.

For the first time ever, there were mass media not only catering to but also marketing directly to the adolescent. There was money available for the young to have their very own radios, small and large, and records—and FM. The rock music culture served to both enfranchise adolescents and to insulate them from adults as never before.

And adolescents were not only present in greater numbers, they formed a larger proportion of the population than their predecessors had done. The classic population triangle had developed an enormous bulge. Soon, Hollywood discovered that the young had a great deal of

disposable income. The movie theaters, emptied by television, filled up again with teenagers.

Adolescence, we all recognize, is supposed to be a time of testing, of seeking independence, distancing oneself from one's parents. For a certain number, that independence takes the form of outright rebellion; for many others, it is a symbolic rebellion. And the easiest symbol of all is the word, especially the forbidden word. As the psychiatrist Rensatus Hartogs put it in his classic study, *Four Letter Word Games*, "The natural idiom of rebellion is obscenity."

Not surprisingly, one of the most conspicuous characteristics of the adolescent-directed media, most especially theatrical films, has been their language. At one point, a major Hollywood studio asked CBS to look at one such movie to determine whether it would be suitable for primetime network television. The Program Practices editor's note to the distributor listed no fewer than 147 words or phrases that would have to be removed from a 111 minute film. My recollection is that, aside from the use of language, the film was generally innocuous and would otherwise have posed no problem.

The use of appropriate language is a hallmark of good manners. What is or is not acceptable language varies greatly from culture to culture and, within a culture, from class to class. It also changes from time to time. Not too long ago, calling a Frenchman a "dirty salad" could get you an immediate bloody nose. And what about that word, "bloody?" The "bloody," originally a contraction of "by Our Lady," is still not considered socially

acceptable in many circles in the United Kingdom.

**T**he Sixties marked the beginning of a period of considerable change in language acceptability, partially because the Baby Boomers discovered their new found vocabulary so useful in that decade of protest. The psychologist Phillip Zimbardo, observing the changes in language at that time, particularly among young women, remarked that "The psychological controls that we put on women are so tight that when they break through, they really let go. Maybe what we are seeing now throughout society is a similar reaction to a sudden lifting of controls."

Hartogs took a longer view: "Verbal obscenity is undoubtedly a universal phenomenon. If it did not exist in all known languages, it would probably have to be invented in order to permit humans a psychologically suitable vehicle for the ventilation of fury and despair, the elimination of anger and aggression, the expression of rebellion, and the suppression of fear."

As has happened so often in the past, when a large proportion of the public adopt changes in language use, it has had an effect on the society as a whole. In recent years, tee shirts and bumper stickers have reached what would hitherto have been considered unimaginable levels of bad taste. Characters in prestigious novels use language that would have made a sailor blush a few short years before.

In a discussion of the topic recently, someone asked what was the harm in

*In the Sixties, young people liked to believe (and they would have the rest of us believe, as well) that their generation invented sex. Even they now know that wasn't true.*

bad taste in broadcasting? Who is damaged by it?

Bad taste is that which is, by definition, what is unacceptable or offensive to most people. Mass media, by definition, depend for their survival on mass audiences. Failing to be sensitive to societal norms of language and portrayal will inescapably result in turning away a significant proportion of the mass audience. As audiences continue to fractionate, the networks and other distributors who aspire to capturing the largest and most diverse audience possible, must not provide a climate in which most of the time, most people are gratuitously made uncomfortable by what they see and hear, particularly in the company of other family members.

In short, good manners on the part of the electronic guest in the house dictate observing the canons of acceptable behavior. The economics of primetime television require that every single hour is the subject of such intense head-to-head competition among the networks that none should consider alienating any significant portion of the audience.

**T**he real question, of course, is not what has happened in the past but what will happen in the future. Let's go back and look at that Baby Boom generation again. They are parents now and like every generation of parents before them, they are concerned about their children's socialization.

During my days in CBS Program Practices, I divided most of my time between the two coasts. But at least once a month, I sought out an occasion to meet with our affiliates and with groups of people in diverse communities, large and small, across the country. Almost everywhere I went I picked up the same information: the new parents simply did not want to hear their children mouthing

words that others might find objectionable. I concluded then that we would soon see a societal change in language acceptability.

If my observation was correct, as some observers seem to suggest, it may shed some light on that other, ultimately more elusive area, that of content.

When people talk about being personally uncomfortable with what is on television, two topics tend to preoccupy the discussion. First, almost invariably, they speak of the prevalence of sexual themes. In second place they may put any one of several themes— life styles that seem to promote substance abuse; materialism; or violence.

Let's look at the question of sexual material.

In the Sixties, young people liked to believe (and they would have had the rest of us believe, as well), that their generation invented sex. Even they now know that wasn't true.

Over the last several centuries, societal attitudes toward sexual behavior, or rather, what is much more to the point, societal attitudes about *discussing* sexual behavior, have gone from one extreme to another in the English-speaking world. Again and again and again. The Elizabethan Age was succeeded by the Protectorate. The bawdiness, vulgarity, and excess of the earlier period gave way to total silence. The Protectorate was characterized by repression of discussion, widespread official censorship of writings—not just about sexual and other personal matters, but also about politics—and even the closing of the theaters.

Then there came the Restoration and a theater totally preoccupied with sexual themes; so were its audiences, a generation brought up in exile, newly returned and needing to develop ground rules for good taste and acceptable behavior. We tend to regard their theatre as totally fanciful, but the court cases of the time read



like the plays.

That period was followed by the era of William and Mary and of Queen Anne which saw the establishment of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners. Then there was another period of *laissez faire* which prompted the foundation of The Society for the Suppression of Vice, in 1802, and the dawning of the Victorian era, when anything that remotely suggested what the human body looked like or how it worked was simply not to be mentioned, let alone, discussed. The terms "white meat" and "dark meat" were originally euphemisms without which the Victorian parent could never have carved and served the turkey. The words "leg" and "breast" were forbidden, even in that context. Even the legs of grand pianos presented a problem; they were often provided with ruffled pantaloons.

Queen Victoria's era was succeeded by the Edwardian, World War One, and the Age of the Flapper—the Roaring Twenties. In the Thirties, the Hayes office, Hollywood's rigid attempt at self-regulation, prohibited explicit sexual portrayals, but the film comedies of the Depression era were rife with innuendo, tag lines from off-color jokes and plots which held up a promised romance, of unspecified but certainly sexual nature as the solution to all of life's problems.

That brings us to World War Two, and the comparative lack of sexual content in the Fifties. That was the era of conformity and the building of the nuclear family, the childhood years of the Baby Boomers.

**N**ow that generation is exercising control over television choices. The adults, especially women, 18 to 49, are the principal targets of so many advertisers. And, of course, the overwhelmingly dominant subgroup within that cohort, the Baby Boomers.

We see many references to change

in the Baby Boomer's orientation toward sex. Some try to link this to the fear of AIDS. Actually, the change took place before AIDS became a factor. The sexual revolution, if it ever really started, was ended by the troops in the trenches. Few had signed up, and not too many were drafted. True, the generation's coming of age coincided with a disappearance of some of the traditional constraints on adolescent sexuality and to some extent, their behavior reflected that. But it didn't take too long before commitment and a renewed interest in marriage had come back into vogue.

As always, television has been a year or two behind that change. At least in terms of presenting stories which reflected that new reality. In part that is the inertia, the lead time involved for a writer to spot a social change, find and develop a story idea which embodies it, write it and finally have the material produced.

But here an interesting paradox emerges. We have no way of knowing what stories are not written which would have been written a year earlier, or what ideas are abandoned before they are developed. We are unable to measure or even discern a trend until after it shows up on the air.

What will happen before television catches up with the new mores? In today's climate, with the greatly reduced role those who set and enforce standards have been given, we will see the producers having more and more control over what is seen. But not all producers understand what is happening in the society at large, or even what the difference is between network television and cable.

What has been the result of the change in television's standards so far? True, the republic still stands. But serious practical problems have arisen—even if we continue to look only at the relatively simple question of language acceptability. As with all

matters of taste, this involves subjective judgment. On a mass medium appealing to a national pluralistic audience, the standard against which that judgment must be measured is not the personal taste of the producer, the program practices editor nor even the head of the network.

**W**hat must prevail, I believe—and what used to prevail—is an informed assessment of

what is currently acceptable to most American adults. Unfortunately, determining what that is, keeping up with it, requires more time and effort than any producer or executive producer can devote.

Equally unfortunate, is the fact that each producer makes independent judgments with no awareness of those made for the program which precedes and that which follows. Already, this has robbed certain words of whatever dramatic emphasis they might provide. It has brought complaints from a number of affiliates who believe their audiences find the general tone of the language used becoming increasingly distasteful. A relatively mild term, not offensive to most people but seldom heard before on network television, can and does become annoying to many when it is used six, eight, ten times in each of three successive programs.

An even thornier problem arises with respect to the visual language which is deemed acceptable. Questions of portrayal do not lend themselves as easily to codification. How explicit should the portrayal of bodily injury be? Does slow motion make violent behavior appear more so? Or

even less so? Why were “squibs”—the devices that release blood upon contact—so long prohibited on network television? Or guns held directly to the head?

Where is the line drawn between what is required by the dramatic imperatives of the story and exploitation or sensationalism? These questions become even more difficult since merely posing them comes dangerously close to an assault on the very core of the producer’s creative contribution.

The question of violence on television is one which has concerned networks, social scientists and observers almost from the debut of the medium. Until its disbanding, CBS’ Office of Social Research, like similar arms of the other networks, conducted scientifically rigorous tracking studies extending over

decades. Recently we have heard demands that the Congress gear up for yet another look at the violence issue.

Reasonable persons may—and do—disagree on the effects of any sort of information on television. Consensus is emerging, however, that a climate of unrestrained violence would be not only distasteful but actually detrimental.

The problems become even more significant when we go, as violence takes us, beyond presentation, beyond manners—such questions as language and portrayal—to the content of television itself.

We musn’t let a preoccupation with manners alone distract us from what we really should be worrying about. The question of manners can be taken care of by the on/off switch. What we really should be worrying about is

*Reasonable persons may disagree on the effects of any sort of information on television. Consensus is emerging, however, that a climate of unrestrained violence would not only be distasteful but actually detrimental.*

what should be the larger concern of the self regulatory process in all its dimensions, the basic moral question: the question about the responsibility of the media as important institutions in American life. That question derives its importance not just from the role the media play, but also from the fact that they can be seen as microcosms of American society at the threshold of the Twenty-first Century. Once again, the media serving as metaphors.

The media in general and the broadcasting media in particular have been caught up in the same forces as the society as a whole. Business institutions have been a major force in the development of stable communities in this country. At the very least, they have taken pride in providing employment, in turning out quality products or providing quality services, and in being good citizens in their communities.

Most media businesses have also taken great pride in the role they have played in people's daily lives. By and large, they have recognized the special obligations which flow from that fact. Professional broadcasters, as individuals, have tried to make their public interest obligation a standard of personal conduct and a cornerstone of the culture they share with their peers.

Jack Schneider, once Executive Vice President of CBS, Inc., characterized his generation of leadership to me in the following statement: "We came into this business because we wanted to join a priesthood." Contrast that with the words of one of the non-broadcasters in the new breed of media management. He said of his network, "This company does not recognize any such thing as a moral obligation."

There are many ethical issues which trouble thoughtful critics, of television: the values which the medium presents to its public; trivialization of the news; gratuitous sex or

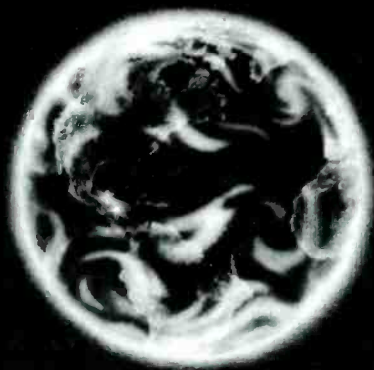
violence; over-commercialization; the exploitation of children; a general lowering of standards; a vulgarization of the public discourse.

Reasonable men and women may differ on what is proper to put on a medium which goes unbidden into the home. So may reasonable organizations. We know that censorship is not the answer; it never was. But with no recognition of moral obligation, without a commitment to some larger purpose, neither people nor institutions will even realize that the questions deserve examination.

Plato might not have welcomed the paraphrase that unexamined television is not worth having. But we can be fairly sure that E.B. White would certainly have agreed. Television "is going to be the test of the modern world. . ." White predicted, "We shall stand or fall by television." ■

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# TURN-OFF TIME?

An industry veteran reacts to a critical study of television and an educator's campaign for viewers to boycott the medium.

**BY JACK KUNEY**

**I** got a call the other day asking me if I would care to appear at the local elementary school and talk to some of the 7th and 8th graders about television on Career Awareness Day – an annual event in our town.

The offer didn't strike me as particularly flattering, as we live in a very small town: 1,200 people year-round, a figure which grows to about 5,000 when the summertime tourists flock in. So obviously there isn't a big list of TV-ers to draw from. I would have to assume I am the only card-carrying member of the Director's Guild and The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences who lives in Guerneville, California.

About ten invited guests covering a wide variety of disciplines appeared to present their careers for examination by the young people of the school as possible job tracks they might consider. I met a nice group of folks who live here on the Russian River about 65 miles north of San Francisco: a young woman lawyer; the Sonoma

County stringer for *The San Francisco Chronicle*; a ranger from the California Forestry Service; a man who writes and illustrates children's books; one of our local fireman. There were others.

I remained at the Guerneville School for over two hours talking to two classes of 7th and 8th graders who had expressed an interest in television. From the outset it was obvious they hadn't spent much time thinking about what makes television tick. In fact, I was asked the same two questions by both classes at the completion of my remarks. Did you ever produce or direct anything I might have seen? And what famous people have you met? I answered as best I could, but I don't think I was too successful turning them on to television as a possible profession.

I certainly don't know what goes on in their homes, but in the classroom they certainly didn't seem like kids in crisis. But if you were to read the local press this month, you would think the sky is falling and the fault lies solely with the infamous box in the living room. One of the journals with the largest weekly circulation in the area,

simply called *The Paper*, had most of its front page last week filled with a long article titled *The Trouble With TV*. A sub-headline in lower case read, "Pulling the plug on the mind-numbing, child stealing technobeast."

Much of the information upon which that story was based came from a study, released last February by an American Psychological Association task force, which was five years in the making and heralded as, "The most comprehensive look ever taken at the role of television in our society." Titled "Big World, Small Screen," the study was not readily available at the Guerneville library, and I doubt I would have taken the time to read it even if it were. So all of my information came second-hand via *The Paper*, which tells me the APA task force reports that educators are now finding fragmented attention spans, loss of creativity and communication skills, anti-social behavior, stereotyped perception and lowered academic performance among their students. They also state unequivocally that the research exists confirming TV had been proven to influence children in all the above areas.

Wow, I thought, is TV really responsible for all of that? For a moment, I had assumed the APA was describing Nettlehorst Grammar School in Chicago, where I went to school as a boy, and that was long before Mr. Sarnoff, Mr. Paley, and Mr. Kintner discovered the viability of a new medium called television.

But I don't mean to be facetious about the problem and the study, for I, too, believe television too often is currently given to exploitation rather than information and entertainment, although it seems too much to place the entire blame for the dissolution of the American system of education and the subsequent disenfranchisement of our children on television.

Regardless of what I believe, however, the response to that APA study is certainly having a dramatic

effect on the educators and politicians here in Sonoma County. This month, families connected with more than 21 schools in the county will be unplugging their TV sets for three weeks as part of an organized turn-off.

Started by a Sebastopol kindergarten teacher named Ben Fishbaine, encouraged by school supervisors, the campaign has become the darling of the local pols. Everywhere we turn candidates and office-holders alike are encouraging the experiment. We see the bumper stickers inspired by the crusade all over the county. Their message, "Enjoy life! Turn off your TV!"

This will be the second go-round for this boycott. Last year it was estimated almost three hundred families participated; this year more than a thousand will join the demonstration. Fishbaine says he has plans for next year, in which he intends to move his shutoff beyond the Sonoma County line to the rest of Northern California. He also has contacted friends and associates in such diverse places as Ashland, Oregon; Boulder, Colorado; and Albuquerque, New Mexico, with his message. Tomorrow the world.

**T**he whole idea of this boycott sounds a little rancid to me; it's the old "throw out the baby with the bathwater" syndrome. I have always believed there is something worthwhile to watch on television, no matter what the day or the hour, no matter what the programming source. I love the zaniness of *Northern Exposure*; CBS' *Sunday Morning* with the masterful prose of Charles Kuralt; the investigatory reporting on *Frontline* and *Prime Time Live*; the familiar faces and confrontation of *60 Minutes*; the style of *Masterpiece Theatre*. I'm a sports nut, so I'm hooked on almost anything where a game is being played, I wouldn't have missed the birth of Murphy Brown's baby for the world, and though I wasn't a consis-

tent fan of the show, I was touched by Johnny Carson's penultimate show, his duet with Bette Midler.

I'm also under the hypnotic spell of C-SPAN. And what would I do without Brokaw, Rather and Jennings to tell me what's newsworthy, and a hell of a lot of other people to tell me what's not. My personal menu is only a small part of what's available, and for other folks, it's different strokes, but I contend there is always something out there of interest to watch.

Conversely, I also believe television has not been kind to its younger viewers, especially those who have advanced beyond the demographics of *Mister Rogers* and *Sesame Street*. There's very little being done for the young once they've passed the cartoon stage, and this is the group being targeted by the boycott. There is no doubt in my mind they are vulnerable. They are dreadfully over-commercialized, they see far too much violence on the box, (less than in the movie houses, I might add), and now that cable is readily available, they have access to adult programming in unsupervised homes, watching programs they should be sheltered from at this point in their development.

I would argue that all of this is a call for parental involvement and broadcaster restraint—new and creative approaches, guidelines for parents and broadcasters, not for boycott. A recent *Washington Post* survey follows this same line, arguing that the solution is not an "all or none" answer. Their research indicates that, although children who spend a lot of time in front of the TV set do poorly in school, those who spend a moderate amount watching TV actually perform better than those who watch none at all.

The problems facing children in our society today will not be solved by turning off their television sets. A small child reared by a single mother living on welfare and food stamps has

small chance of escaping the worst of our social ills, whether or not there is a TV in the household. Even as this child grows and rises up the economic ladder in a family that's self-sufficient, there is small hope he will read or learn progressively if there are no books in the house, let alone a TV. And fully grown, this child can never learn to express love in the adult society he joins, when he himself has remained unloved, and that, too, has nothing to do with television.

I adore the town I live in, but I report with some regret that in spite of our size we are party to most of the social malaise facing the rest of the country. We have our broken homes, our drug problems, our homeless, our unemployed. As a result, we also have a number of disaffected youngsters in town, and I see them wandering the short blocks of Guerneville once the school day is over searching for recreation, but, sadly, there isn't much for them. One area where kids used to congregate now has a large sign posted on it which says, *Alcohol and Drug Free Zone*. Although I believe sincerely in what motivated the sign, I'm not sure I would like to hang out there, if I were a kid.

We do have a large senior center in town with lots of perks for the old folks. We have nothing for our kids, except for a school which does a fairly good job as far as I can tell. But the school shuts its doors and its schoolyard promptly at 3PM, budgetary restrictions, you know. I'm sure there's a big sign hanging in the hall, next to the principal's office which says, *Enjoy life, turn off your TV*.

**W**ell, the boycott came and went in Sonoma County and as far as I was able to discover by doing a little leg work, things are pretty much back to normal. The children who watched a lot of television before the turn-off are back to their old habits, and those

who didn't are no more addicted than they were before. The whole controversy will assume a completely different perspective now that summer is here and school is out. With vacation time and beaches up and down the river, television has a hard time competing.

But come fall, as the days dwindle down to a precious few, I know the boycott idea will emerge again. My own personal hope is that Mr. Fishbein and the schools will bury the boycott idea once and for all, for there are better answers. I read a letter by one county parent which appeared in the Letters to the Editor section of the *Santa Rosa Press-Democrat*, the largest daily in the area. She criticized the boycott, calling instead for selective TV viewing. Mr. Fishbein's stubborn rejoinder was, "we deliberately take no position on what or how much television to watch; only you as a parent can make that decision." After much circumlocution, he concludes: "Turning off your TV cold turkey and instead turning on to life-affirming activities for three weeks can help."

That's where Mr. Fishbein and I part company. I think the answer lies in getting parents involved in their children's TV viewing, not in depriving them of an important part of their growth process. The ideas are not original and not new, but in the context of what had been going on here this year, they are worth re-stating.

"The whole idea would be to make it a less passive activity," says psychologist Diana Zucker, co-author of "Use TV To Your Child's Advantage" (Acropolis Books). "You can teach kids how to be skeptical about the commercials they watch, how to tell the difference between fantasy and reality, how to think of alternative solutions to the ones they see on TV." Ms. Zucker's co-writer, Dr. Jerome Singer of the Yale University Family Television Center, notes, "A child can

learn a great deal from television if you help her think through the messages and point out your point of view as an adult."

Ms. Zucker and Dr. Singer offer three succinct pieces of advice for parents, guidelines for television viewing:

**1. Set limits on which programs and how much television your children watch.**

"That's more important than anything else," said Dr. Norma Feshbach, Dean of the School of Education at UCLA. It's a good idea, however, to give your children some choice of what they can watch, as long as it is within your rules."

**2. Watch news programs with your child.**

This is easier said than done, of course, since the program may be broadcast when you are out of the house. But shows can be video-taped which will give you the opportunity to view them together, discuss the choices the program made and the avenues the script promoted.

**3. Talk back to your television set.**

Remember that if you don't want your children to passively accept what they watch, you can't either. If you think a character made the wrong choice or should have explored other options, say so.

So quite realistically, parents need to learn not how to ban their children from watching TV, but how to cut their losses. Boycotts are a waste of time, intelligent viewing is a creative activity. ■

Jack Kuney has been a director and producer at all three major networks and for several group operators. He also was on the faculty of Brooklyn College, N.Y.



# MY YEAR WITH TALK SHOWS AND HOW I GOT HOOKED— ALMOST

Candid notes from the journal of a writer who watched a thousand and one hours of Phil, Oprah, Sally, Geraldo, Maury, Jane, Joan, Jenny, et al. She examines why—despite sleaze and tease—some win friends, ratings, influence and even political clout.

**BY SARA WELLES**

**I**'ve kept a journal of daytime talk shows for almost a year. I've seen men justly and unjustly behind bars, and been made privy (by satellite) to the thoughts of death-row prisoners a day before their execution. I've spent hours with transvestites, transsexuals, hermaphrodites, pimps and madams, sadomasochist dominatrices and men who like to "control" sexual partners; with the obese and the anorexic, celebrities and nonentities, con artists, misers who monitor the family use of toilet tissue and the

most compulsive shoppers; child abusers and victims, satanic cult captives and Ku Klux Klanners. I've watched male and female strippers undulating, wife-beaters, and male "escorts" who will do anything their clients want.

I've seen beautiful women wed to "beasts" and married couples who "swing" out of boredom. I've listened to an audience of two hundred unemployed men and women worried and angered over lost jobs, lost pensions, lost medical coverage. I hung on the words of blacks and whites, Asians and Hispanics arguing and accusing, explaining and reliving long pent-up agonies.

There was a gamut of guests, and



*Would they be here without Phil? Competing hosts, friends and former guests helped Donahue celebrate his 25th anniversary as a talk show host. Top row, l. to r.: Faith Daniels, Oprah Winfrey, Jerry Springer, Joan Rivers(cardboard), Montel Williams, Geraldo Rivera. Bottom row: Sally Jessy Raphael, Diane Sawyer, Larry King, Donahue, Jenny Jones, Maury Povich and Connie Chung.*

even sharp contrasts—perhaps because producers seek controversy and confrontation. It has been like a year in a pop culture supermarket with a mad manager. Here's some of what I learned about talk shows:

- The same host who chats gently with prostitutes also tete-a-tetes roughly with a soon-to-be-President

- The talks give the disenfranchised a voice

- They offer lessons in living and loving to the troubled

- They console viewers with stories of lives messier than one's own

- They stoop real low to pick up a Nielsen rating point

- Besides all the heartache and

## *Monitoring the talk shows was like spending a year in a pop-culture supermarket presided over by a mad manager*

horror they hawk, they also play for laughs

- Their guests' stories become as tangled and never-ending as soap operas

- The hosts become friends you can count on to be there at the appointed time

- Whatever your problem, they just might have a hot-line 800 number to call for help

- While much freak stuff seems lifted from supermarket tabloids, some meaningful material comes from the serious news

- Some guests actually relish washing dirty linen on national TV in a game of kitsch and tell.

**ASSIGNMENT:** I began my journal after TVQ's editor called and said, "I'm looking for someone to watch the syndicated daytime talks and keep a journal on what goes on. There's a lack of serious study of them. Since you're housebound, you might find it interesting. Give us your reactions—positive and negative."

I had no experience with daytime television. I knew the names of some top talk show hosts, but don't think I'd ever watched a program through. As a fulltime magazine editor, later public affairs vice-president directing media projects for a major multinational corporation, I'd focused mainly on TV news and public issues programs, serious drama and the morning wake-up shows. My daytime hours were spent in the high-rise offices of Manhattan and big cities here and abroad.

But now I was housebound, recuper-

ating from back surgery. "Sounds like fun," I shot back. "No problem. I can start tomorrow."

My opinion of the talks was loosely neutral, but I discovered quickly that friends, even those professionally in TV, generally thought the assignment a waste of time, at best a distraction when I had nothing better to do.

"Garbage," said a female anchor. "Horrible!" moaned a female soap opera director. "Off the wall!" a writer declared, "junk." And a mass magazine editor who'd been a mentor was limply supportive: "Well, it's not a bad thing for now, but why don't you write a novel?"

I decided to use two monitors and two VCRs so I could record shows I'd want to refer back to or when programs conflicted in time.

The November sweeps were in process. I decided to start right away. I began on Thursday, November 21, 1991 and spent that day and the next with *Regis and Kathie Lee, Donahue, Oprah, Sally Jessy Raphael, Donahue* again (I could catch him live and recorded on different channels), *Joan Rivers, Maury Povich, Geraldo Rivera* and *Jenny Jones*. By weekend I was bleary-eyed—but starting to get hooked.

### **November 21, 1991**

**Phil Donahue:** Subject is men who dress in "baby drag" to have sex. They wear oversized infant clothes, ruffled baby bonnets. One likes to play breast feeding to turn on, others play baby games. With them, a doctor (his credentials include "Advanced

Study of Sexuality") thinks this role-playing is OK. The men assert their sex is good and they only do this one-tenth of one percent of the time. The "expert" says we all have an inner child who's sexual, sensual, consenting. The audience backs away: "Breast feeding play? Sick! Sick! Sick!"

**Sally Jessy Raphael:** Reprises some previous guests who report on recent changes in their lives. First, a former male who had a sex change reveals that the female orgasm is better than the males'. It's softer but lasts longer. A woman who married a transvestite returns with husband, daughter and daughter's boyfriend. Transvestite wears a dress exactly like the daughter's. They adjust well to one another and the boyfriend proposed marriage to the daughter right there.

**Jenny Jones:** She's blonde, lovely, looks farm-girl apple-cheeked. Her guests, two nymphomaniacs, say they are sex addicts. Jenny isn't fazed. A psychologist explains: Women become sex-affair addicts because the scheming forced by society gives them a rise in adrenalin and euphoria. Jenny's second segment brings on a young Englishman who worked at Buckingham Palace. Jenny asks: Do Prince Charles and Princess Diana sleep in the same bed? He says they have separate bedrooms, but reminds us they have two children. He adds, Lady Di sleeps with frogs; she has a collection on her bed. The Prince sleeps with a teddy bear.

**Joan Rivers:** Chats with the producers of four talk shows about what producers do, how they move among shows, help each other even though they compete. Rivers asks Sally Jessy Raphael's producer, in her hoarse, nasal, sexy voice: "Does Sally ever come in really bitchy in the morning?" Dead air. Joan remembers a morning when her dog ate rat poison and she didn't like the show her staff had lined up. Her producer agrees it wasn't

good, but with 200 shows to do a year, not all can be great. Joan's last words: "I hope we're all on the air for many, many, many years—and me a day longer than anybody else."

**Geraldo Rivera:** Subject: mothers and daughters who compete for the same men. One daughter's mother even had a child by the daughter's friend.

**Maury Povich:** Subject is pregnancy resulting from rape, but it becomes a disturbing exploration not so much of rape violence as racial prejudice, fear and anger. A white, grandmotherly woman who struggles with tears was raped in 1958. She was married and the mother of four. Then she learned she was pregnant. When the baby boy was born, it was black, the rapist's, and she and her husband put the child up for adoption.

They kept the secret for 21 years—until her daughter got a call from a man who told her he was her long-lost brother and begged to be taken in as part of the family. The husband told him they had no place for him. Now this son is in jail.

The studio audience—blacks and whites—is not friendly. The mother is asked: "Would you have kept the child if he were white? Maybe he wouldn't be in jail if you had taken him in." The woman defends herself timidly. She says her husband would have left her, perhaps the children, too. I wonder why she goes on television to expose her obvious torment. Her husband and children did not appear. And if she sought absolution, she doesn't get it.

## November 22

**Oprah:** Opens show with drumming and chanting. We are told these express feelings. Oprah then wonders how much expression of feelings has to do with one's relationship to a father. Incomplete father-son relation leaves a son with "a hole where his father should be." An expert directs

## *The talk shows give the disenfranchised a forum and a voice. The television set has become the Box Populi*

the studio audience to "take a deep breath, close your eyes and start remembering your father ... in 1955 ... in 1965 ... See him, smell him ... Say 'Father, my father!' See how you feel ... Go down deep. Say 'Daddy, my Daddy!' " Camera pans across an audience with closed eyes. I dislike manipulation of an obedient audience.

### November 25

**Donahue:** I picked up the remote clicker on Monday and knew it was Sweeps time again. Donahue was running a dance contest (audience to judge the winner) between obese British male dancers, the Blobindales, and a troupe of young, handsome, muscled U.S. male strippers, For Ladies Only. Hail from Fort Lauderdale. Blobindales weigh in at 440, 306, 289 and 320 pounds. Wear big sloppy sweaters and bloomers in bright yellow, fuschia, etc., horse around freely, letting flesh shake. The FLO boys in skimpy black leather bikinis, black gloves, black leather neckbands. Long hairdos look salon-styled. Their cheeky buttocks surround the thin bikini straps. They flash toothy smiles.

Donahue seems revved up, says studio audience was picked by computer for broadmindedness. In "The Great American Strip-Off," each troupe strips to near nudity. Donahue shows clip from *Saturday Night Live* with the trend-setting Chippendales, who were much more suggestive—more pelvic grinds. By comparison, FLO now seems like good clean fun. Audience chooses Blobindales as

champs.

Am I shocked? I swing between feeling why not let go and laugh, and dismay at the voyeuristic elements of a freakish show. I'm saddened by the Blobs, the Chips, the FLO boys, the voyeurs, Donahue's pandering. Are bumps and grinds *talk*?

### ON TO SOCIAL ISSUES

**B**ut I was glad to see that not everything was kinky. Talk hosts were also airing serious social issues that needed courage; I was just as strongly, if not more so, riveted by these. Some programs dealt with more meaningful matters more frequently or more pointedly than others. Donahue was the leader but he was not alone. I was surprised.

### November 26:

**Geraldo:** Departing from his usual menu of satanism, serial killers and rapists, Rivera examined the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, talking with James Earl Ray from prison. Also put on Ray's estranged wife who was suing for half the proceeds of Ray's book and believes Ray is guilty. Attorney William Kunstler and Dr. Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, were interviewed. Both said J. Edgar Hoover made it easy for a sniper to kill King, setting the stage for the shooting by making him into such a pariah that killers thought they could get off lightly. Asked

whether he was shocked that Ray's book has introduction by Jesse Jackson, Lowery countered, "Jackson is free, black and 21." On the whole, a topnotch broadcast.

## December 17:

**Donahue:** Deals with friendly fire deaths in the Gulf War. An American colonel, the only person to admit he pulled a fatal friendly fire trigger, talks about it candidly. Two American soldiers were killed. We see tapes of the tiny screen in the colonel's 'copter during the battle and hear the recorded communications.

The widow of one GI bitterly describes how she first heard the truth, through scuttlebutt, and was only informed officially six months later.

The colonel says he was scapegoated. A general claimed the colonel ignored instructions to avoid firing, but the colonel says a ground commander instructed him to fire.

On stage is a GI who was horribly burned in another friendly fire accident. A home viewer calls to say, "War must end." The burned soldier cries out in agony: "Who are we kidding!"

The colonel says 25% of U.S. deaths in the Gulf War were from friendly fire, although the number was small. He reads the last letter by a GI killed by friendly fire. It said that you can't identify the target without having a two-way ID system. The colonel says the issue is truth, that we rely on position information, but in today's high-speed-vehicle wars, position is no longer important

without two-way ID equipment. It's available and not expensive. My reaction: A courageous colonel, a courageous GI on stage, a courageous Donahue.

## TO YOUR HEALTH!

**S**eems like I'm getting a crash course in health matters—dieting, allergies, attention-span-deficit, silicon implants, plastic surgery, skin lightening, medications. On December 2, Donahue appeared on Geraldo's program in a joint effort to raise money for AIDS. That two competing hosts worked side by side highlighted the campaign's importance.

The same day Donahue ran a powerful show on the side effects of the drug Halcion. He gave us accusations by patients who said they became psychotic, violent, suicidal or murderous after being put on the drug. Author William Styron said he had been given Halcion during a depression, got better, but then began having suicidal thoughts; they disappeared 24 hours after he was taken off the drug.

A doctor said all medications can be dangerous, should be prescribed only by a physician and media should not make the decision. Donahue, to be fair, gave other possible causes of the violent episodes. He passionately justified media's role on the basis of the First Amendment. Said he's been at this work 25 years and has done lots of thinking on media's role. The effect of all this on me? I'll be careful

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*Oprah offers valid lessons in living and loving. A viewer says, 'She let's me see trouble I might run into, so I'll know how to cope'*

## *Surprisingly, some guests seem to relish washing their dirty linen on national TV in a game of Kitsch and Tell*

taking or mixing any pills, but I think media have a real role to play as witness and in initiating public debate on all issues, including health.

### **AUDIENCE AS GREEK CHORUS**

**T**he factor that sets the talk shows I looked at apart as a distinct species of the genre is the participating audience—in the studio and at home. Some talk shows may have anchors cum reporters and interviewees; others may have a facilitator and a panel of discussants; others are wake-up or call-in shows. But the programs I was asked to concentrate on all had that vital element—the interactive studio and home audience.

The people who fill the studios serve as a Greek chorus. They don't just sit to applaud on cue, but play a major role in the total performance. The audience is actor/reactor to the dramas that unfold on stage. It responds to and judges the lives and fates of the panel guests.

The TV cameras continually pan around the audience to pick up facial expressions in unconscious pantomimes that express strong response to the developing dilemmas and revelations. We see horror, disapproval, pity, support, smiles, wonderment, disbelief, discomfort, delight, doubt. The audience questions, advises, criticizes. It rises to relate experiences to contradict or verify the beliefs and behaviors of the leads. Thunderous applause means Hurrah! and Congratulations. Mild or thin applause is limp acceptance. I watched the chorus appeal to

a 14-year-old boy who had married the 44-year-old mother of his pal and who now sits huddled and frightened while the woman covers his hand supportively. Get out of this, the audience pleads. Go back to school, get an education, learn how to hold a job. Later you'll find a wife your own age. The audience warned the 44-year-old she may be guilty of child abuse.

The telephone is a key member of the cast. On some shows, the home audience ("Are you there, caller? I'm glad you waited.") is solicited like the studio attendees to give a bottom-line judgment. Some hosts are using 900 numbers so viewers can vote. Even if you do not participate directly, you are made to feel part of the action.

Notably, both the studio and home audiences generally are a refreshing mix of men and women, different classes and ethnic groups—blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, teens, seniors, prime-of-lifers, couples of the same race and mixed couples, married and not. All speak up as equals and the host rushes around the aisles to point the mike at the next speaker. The talk audience emerges as a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-minded, democratic vox populi. And we learn a lot about each other, and that's very good.

### **WHAT OPRAH KNOWS**

**I**n its October 10, 1992 report on viewer attitudes to television, *TV Guide* included two questions on talk shows. It asked, "On whose talk show would [you] tell all if you were involved in a major controversy and

## *A major element in talk shows is the audience, which acts as Greek Chorus—actor and reactors as the dramas unfold*

wanted to tell [your] side of the story?" Oprah was the favorite. One third—34%—named Oprah. (Donahue was next with 19%.) And if they needed an organ transplant and couldn't find a donor? Even more—37%—thought they'd have the best chance of finding a donor through Oprah's program.

I find it takes a certain amount of close watching to identify Oprah's special appeal. She's laid back. Her persona doesn't depend on fireworks. She doesn't exploit bizarre or explicit sex. She often lets her guests take over, lets them play out their quarrels, while she becomes as much a spectator as the studio audience, before she steps in to ask, "What is going on here? What is really going on?"

When she appears on camera after the jazzy opening, she's not your image of a celebrity. A black woman competing in a white-male-dominated medium, she's not smashingly beautiful and has real trouble with her weight. After her well-known slim-down liquid diet, she steadily regained the pounds—and she doesn't claim "big is beautiful." She endured sexual abuse as a child, reveals it and has hosted a PBS special on the subject.

Why is she, by far, the top-rated daytime talk host? While Oprah deals with many of the same family troubles and relationship conflicts you see on other talks, Oprah has carved out a way to offer what media psychologists call lessons in living. I asked a black woman why she likes Oprah. She said Oprah helps her

with her problems. Another Oprah fan, also black as it happens, told me Oprah helps her plan ahead for her life. This woman has two small children and a successful family life. "Oprah tells me where the steps are located," she explained. "If you don't know there's a step ahead, you might trip on it. If you do know, you'll step ahead correctly. Oprah helps me see trouble I might run into, so I'll know how to cope with it."

Oprah deals with solutions, not just the problems. A continuing theme is the nature of forgiveness. She calls forgiveness a way of "releasing yourself" in order to move ahead with your life, rather than remaining in a rut, obsessed with your hurt.

The dramatic subject of a show may be a triangle, the "stealing" of a husband by the wife's younger sister. But Oprah's focus is on the psychological lesson the abandoned wife—and the audience—might apply to overcome feelings of pain and betrayal. The audience might feel the hurt from losing a job, rejection by a lover, child or friend, or whatever. Oprah presses the point that forgiveness isn't altruistic, but the way to move on, find other options, recreate your life. Somehow, in Oprah's hands, it is convincing, hopeful, comforting.

Oprah is empathetic as distinct from sympathetic, that is, she seems to truly identify with people in pain, conveying the sense that she has used forgiveness in her own life to become strong, flexible, self-reliant and as successful as she is despite many obstacles. In a way, her weight and past problems make her



a cogent example of what she preaches: a role model just because she doesn't present herself as a goddess but as vulnerable, robust, earthy, direct, a strong survivor who has kept a sense of humor. I think Oprah's appeal is that across differences of personality, gender, age, background, ethnicity, religion, and so on, she can be a role model.

But, a caveat: While Oprah seems to be just what you see, I also remember that Oprah is an accomplished actress. I wonder if the calm, straightforward empathetic character she projects is a carefully honed role by this very smart professional and highly talented actress. Does it matter which—polished actress or unvarnished Oprah? It sure works.

## THE RIOTS OF SPRING

**W**hen the Los Angeles riots erupted last spring, it was a welcome surprise that many of the talk shows went into racial issues as deeply as they did. They initiated serious mass debate about the racial and ethnic realities of America. I followed the hosts closely to see how many responded to our cataclysm—how fast and how relevantly. Here are excerpts from my journal notes between April 30-May 15.

### April 30:

**Donahue:** Immediately after today's incredible verdict in the Rodney King beating trial, Donahue has called a juror (identity unrevealed) and asks how the decision happened. Donahue is on top of the news. Has scooped much of the mainline press.

### May 1:

**Donahue:** Friday's broadcast is live with a roundtable discussion: four

points of view on the still exploding Los Angeles riots. A black woman calls them a "wake up call to America." Again, Donahue has left his talk show peers by the wayside.

### May 4:

**Montel Williams:** He devotes this Monday hour to the verdict and the riots. Has put together one of his strongest shows, with Rep. Charles Rangel (of the Black Caucus) one of the guests to interpret the events. Other talk hosts are moving slowly, if at all.

**Regis and Kathie:** Though mostly concerned with their usual froth, they flash the newspaper front pages and note that a second man in the Rodney King car has come forward to say he was beaten too, bringing a suit allegedly contradicting police assertions.

### May 5:

**Oprah:** Took show to the hot spot, says the beating of Rodney King, the burning, the killing "came into our living rooms, smacked us in the face and now we must ... we must ... listen to each other." Audience includes blacks, Koreans, Hispanics, whites arguing vehemently. Asians ask, "We have been here only 20 years, but you've been oppressed for 350. How does attacking Koreans solve the massive problems?" Blacks say "Anytime you have a government of law, and the law givers set themselves above the law, you have anarchy ... It's not over yet ... The blood here is on the hands of that jury in Simi Valley."

Oprah shows tape of the killing of a black girl by a Korean shopkeeper, which had earlier sparked racial tensions. Other tapes spotlight the many conflicting views. Black store owners argue with looters. Oprah had to hold back some angry speak-

ers and I feared violence could break out. But raucous debate didn't turn into bloody debacle. Oprah's plea, "Don't we all live in a world together!" kept the lid on. A new, deeper dialogue seems to be taking place between races. I felt Oprah and the all-seeing, all-powerful cameras were icons that barred a free-for-all. A stunning, sterling program.

## May 7:

**Sally Jessy:** Opens on Valerie Harper in L.A. with celebrities seeking to help rebuild devastated communities and race relationships. In N.Y. Sally presents provocative discussions about police brutality in several cities. A black mother in N.Y. tells how her son, driving to deposit \$1,500 for his father, was stopped by two housing police for passing a red light; she charges they shot him in the head, that police harassed a witness to give false testimony. Next, a black ex-policewoman from Boston says she was hounded off the force after reporting a case of police brutality. Says the message was "You don't break the code of silence and survive."

A black former police detective tells a harrowing story of being stopped by white policemen while he was in an unmarked police car chasing a suspect. They called him "nigger" and threatened him.

Panel includes a police officer who states he never practiced or witnessed police brutality. An ex-policeman

agrees. Sally shows a tape, provided by wife of a Texas policeman killed on duty. It shows the patrolman with three drug runners he stopped; they threw him to the ground and killed him. A video camera on the patrol car caught the grisly scene.

On balance, I think until now, I had not perceived the extent and pervasiveness of police brutality against blacks or of police cover-up techniques.

## May 14:

**Donahue:** A riveting program. An almost all-black-male audience of 200 debates and brainstorms on "The Black Male in America." I learned there's much ardent diversity of opinion about causes and solutions, about strategy and tactics to deal with racial discrimination and oppression.

**Sally:** Campus racism. A dismal racial brawl at a Michigan college has caused most of its black students to leave. One black student won't let himself be forced out—in the face of KKK threats.

This fortnight of daytime talk coverage of racial disturbances and issues has depth and power. Of course, between those broadcasts they didn't abandon their typical subjects, which seemed even more irrelevant and trivial in the context. Geraldo, for example, was locked in his same old groove. On May 4, this journalist served up "My Mother Ruined My Life," a maudlin sexual abuse tear-

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*It wasn't all sleaze and tease.  
Presidential candidates and serious  
social issues that require courage to tackle  
were aired, and they were equally,  
if not more riveting to me ...*

*I no longer am hooked by the sobs  
and sex, kinks and kooks, and that ilk.  
If a guest is awash in tears, I zap her.  
I've become selective*

jerker with the girl victim sniffing and the mother (who permitted the abuse) crying—the audience was swamped in pity. Geraldo got on his knees to wipe her tears. He milked it and milked it.

## A POLITICAL FORUM

Even a month earlier I'd seen signs that a significant change might be underway. During the primary campaigns for the Democratic nomination, Donahue made journalism and political history, despite one misstep.

He devoted his April 1 show to an hour with Bill Clinton. However, when he spent 25 minutes badgering Clinton about alleged marital infidelity, marijuana and the origin of the phrase "slick Willie", Donahue's dogged devil's advocate stance got him into trouble. The Greek Chorus groaned and revolted. Some called out "No!" Others shouted "Move on!"

Clinton protested to Donahue, "There are real problems in this country, and there are people who'd like to hear them discussed. I've done my best to do it and it's very difficult." The audience applause for Clinton was marked.

Then a young woman (a Republican, she revealed) criticized Donahue, "Given the pathetic state of the United States—Medicare, education, everything else, I can't believe you spent half an hour of airtime attacking this man's character. I'm not even a Clinton supporter, but I think this is ridiculous." Cheers! And applause!

I've never seen Donahue's audience turn on him like this—not even during polarized and conflict-ridden issues.

Clinton appeared pleased, smiling confidently at the audience approval, while Donahue stood isolated from the audience, and with the Chorus taking over control.

Donahue does deserve kudos for his other election broadcasts during the primary campaign. He staged a true debate between Clinton and his chief competitor Jerry Brown, acting only as the introducer and keeping silent while the two faced off with one another. In that hour Donahue reinvented the issue debate between candidates.

Donahue put on other talks with the political hopefuls: with Jesse Jackson, with H. Ross Perot, two with Brown—six in all. My feeling that my assignment to the talk show beat was moving to center stage was reinforced when ex-CBS newsman Marvin Kalb, now heading Harvard's Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, said, "If there was a single, significant turn in the road in [election] coverage, it was the marginalization of the traditional political press corps and the embrace of the talk show host." Some daytime talks dealt with the election right up to E Day. For example:

## November 2:

**Sally Jessy:** An important, go-for-it show, "Decision '92," live with satellite pickups of 200 uncommitted voters from her Cincinnati outlet, 200 decided voters from her Washington station and 200 from New York. She has two celebrities in New York for Clinton and one for Perot, with Barbara Bush in Des Moines ably backing her

husband. Sally also put on heavy-hitting representatives of the three candidates, including former senator Geraldine Ferraro and Bush's labor secretary Lynn Martin. It was a solidly argumentative debate with citizens getting lots of opportunity to voice their views, ask questions. Lists of celebs backing each candidate were shown. Public service spots urged voting.

I'd give the daytime talk shows a B rating for informing the citizenry on 1992 presidential candidates and issues. The higher voter turnout and sense of participating was widely attributed to the talks, and the political pundits and pollsters tell us these programs have changed the way future election campaigns will be run. Recognizing their new political clout, the hosts and their staffs will have to improve their handling of public affairs. It will be a sad failure if they do not.

So to me, right now, the more interesting question isn't what the politicians in the campaigns discovered about the possibilities of talks, but what the talks themselves may have learned about their own potential. If presidential elections won't ever be the same, neither, I hope, will the talk shows.

In Fall 1992, there were real cues that some other hosts besides Donahue are reaching out toward a new dimension for their shows. These were actually enriching their usual fare, learning to be less timid in how they deal with their subjects—in short, learning to relate sob stories of individual traumas to their much more important social bases.

Will the daytime talk programs still depend too much on their tired cash cows: kinky sex, sobs, rape, crime and other sins? Evil of one kind or another has been a staple. We accept that evil has also been a staple of fairy tales, legends, myths, drama, horror literature and other entertainment forms. Why?

## FASCINATION OF EVIL

**T**he philosophers, the psychiatrists, psychologists and many critics have offered provocative if varied answers to the question: why does evil fascinate us? Do we all have an evil gene? If not, why would we look for or at the darkest limits and capacity of human depravity? Here are a few of my journal notes.

### December 2, 1991:

**Sally Jessy:** Satanic cult saga. Young woman says her father and others in her town had a satanic cult for 22 years. All forced sex on her and they aborted her fetus. Says the five-month fetus was alive, but they killed it and ate parts of the body. Claims to have watched them kill a friend. Insists the whole town was "in cahoots" including some police and her mother. Insists they attacked her sister and three brothers. Her sister, on stage, contradicted her story. The father is in jail with a 22-year sentence; he pleaded guilty. Her mother wasn't jailed; claimed to be a victim.

### December 4:

**Geraldo:** Grisly presentation on serial cannibal killers who devour all or parts of their victims. Called "Murder Most Foul." Spares the audience no gory details of the murders and meals. Geraldo refers to satanism and says people who practice it are paroled and go free, even after threatening guests. Looks shocked. Gives the audience safety advice.

### December 17:

**Montel Williams:** He's a new face. He interviews a former captive sex slave who says she was imprisoned in a box under a married couple's bed for

seven years, beaten, tortured and raped by the husband while the wife watched. Williams calls it a case of "mind control" and sexual fantasy to explain why the captive endured it for seven years, and why the wife permitted it. Refers to the "Stockholm syndrome," in which victim identifies with jailor. In another segment of this show, a woman says she helped someone kill her sister.

Do we watch such "entertainment" shows, fascinated, to try to understand hidden mysteries? Does curiosity only drive our continual probing of the bizarre, satanic cults and cannibalistic murders, sex abuse and other rule-breaking?

One theory says we enjoy toying with the breaking of rules of behavior. I don't think we have final answers, but I can see that whatever the outcome of a tale of human evil, we who watch feel we win. If the transgressor is punished by society, or the hero or heroine, or the intended victim, or even just blind ironic fate, we can congratulate ourselves for avoiding catastrophe by sticking to society's rules. "Justice" wins.

On the other hand, suppose the transgressor is not caught, isn't punished? We can validate a belief that life is unfair. Or we can enjoy vicarious triumph because this transgressor has beaten the power and rules that oppress us.

So we can adventure via such talks and tales into taboo realms of behavior, and then congratulate and comfort ourselves for being luckier or smarter than victim or villain.

## COMING SOON

**I**f I play back those initial warnings that talks are garbage and off-the-wall, I ask what have I learned after watching for a year? One lesson: If I want to write a novel, I won't need a book of plots. I could just watch some talk shows with their

unending stories of conflict and problems.

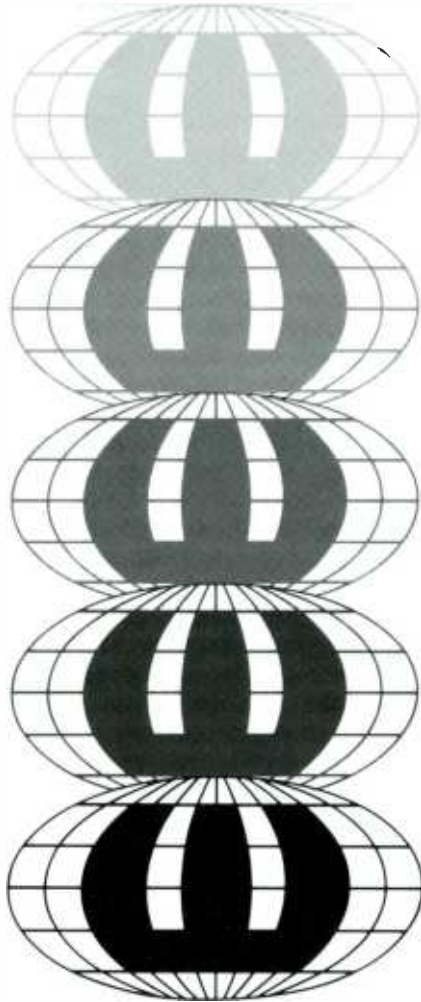
Meantime, I no longer am hooked by the sobs and sex, kinks and kooks, and that ilk. If I tune into Sally and the guest is awash in tears, I zap her. I've become selective.

I've learned that this oriental bazaar is under a big tent. The tent, however, is proving too big for a single take. There are many aspects of the hosts' personalities that need analyzing. We haven't yet focused closely on such performers and perpetrators as Regis and Kathie Lee, Joan Rivers and Maury Povich, or such newcomers as Montel Williams, Jenny Jones, Jane Whitney, Vicki Lawrence, Jerry Springer—and wannabees, promising or teetering.

Why do so many talk hosts who start out afire with an encouraging new slant fall back and fail with big-buck losses? Will the proliferation of talk programs produce a glut? Can advertisers support them all? How are the shows changing mores? Can they escape being prisoners of movie and book plugs? Is there life after Sweeps? We'll cover these, and other questions, when we return in the next issue. Stay tuned for Part 2. ■

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Sara Welles was vice-president in public affairs for Citibank/Citicorp after a long career in magazines and book publishing. She co-authored *Born Female* and several other books. She was articles editor of the *Woman's Home Companion* and a senior editor of *Mademoiselle*, *House & Garden*, and other national magazines. Currently she is a media consultant and is at work on another book.



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# DONA QUIXOTE

## THE ADVENTURES OF FRIEDA HENNOCK

**BY HENRY  
MORGENTHAU**

**I**n the summer of 1948 when Frieda Hennock was appointed by a presumed lame-duck President, Harry Truman, as the first woman to serve on the Federal Communications Commission, many young American women were temporarily back pedaling on the road toward gender equality, to become the mothers of the baby boom. It was the destiny of Hennock, then forty-four years old and single, to be the mother of non-commercial educational (now called public) television. During the first four years of her seven year term, when the commission froze the allocation of all television frequencies, she fought a lonely ferocious battle to persuade her fellow commissioners and the broadcasting industry to have channels reserved for noncommercial educational stations.

In 1953, Hennock went to Texas to



Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College

inaugurate the first educational television station in the nation, KUHT, at the University of Houston. A photograph taken on this historic occasion shows her with the University President Kemmerer and Ovita Culp Hobby, the World War II commanding officer of the WAC (Women's Army Corp) and the second woman to serve in the U.S. Cabinet. Beyond the fact that both had risen to positions of great responsibility rarely exercised by women, they were radically different in appearance and style of operation. Hobby, one year Hennock's senior, had become the publisher and president of the *Houston Post*, a staunch member of the establishment and the Republican party. Out of uniform, she dressed in the nonsensical style of her only female cabinet predecessor, Frances Perkins.

By contrast, Hennock, a Democrat, radiated the confident glamour of a woman who had been a stunning beauty in her earlier years. Decked out in modishly tailored black dresses and a well-cut blonde coiffure, she was still winning the battle against the ravages of many state dinners and Washington cocktail parties. She always attracted attention at public events, arriving late and swishing up to the dais in a floor-length ermine wrap.

In an era when women received very little encouragement for their career aspirations from either their own or the opposite sex, Hennock didn't hesitate to marshal the entire gamut of her assets in support of her ambitions, mingling the energetic exercise of keen wits with traditional feminine charm. It was the latter which eventually cost her dearly when she became caught up in the prevalent double standard for sexual conduct that remains to be fully sorted out even to this day.

My first personal encounter with Commissioner Hennock occurred in January, 1951 when I arranged to have her appear as Eleanor Roosevelt's

guest on a Sunday afternoon series I was producing for NBC, *Mrs. Roosevelt Meets the Public*. In introducing Hennock, Mrs. Roosevelt noted that "Television has been the newest and most controversial wonder child of modern science and industrial ingenuity ... It is rapidly promising to become the major medium of communication ... It can bring you wonderful entertainment and can be very convincing in selling you products of various sponsors. But I wonder how often you have stopped to realize that television can also be a great teacher?"

Encouraged by Mrs. Roosevelt's empathy with her cause, Commissioner Hennock responded that the FCC was "about to allocate and open up for licensing all of the remaining spectrum space ... I believe that 25% of all TV channels should be reserved for the use of educators on a noncommercial basis. Education now faces its last chance on TV; without a reservation, educators will probably forever be out of the television picture—except perhaps for the crumbs they may pick up."

Hennock envisaged "schools of the air—enriching the classroom curriculum, bringing adult listeners right in their own living rooms the literary, scientific, and historical treasures accumulated by modern man". The nub of her argument was that "In order to realize the full educational potentialities of TV, educators must be provided with their own stations—their own homes in the spectrum. 75% of the available channels is more than adequate for mere commercial needs."

One can only speculate on the origins of Hennock's passionate commitment to education. Prior to her arrival at the commission she had been a successful litigating attorney and a Democratic political activist. Her all-male colleagues on the commission, mostly career public servants, viewed her as an uncom-



monly tough-minded maverick. Cynics believed that she chose the role of advocate for educators in order to gain a high distinguishing profile for herself. To be sure, she had no intellectual pretensions; but what she did have was the parareligious worship of education ingrained in so many impoverished immigrants of her generation, especially those who had sought relief from the discrimination and persecution of Eastern European ghettos.

"Democracy thrives on education, totalitarianism on ignorance and darkness," Hennock proclaimed to Mrs. Roosevelt, who was always sympathetic to such sentiments. "Educational television will be a strong weapon in America's arsenal. Educational TV will be an investment in our country's future that will pay dividends for generations to come."

Frieda Hennock emigrated to the United States in 1910 with her parents, Orthodox Jews from Kovel, Poland (now the Ukraine). Then six years old, she was the youngest of eight children. Immediately after graduating from Morris High School in the Bronx, she started taking night classes at Brooklyn Law School, supporting herself clerking at several law firms.

Frieda received her LLB at the age of nineteen, but had to wait until she turned twenty-one before she was eligible to be admitted to the New York bar. At the age of twenty-two, Hennock was the youngest woman lawyer in New York City. While earning a living through legal services related to real estate, Hennock reserved most of her passion and energy for criminal cases. Between 1928 and 1929, she stunned New York's legal establishment by winning seven acquittals in murder trials. She later devoted herself entirely to corporate law, lamenting that as a woman lawyer she had "to work twice as hard" to win a case.

Hennock discovered that she would be more successful if she had a male

partner. This led to her joining Julius Silver in 1927. Silver had been a camp counselor and mentor of Edwin H. Land, inventor of the Polaroid camera. The Hennock-Silver partnership was dissolved in 1934 when Hennock went to court over a claim of a partnership share of the stock Silver had obtained in Land's lucrative business.

From *Hennock v. Silver* she received \$9,000 plus court costs, but the resulting cost to her reputation within the legal "fraternity" for her seemingly uncollegial behavior would come back to haunt her. But immediately thereafter Hennock advanced to become the first woman, the first Democrat and one of the few Jews to be an associate of Choate, Mitchell and Ely, one of New York's most venerable and prestigious law firms. As a respected corporate lawyer, Hennock commanded hefty legal fees and earned a six figure salary.

## A Success Story

**A**t the same time she became important in the city's Democratic party, heralded as "a champion of women's rights" and "a leader in the liberal wing." She proved to be a proficient party fundraiser, working vigorously in support of FDR, Mayor William O'Dwyer and later President Harry S. Truman. She also served as assistant counsel to the New York Mortgage Commission, studied low-cost housing and lectured on law and economics at her alma mater, Brooklyn Law School.

In the summer of 1948, virtually all the savvy politicians were betting that Harry Truman would fail to be reelected. Frieda Hennock was determined to cash in her chips at the eleventh hour. When the President nominated her to serve as the first woman member of the Federal Communications, it appeared to be little more than a farewell gesture by Truman.

But Hennock had made powerful alliances with the Democrat leadership as well as many groups that crossed party lines. For aspiring women who were segregated in separate female auxiliaries of male-dominated organizations, she was a rare success story. Among Jews, she was a visible practicing professional member. At the same time, in New York's politically-charged Catholic Church she had the support of a lot of nuns as well as the conservative head of the New York Archdiocese, Cardinal Spellman.

On Hennock's behalf, her good friend Dr. Armand Hammer, the fabled entrepreneur, contacted General Julius Klein, founding commander of the Jewish War Veterans.

General Klein managed to deliver the votes of key Republican senators, starting at the top with Robert A. Taft, who wrote to him about the Hennock appointment:

*"We withdrew our general opposition to confirming anyone to a long-term job, because of her excellent recommendations as an attorney, in spite of the fact that she had been active in several Roosevelt campaigns."*

The effectiveness of General Klein's arm-twisting is even more apparent in the letter he received from Senator Owen Brewster serving on the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, who seemed far from comfortable with what he felt compelled to do.

*"I trust you will understand the very great embarrassment that would be occasioned to all concerned if our confidence in your judgment should be found to be misplaced. I have taken considerable satisfaction in this confirmation, mingled with occasional concern as to the consequences to those who relied upon our leadership if the very critical test applied to women in high office should reveal any flaws. Caesar's wife had a picnic*

*compared with what women in public life must face today as they move to upper levels.*

*"I am as anxious for the young lady to make good on her own account and the cause of woman's progress in general . . ."*

Senator Brewster's anxieties were hardly relieved when during the hearing, in response to his question as to what she knew about radio, she answered, "Only that I've raised a lot of money for radio programs for Roosevelt." Then she told the Committee's Republican majority, "I'm against you, and I always have been."

The very chutzpah of such unmitigated candor seems to have won the day. With about 800 Truman appointees in abeyance, Hennock's may have been the only one confirmed. Of course, the irony was that this great victory was made totally unnecessary when Truman was reelected in November along with a Democrat majority in Congress. But Hennock, faithful to her promise to Senator Taft, chose an outsider rather than the customary seasoned FCC staffer as her principal assistant.

Stanley Neustadt was the first in a succession of brilliant young lawyers whom Hennock selected to serve her in a fashion similar to a judge's law clerk. I recently had the opportunity of gaining extensive interviews with Neustadt and with Arthur Stambler, who served Hennock during the most critical years of her tenure. Neustadt, then in his mid-twenties, had been a pilot in the Air Force during World War II and practiced law for a year in New York. "Neither of us knew a damn thing about broadcasting or about FCC regulations," he recalled. "We learned together."

In July, when Hennock was sworn in by the FCC Chairman, Wayne Coy, he proclaimed: "We've had rectitude, fortitude and solemnitude, but never before pulchritude." But for General



*At the University of Houston, Texas for the inauguration of the first educational TV station in 1953, l. to r. Ovita Culp Hobby, University President Kemmerer, and Commissioner Frieda Hennock.*

Klein, who had piloted her confirmation through the Senate, much more was expected. Klein wrote to Hennock demanding that she expedite his brother's long standing application for a radio license in Oak Park, Illinois. Although it was approved by the Commission, Klein was furious that Hennock abstained when it came up for a vote. In an agency where corruption was not infrequent, Hennock's record remained absolutely clean.

When Hennock settled into her job as Commissioner, she quickly established a reputation as a strong-minded contentious maverick. She liked to think of herself as the preeminent defender of the public interest in opposition to the greed of the entire gamut of the telecommunications industry whose powerplays she believed unduly influenced her fellow commissioners.

The composite picture of Hennock pieced together from the recollections of those who served with her during her seven year term on the FCC is highlighted with explosive displays of

mercurial temperament. Both subordinates and peers found her difficult to get along with. At heart an idealist, she didn't hesitate to employ everything within her grasp, using her keen mind and sharp wits, astute negotiating skills, along with political and institutional connections, and a toughness that men inexperienced in working with women as colleagues had difficulty in dealing with. Fellow commissioners became accustomed to having her stalk out of meetings after an emotional eruption in which she sometimes mixed foul language with a flood of tears.

Both Neustadt and Stambler recall their boss as a fascinating person to work for: long hours and the expectancy of high performance. Hennock had no head or patience for detail. As she plunged into controversy she counted on her "boys" to have the facts at their fingertips to develop positions for her. For men in their twenties to be shaping opinions that would set the course of the broadcasting industry was heady stuff.

Hennock persisted in demanding an allocation of 25 percent. She held that "The Commission improperly provides that it will review the general situation from time to time ..."

## Sexist Innuendos

**I**n 1951, midway into her term on the FCC, Hennock achieved her most coveted goal when President Truman appointed her as a Judge on the Federal District Court in New York City, the first woman chosen to serve in that locale. In a front page article (June 12, 1951), the *New York Times* noted, "The President had been known to desire appointing a woman, and Miss Hennock, with important local political connections, won out over several other applicants." A note left in her files suggests that there had been some consideration of such an appointment in 1949. But it had run into stiff opposition from the powerful New York City Bar Association.

Before the Senate Judiciary Committee held its confirmation hearing, the New York City Bar Association let it be known that they considered her "totally unqualified" for the job. The American Bar Association also vehemently opposed her appointment. Both had just begun to admit women and were still essentially male dominated clubs. At the same time a large number of women's bar associations and other organizations strongly recommended her.

The records, if they existed, of the Senate hearings—the first closed, the second open—have disappeared. What we know comes largely from her drafts of responses to anticipated questions from the Judiciary Committee, and the recollections of some of her contemporaries. The charges for the most part were rather trivial. They had to do with a small wager she had made in 1940 that FDR would run for a third

term, also some questioning maligning the ethics of her suit against her former law partner Julius Silver, concerning the partnership's claim to Polaroid stock. But most serious was the implied allegation that at some point she had had an affair with Judge Ferdinand Pecora.

A short Sicilian immigrant with piercing dark eyes, Pecora had risen to fame when serving as special counsel to the Senate Committee investigating Wall Street practices. He had put J.P. Morgan and other titans of the financial world on the spot. Before becoming a Justice of the New York State Supreme Court, Pecora had been a leader in New York politics when Hennock became associated with him. In a memorandum drafted for testimony before the Judiciary Committee Hennock wrote:

*"In the course of the hearing before your Committee, certain issues were intruded regarding my personal character. Sweeping charges, not based upon facts adduced as evidence, were spread upon the record in the contemptible guise of hearsay— hearsay compounded of falsehood, rumor, innuendo and gossip— hearsay of a nature which women are defenseless to combat.*

*"These charges are especially despicable because of the significant sequence of events in connection with my nomination. In 1949, when my name was first considered for this office, the Judiciary Committee of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York declared after a perfunctory examination that I lacked the necessary experience. Then followed my extensive tenure on the Federal Communications Commission in a quasi-judicial capacity, which undoubtedly weighed heavily with the President in naming me for the Judgeship in June of 1951. Within twenty-four hours of the announcement of my nomination, the same Judi-*

ciary Committee, by vote of only eight men, on the ostensible basis of its previous inquiry declared publicly that I was 'totally unqualified'. When my friends at the bar protested against this obvious pre-judgement, the same small group instituted pointed inquiries regarding my moral character and personal reputation in a desperate attempt to defeat my confirmation by smearing my name.

*"The charges of improper relations between Judge Ferdinand Pecora and myself are as malicious as they are unfounded."*

When word spread that the Hennock appointment was under serious attack women rallied to her support. Pauline Malter James, President of the Brooklyn Women's Bar Association testified:

*"... opposition to Miss Hennock is limited to that small clique from large Wall Street firms who have what amounts to interlocking directorate among the controlling groups in the leading bar associations.*

*"I have heard rumors and seen direct evidence of the campaign of vilification and innuendo that these associations are waging. From what I know of Miss Hennock's qualifications, I believe that these insinuations are as far-fetched as they are unfair ... I cannot believe that the bar associations would have conducted themselves in a similar manner with reference to a male nominee as they have in this case, proceeding as they did without an examination of the entire record of the nominee, which should be in the issue involved here."*

A sexist endorsement was issued begrudgingly by Clarke Blair Mitchell a partner at Choate, Mitchell and Ely, the firm with which Hennock had been associated, in a letter to Senator Pat McCarran, Chairman of the Judi-

ciary Committee: "Although opposed to women on the Federal bench, I believe that Miss Hennock is as well qualified for the place as any woman I have heard mentioned for it."

Another senior member of the New York Bar Association establishment, George W. Whiteside, was more understanding:

*"The objections to Miss Hennock's confirmation urged by several bar associations impressed me as superficial and unconvincing.*

*"... I realize that the appointment of a woman lawyer to the Federal bench in New York breaks a long precedent and perhaps, consciously or unconsciously, might influence the judgment of my male brethren at the bar."*

But as the opposition to her gained momentum, it eventually became overwhelmingly evident to Hennock that she was not going to be confirmed. Thereupon, in what must have been the bitterest disappointment in her career, she requested that her name be withdrawn.

## A Blessing in Disguise

**T**he circumstances which caused the humiliating defeat of her appointment to the court was in fact a great blessing to those whose causes she had fought for at the FCC. For as she returned to her seat the most important challenges lay just ahead.

During the four-year freeze, tremendous pressure built up to release channels to those waiting to jump into the lucrative business of television broadcasting. No gold rush or land grab in the history of the expanding US economy provided more opportunity for profit. In the face of these demands from the broadcasting business, Frieda Hennock continued to stand alone

among her fellow commissioners in her firm insistence on permanent reservation of specific channels throughout the country for noncommercial educational usage. When the enthusiasm of the educators themselves flagged, she went on the campaign trail herself.

The *New York Daily News* referred to her as a "blond dynamo [who] spends all of her spare weekends dashing around the country to sell America on a 'school house of the air'." An article about her duel against overwhelming odds in *Look* magazine was titled "Dona Quixote". "Selfish interests are at work," she warned, "in an attempt to discourage the use of television by educational institutions."

She was given to saying that "Television channels represent one of America's most valuable resources ... The airwaves, you know, belong to the people. Unlike any other main communication media, such as newspapers, magazines or motion pictures, the radio and television airwaves are in the public domain." In this respect she held, the FCC was merely "following precedent set by Congress ... in preserving great tracts of forests and national parks and preserving rights to tidelands."

Against the howls of commercial broadcasters, Hennock was at times shrewdly persuasive. "Educational television is not to compete with commercial interests," she would argue. "It is here to supplement them."

Finally the FCC's 6th Report and Order on April 14, 1952, opened up the allocation of television frequencies to applicants who had been waiting in line impatiently. When approximately 12% of the total number of channels were permanently reserved for noncommercial television, it was a great triumph for Frieda Hennock. Yet in her lengthy separate opinion she protested that the ruling, which she approved of in general, didn't go far

enough. She had wanted 25% of the channels reserved. She was also deeply concerned that so many of the noncommercial reservations were in the UHF band, then almost worthless.

She commended the decision to reserve "specific channels in cities throughout the country". The Commission mandated that in markets where there were more than three VHF frequencies, one would be reserved for educational TV. But in cities such as New York where all the VHF channels had already been assigned educational TV would have to settle for UHF.\*

Hennock held that educational TV had been short changed. "The reservations have predominantly been confined to the ultra-high (UHF) portion of the spectrum and an insufficient number of VHF provided ... By failing to provide education with its rightful share of the television spectrum, the Commission, in my opinion, runs the risk of stunting the growth of educational TV in the formative days of its infancy and of forever retarding the future of our entire educational system."

Hennock's strong minority opinion stood as a firm warning to those who would erode the ground she had gained for educational TV. She provided a bulwark of protection as educators struggled laboriously to muster the necessary financing prior to filing their applications.

## A Little LBJ Night Music

**H**ennock's unflagging struggle assured the very existence of noncommercial broadcasting in the United States. For this she has

\* In New York City the educational TV applicant eventually purchased Channel 13, a New Jersey commercial frequency, and had it redesignated noncommercial.

earned a niche in the history of mass communications. But the range of her activities on the FCC was more than a one-note battle cry. From her vantage point as dissenter and critic, her minority opinions influenced the shape of every aspect of television in its formative years and provided useful guidelines for decades to come.

During the first two years of the freeze the FCC wrestled with the question of color television. In 1950, they decided in favor of the CBS system, principally because it was about ready to be manufactured. While RCA, GE, Dumont and other systems under development were compatible with the existing black and white standards, the CBS system was mechanically complex and incompatible. Hennock's dissent emphasized that the Commission had "a moral obligation" to the seven million set owners in the country who would be penalized by a resulting diminution of service or by needing a costly expenditure to adapt their sets. She urged the Commission to explore with the industry all possibilities of compatible systems that might soon be available. In the meantime, she demanded that the suggested determination be deferred.

This did in fact happen, not because of the FCC, but because production of civilian goods was halted during the Korean War, continuing until 1953. By that time, the number of black and white sets in use had increased five fold. Along the lines Hennock had suggested, the FCC then turned to an all-industry committee, NTSC (National Television Systems Committee) which developed a compatible system, that was essentially that of RCA. This system was thereupon made available to all manufacturers. At one point Commissioner Hennock's dissent on color TV was cited in a Supreme Court opinion.

After the end of the freeze in April, 1952, the FCC proceeded with what Hennock considered undue haste in

response to the demands of the commercial broadcasting industry. About fifty uncontested applications listed in order of size of the market, were made ready for immediate action. All of the normal procedures were waived in favor of simple oral presentation by the staff as to the qualifications of each applicant, after which the commissioners voted their approval. A procedure that might have taken weeks was completed without any written presentation in minutes!

**A**rthur Stambler remembers Hennock's outrage in one incident that involved the application for a VHF channel in Austin, Texas by Ladybird Johnson. In 1952, the year before Lyndon Johnson became Senate majority leader, he was already well known for his ability to get what he wanted—or else.

On the first day of the FCC crash hearings for some fifty applicants, Austin, Texas, was somewhere down in the middle of the line. By the end of that day fifteen applicants had been disposed of, and the commissioners adjourned. Accordingly, Hennock went home. When she returned the next morning, she learned that later the preceding evening there had been a call presumably from someone in Lyndon Johnson's office, deploring the fact that the Commission had not acted on the Austin franchise. As a result, a quorum of commissioners reconvened an unheard of night session. They continued until they had approved all the applications, including Austin.

Hennock was conspicuously left out of this nocturnal star chamber session. When she found out about it the next day, she protested angrily that the Commission had acted unwisely and illegally, arguing that when an adjudicatory session adjourned it could not be rescheduled without the approval of the entire Commission. She insisted that all of

those after-hours approvals be nullified. This the Commission refused to do.

Hennock said she would file a dissenting opinion to be included in the minutes, voicing her violent objections to what had taken place. Whereupon the Commission ruled—improperly—that there was no precedent for such a dissent. Stating that it would be unwise and illegal, they refused to accept it. As a result, the whole ugly business disappeared without a trace of evidence.

## The Conscionable Dissenter

**I**n many of her dissenting and separate opinions Hennock believed she was representing the public interest against powerful and in some cases monopolistic corporations. In 1953, she opposed the merger of Paramount Theatres with the the ABC Television Network, recalling that Paramount Pictures had recently been severed from their theatre holdings in an anti-trust case. When the moguls of ABC came to Hennock's office to plead their case, she virtually threw them out, slamming the door behind them with such vehemence that the glass panel almost shattered. "It stinks," she yelled. "Hollywood is taking over television!" Spelled out in a sixty-three page dissent she later argued: "... The merger's harmful effect upon competition stems principally from the fact that it will create in one corporate entity a vast combination of powerful interests in two or more vital media which are naturally in fundamental and violent competition with one another." In this instance, Hennock failed to appreciate that the infusion of Paramount capital, rather than being harmful to competition, made it possible for ABC to remain a viable network competitor.

In 1954, toward the end of her term

on the FCC, on several occasions Hennock did battle with the telecommunications giants. When the FCC terminated without a hearing its inquiry into the "justness and reasonableness" of AT&T rate increases, Hennock objected. Later that year when Western Union was permitted the discontinuance and reduction of some of its services she demanded an investigation and hearing.

Again in 1954, Hennock voiced her dissent when the FCC granted a VHF license to the Southern Newspapers, Inc. in Hot Springs, Arkansas, without holding a hearing. She raised the basic policy question of concentrated control of the mass media of communications. The Palmer family in addition to their newspapers owned, within a radius of 125 miles, a TV station in Texarkana and an interest in five AM radio stations. Hennock held that the Palmer's power adversely affected the development of competition.

After Hennock had won the battle for the permanent reservation of channels for noncommercial TV, her most impassioned crusade was directed toward the survival of UHF in competition with the vastly superior signal provided on VHF. She was motivated by the fact that most of the channels reserved for non-commercial stations were UHF.

Her own recommendations were for cuts in VHF power and antenna heights and stronger regulations of the networks. She opposed the expansion of ownership from five to seven VHF stations by any entity or individual.

However, the advance of commercial TV was so powerful and rapid that any practical consideration of such a radical turning back was out of the question. Nevertheless, Hennock's arguments in support of UHF led eventually to the mandating of all-channel receivers almost a decade after she had left the Commission.



## A Farewell Unhailed

Commissioner Hennock completed her seven year term on the FCC in 1955. Under the law, President Eisenhower was required to appoint another Democrat. Hennock wanted to stay on, but her credentials as a prominent politically active liberal Democrat worked against her. Thereupon the President replaced her with a Florida bureaucrat and businessman, Richard A. Mack. The *New York Times* reported "As is customary the White House offered no explanation of why Miss Hennock had not been reappointed."

Returning to private life, Hennock took up the practice of law in Washington. She also acquired the license for a commercial television station in Arkansas. In 1956 Hennock, who had always been strongly opposed to divorce, married William H. Simons, a divorced, but otherwise a presentable mild-mannered gentleman, successfully engaged in real estate in the Washington area. Then in 1960 at the age of 56, Frieda Hennock developed a brain tumor and died.

Throughout her short brilliant public career, her style was characteristically confrontational. As the liberal gadfly on the FCC she often spoke up as a minority voice of one. She suffered many defeats though not in silence. Her one great triumph was the permanent reservation of channels resulting in the establishment of noncommercial television. Perhaps because she had a way of getting along better with her enemies than her allies Frieda Hennock has to this day never been honored as she deserves. ■

Henry Morgenthau III spent twenty five years at WGBH-TV, Boston as a writer and producer, winning many awards for his documentaries and talk shows. In 1991, his book *Mostly Morgenthaus: A Family History* won the National Jewish Book Council prize. He started his broadcasting career at WNEW Radio in New York, and later in TV produced for NBC, ABC, CBS and PBS.

# PLAY BACK

# 100<sup>th</sup> ISSUE

**Interviewer:** *Let's turn to the future—and to the entire question of an evening network half-hour news program. We know it has its proponents as well as its detractors. What are some of the ... factor involved in such a move?"*

**Don Hewitt:** *The half-hour is coming, and probably should, but it's hard to say that we haven't stumbled into a good thing with the present fifteen-minute show. It has been successful—it is informative, so naturally you're reluctant to tamper with it..."*

**Reuven Frank:** *I think the fifteen-minute dinner hour news program is a hangover from the most successful days of radio news and has no relevance to television at all ... People are willing to give more attention to news. The half-hour news program can be properly done and be successful..."*

Dialogue with  
Reuven Frank, NBC News,  
and Don Hewitt, CBS News,  
*Television Quarterly*  
November, 1962  
Vol.1/No.4

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# PRESERVING THE INTEGRITY OF THE DOCUDRAMA

The gatekeeper who managed changing standards and practices at ABC Television for three decades probes the ethical and journalistic questions the genre must confront

**BY ALFRED R.  
SCHNEIDER**

**C**ritics who disparage television docudramas would do well to read the *American Heritage* special issue on the Power of the Historical Novel: In a lead article illuminating the fact/fiction debate, Daniel Aaron paraphrases the columnist George Will by stating, "If novelists use 'the raw material of history—real people, important events,' then they should be constrained by concern for truthfulness, by respect for the record and a judicious weighing of possibilities."

Truth is essential to docudrama, but truth is a complex concept. A good place to start is the controversy around the Oliver Stone feature *JFK*, which leads us to ask of docudrama,

What is its purpose? What are its standards?

Over the years, in television and in film, the docudrama has come in for criticism from reviewers and academicians. Essentially the charge is distortion, tampering with "truth". "Point of view" also has been part of the debate. At issue is the extent to which a writer must provide balance for his opinion. However, there has never been the diatribe outcry of "polemic" as charged by some against Stone's *JFK*.

Stone's defense adds another dimension to the debate. In reviewing docudrama on television my attitude has always been that of a lawyer. Conclusions must be based on fact, although certain guidelines permit dramatic license and some incidental fictionalization. Advocacy is prohibited. Conflicting points of view have to be presented. Stone appears to be saying that as author he can hypothe-

size. In doing so it matters not what substance there is to facts. A statement and premise is to be made and the facts will work to that end. No quarrel. His prerogative. However, it is not docudrama. It is personal opinion and needs to be so labeled and held out for exactly what it purports to be.

One of the best symposia on the genre was held in the summer of 1979 in Ojai, California, at a time when fear of loss of the form brought writers, producers, directors and broadcasters together to discuss the question.

The consensus then, and time has borne out its validity, was that the docudrama is a viable program technique. Reduced to its simplest form, docudrama is no more nor less than the relating of a tale, from the happenings of real events to or about real people. It has to be entertaining. It has to be audience-captivating. It has to be commercially viable. The difficulty arises when an author interprets the fact or creates "fact" in order to proffer his personal point of view and hold it out as undeniable truth. It is further complicated when the interpretation takes on a patina that is of the mind and heart of the author. So we are faced with the roots of the controversy.

- (1) *what is fact and what is fiction?, and*
- (2) *when is it advocacy of one's point of view, rather than exposition?*

If it is "fiction" it is not "truth." If it

is not truth, then it is not "docudrama." Thus by definition, certainly for television, and probably for motion pictures as well, a standard of fidelity is required.

There is established precedent for docudrama as a genre. It means something to the viewer by reason of prior use. The documentation of real events about real people with certain limited dramatic license has come to be known as "docudrama." If we are to retain the integrity of the form as presently known and defined, then we need ground rules. That is what this essay is all about.

The resolution of these issues is not to be put off by abandonment of the genre. Constant maligning of the efforts to achieve the goals of docudrama provide no solution. David Rintels, television writer, dramatist and scholar, summed it up at Ojai. He said, "The public interest demands the best efforts of all of us to save this vital source of information and drama."

It is critical for television writers/producers to separate questions of substance from questions of procedure. If docudrama is the telling of "history," then in the telling, current thinking and perspective on controversial issues are affected. Guidelines as to what is or is not permissible in dealing with perceived fact, as distinguished from invented happenings, must be fair and accurate.

Why should television docudramas come in for special care? Because of the nature of the medium. Television often presents entertainment and news events in close proximity.

*The documentation of real events about real people with certain limited dramatic license has come to be known as docudrama. If we are to retain the integrity of this form, then we need ground rules.*

Accordingly, a higher degree of care is called for in TV. First, there is the ever present potential that a teleplay will be interrupted for a news bulletin or special news report. Reality and fantasy may be juxtaposed. This has the potential for confusing the viewer. Is it news which is presumed true?— Or is it drama based on news, which, it follows, must also be true.

Second, it is through television that the viewer may be receiving the only recounting or interpretation of a particular event. What if, for example, during the presentation of a docudrama on the Pearl Harbor Attack (as was shown the week of its 50th anniversary)

the President had been visiting in Japan and those NHK tapes of his collapse at a State Dinner were shown in the middle of the program? Would such an interruption appearing at the very moment the Japanese attack is shown give credence to some of the hypothesis and fact/fiction accounts being rendered in the movie? Or let us suppose that during the showing of *The Day After* (while not a docudrama per se, it dealt with many factual events relating to a nuclear holocaust and gave rise to many of the same concerns), a bulletin interruption brought the news of Chernobyl. Suppose there were no opening disclaimers or closing epilogue to the program advising of its hypothetical nature and its suppositions.

Visiting the television docudrama is different than visiting a library with numerous resource materials available. It is different from being exposed to a continuum of debate as exists in print in critique of a motion

picture like *JFK*. In television docudrama the plot appears once, may have momentary review and except for the implant of idea/fact/fiction in the mind of the viewer, is forever gone.

Moreover, the mere size of the potential audience, and the actual audience that would derive information, ideas or values from its message, is a factor. It demands a degree of caution that suggests fairness in the presentation of conflicting points of view so that the viewer can make his/her own choice.

Choice dictates the definition of purpose for docudrama and makes the strongest argument for its continuance as a dramatic form.

Choice is the essence of democracy. It speaks to the reason for freedom of expression. Choice is the denial of thought control. Choice is the effluence of the total workings of a free society, economically, socially, and politically. Choice is the apex of the pyramid.

## Controversy and Choice

**H**owever, choice is effected only when the viewer is given the opportunity to consider the conflicting fact or opposing views. Choice is non-existent when there is nothing to choose from. To achieve the goal, choice, the docudrama must meet certain criteria. To explore controversial issues it must present more than one side. It must make clear that it is the author's interpretation of fact, or that it is the "historian's" deductions of inferences from circumstance that is being presented.

*Choice dictates the definition of purpose for docudrama and makes the strongest argument for its continuance as a dramatic form. Choice is the essence of democracy.*

The fabrication of an event, the re-sequencing of time and happenings, or the invention of totally fictitious characters—all passed off as truth, makes the presentation invalid as docudrama.

Edward Jay Epstein, the scholarly author who participated on a recent Town Hall panel debate on the movie *JFK*, made this distinction between fiction and non-fiction, "In non-fiction the writer is bound by the universe of discoverable fact when he reaches the limits of discoverable fact, he stops, ...

"The problem comes when an artist tries to mix fact and fiction. What you get is not a hybrid but pure fiction, because the introduction of a fictional scene or fact changes everything after it."

There are procedural steps, however, that can guide an author to avoid the pitfalls. David Rintels in a *New York Times* article, states that "... Most writers who dramatize real people and events have a moral code that tells them:

- "Make no changes that are not absolutely necessary to tell the story better, more understandably."

- "Make no change in the facts when the facts are not in dispute or subject to misinterpretation."

- "Never change the essence of the story or the event, or the character."

- "Make no change that will make a difference as to how history is perceived."

- Make no change when a participant in the event will be unfairly damaged."

- Never invent unless it is necessary to fill a gap, or for reasons of completeness or clarity. Never invent at all unless you believe the invention will illuminate and not distort reality."

**I**would add that there should be a reasonable basis for the "invention," in circumstance or surrounding events. In the past I authored with ABC colleagues similar criteria:

- It is permissible to create composite characters (i.e., characters who are based on two or more actual individuals). However, fictitious characters—other than incidental characters who have little or no bearing on the basic plot—should not be included.

- The chronology of significant actual events portrayed should be substantially accurate, and supportive evidence produced. Telescoping may be employed so long as the compression does not misrepresent actual events. Where relevant to accuracy, passage of time must be clearly indicated, either in dialogue, by supers, dissolves, or other visual techniques.

- Personal characteristics, attitudes and the demeanor of actual persons portrayed must be consistent with corroborating evidence as to the actual characteristics of these persons.

- Created dialogue must be consistent with the actions, values, attitudes and personalities of the actual figures portrayed.

- Fictionalized or compressed representations of actual events must be reasonably consistent with the historical record regarding them. For example: although a conversation between actual persons on a specific matter may not be capable of documentation, depictions of such conversation may be acceptable if they accurately characterize the individuals portrayed and their specific attitudes at the time in which the scene is depicted. And if they are consistent with available evidence regarding their action and thoughts.—i.e., no invention out of whole cloth.

Implementation of these guidelines is of course subjective. However, interpretation of facts, selection of events, perception of persona are all judgments, a mixture of the heart and mind. History is the handmaiden of the scribe's selection process. It is the reasonable care standard and the best evidence rule that governs the

acceptability of inclusion or exclusion. Good faith representation, fairness, reliable sources are requisites.

## How to Portray Nixon

**F**or example: In the "prayer" scene in the adaptation for ABC-TV of Woodward and Bernstein's *Final Days*, Richard Nixon is portrayed as distraught and stricken. It is an emotion-filled meeting to which he had invited Henry Kissinger.

There were several accounts of that session in print. The producers of course intended to follow their version of the meeting which included Nixon breaking down and sobbing. Also contained in the same scene was his request as quoted in the book, "Henry, please don't ever tell anyone that I cried and that I was not strong."

In the book that statement is not made while they are meeting in the Lincoln Room. It is subsequently referred to as part of the account of a telephone conversation made by Nixon to Kissinger, after Kissinger returned to his office where Scowcroft and Eagleburger are present.

Woodward's corroboration for the statement is the reference in his book to the custom of Kissinger having a colleague listen in on an extension to his conversation with Nixon. The book relates the conversation, but makes no attribution to Kissinger or a colleague saying the said quote. Kissinger's rendition of the meeting as well as of the telephone call is contained in his autobiography *Years of Upheaval*, where he makes reference to the prayer scene. Kissinger states he is not clear as to whether he actually knelt (a "trivial distinction,") or not. He refers to Nixon as being "shattered," "deeply distraught," "stricken," but states that he was not out of control, although "... I found his visible agony more natural than the almost inhuman self containment that

I had known so well."

He refers to the telephone calls, but says nothing about anyone listening on an extension. He states that Nixon asked that "I must not remember our encounter that evening as a sign of weakness," and that "he hoped that I would keep in mind the times when he had been strong." Kissinger goes on to state that Nixon asks him to speak of the evening, if and when he did, with respect, but make no reference to Nixon sobbing.

Nixon in his memoirs makes reference to having prayed with Kissinger that evening, but does not indicate that he broke down and sobbed. Woodward attested to the accuracy of his version. Thus the scene had to give credence to several perceptions of "fact," emotion and interpretation. Care was used in its portrayal, and telescoping of events was permitted to attempt to reach a consensus of attitude, representation and circumstance of the event.

## The Attica Story

**T**ake the case of depicting a chronology of events as they bear upon the issue of cause. In *Attica*, a teleplay based on Tom Wicker's book, *A Time to Die*, the question arose as to the proper sequence of events. The script as written had the order given to storm the yard (where the prisoners were congregating and holding guards hostage) before the occurrence of the event. The event was the prisoners' bringing certain hostages out on the catwalk with knives at their throats, obviously threatening harm. Was this act a bluff on the part of the prisoners, as some believed, or a threat to harm hostages which caused Corrections Commissioner Russell Oswald to give the order to proceed.

To accept the scripted version was to conclude action without cause. To reject the script version was to state

the case for cause. After review of the literature, the McKay report which investigated the uprising, Tom Wicker's description of the event in his book, and *Time* magazine reports and articles at the time, the reversal of the scene as scripted was requested by ABC Standards and Practices. The teleplay concluded that there appeared some cause for the order, rather than drawing an accusatory conclusion as to which there was some ambiguity. The weight-of-the-evidence rule governed in this case.

## Separate But Equal

**A**s I note later, sometimes only a disclosure statement suffices to explain the dramatization of dialogue and scenes. In *Brown vs. Board of Education*, or *Separate But Equal*, a key debate takes place at Howard University. Educators, lawyers and students discuss the merits of taking the case to the Supreme Court. Should they risk a negative decision? How will the court rule on constitutional rights and states' rights? Are equal facilities preferable to integration? Thurgood Marshall's position to proceed to the highest court of the land is firm.

Not knowing exactly what Marshall said, the script creates certain dialogue and includes in his forceful and deciding remarks certain eloquent statements actually rendered by James Nabrit, the Howard law professor, who spoke with conviction and strength at the meeting. His words are paraphrased and contained in Marshall's remarks. Harry Briggs, Jr. is a representative black school child and composite character, al-

though carrying a real name. Mrs. Briggs says her son didn't walk miles to school, only a couple of blocks from home to school. But many others did.

And so the disclosure on ABC: "Tonight's film is a dramatization based on interviews and accounts of the time, and contains created scenes and dialogue".

The most delicate question in this controversy goes to the question of "point of view." The bottom line in creating the canvas of CHOICE is to responsibly handle truth. Truth, accuracy, relativism. Certainly, fact is as perceived in the eye of the beholder. Truth is subject to translation both in word and in picture. However, seeing a teleplay is not like entering the library and finding on the shelf four different volumes with various points of view. The reader has the means to determine for himself from the selection available.

**I**t is for this reason that television has the responsibility to present all "volumes" in the "one edition" presented on the air. The tremendous impact not only on the adult viewer, but on children's perception of history places a heavy mantle on the shoulder of the broadcaster and author.

Just consider if *JFK* were to be presented on television—as I'm certain it will be—and what the child of the 80's and 90's takes away about the alleged complicity of the late President Lyndon B. Johnson in the assassination of President Kennedy.

Many writers take issue with this concern for balance. Their case is that every writer has to have a point of view. One can't write effectively without one. Responsibility, they claim, should not make for blandness.

*Many writers take issue with this concern for balance. Their case is that every writer has to have a point of view.*



Balance does not insure fairness and honesty. Clearly the most difficult aspect of speaking the truth, especially when the subject matter is closer to present time and controversial.

But not without solution. One very obvious but not totally satisfactory answer is disclosure. I have often said that there is nothing wrong with putting a rigged quiz show on the air if you disclose at the beginning, middle or end, "This show is rigged." Not the answer, but one step to balance the interests in furtherance of the goal.

Another suggestion: follow the television program with a panel discussion. Present another full program with the opposing point of view. The latter perhaps is not as commercially feasible as the former, but doable today. The proliferation of distribution systems—cable, satellite, additional networks—makes this possible. Why not include a bibliography at the end of the program and/or, where appropriate, publish a teacher's guide to supplement and clarify the production.

Surely, fertile minds writing for this industry and those critiquing its content can come to a consensus of standards of procedure so as to enable this viable form to continue to entertain, inform and enlighten. That is the easy part; the more difficult one is for all to accept the substantive requirements of accuracy, fairness, balance and choice. ■

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Alfred R. Schneider was Vice President, Policy and Standards, Capital Cities/ABC, Inc., when he retired in 1991. He served for 20 years on the National Association of Broadcasters' Code Review Board and was its senior member. He currently teaches a course in Broadcasting and Social Policy at Fordham University's Graduate School of Business at Lincoln Center, New York.

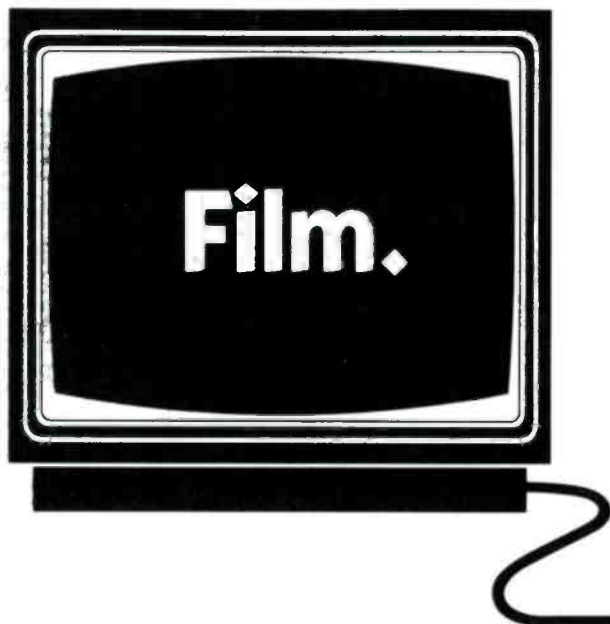
**PLAY  
BACK**

**100<sup>th</sup>  
ISSUE**

*"Assuming that the debates will occur, they can be planned and spaced and a gentleman's agreement, if possible during a campaign, must exist so that neither side can demand additional events ... The subject or subjects of each debate must be agreed upon, and, although this is a sensitive area, the speakers must be kept within the agreed bounds. Many people believe that the debaters should face each other and on one else. (There is no reason why they should not each face other questioners at other times.) The debates should be few in number so that the candidates would be forced to use other forms of campaigning on and off the air... They should all be framed with one intention: to give the debates a unique character, to prevent them from being confused with programs."*

Gilbert Seldes article  
"The Future of National Debates",  
Television Quarterly  
August, 1962  
Vol.1/No.3

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# REVIEW & COMMENT

## MANIPULATING AND MANAGING THE MEDIA IN THE GULF WAR

**BY BERNARD S.  
REDMONT**

### **Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War**

*by John R. MacArthur*  
Hill & Wang: New York

### **Hotel Warriors: Covering the Gulf War**

*by John J. Fialka*  
The Woodrow Wilson Center  
Press/The Johns Hopkins  
University Press: Baltimore

### **Forty Days**

*by Bob Simon*  
Putnam: New York

**W**anted: A much-needed television documentary about the media in the Gulf War. Title: *The First Amendment Betrayed*.

During the conflict, the Bush Admin-

istration and the Pentagon hornswoggled, bamboozled and hogtied the American media—and by extension the American people.

In near-totalitarian fashion, they wrapped us in a camouflaged strait-jacket, throttling us, mocking our hallowed tradition of freedom of the press. For the war planners and leaders, the conflict became a public relations triumph over the media enemy as well as a military victory.

As more of the truth is ferreted out, we now know that the Gulf encounter was not, as Defense Secretary Dick Cheney boasted, "the best covered war in history." In fact, it was the worst covered in modern times.

Shortly after Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait, the media began trying to cover the crisis, but encountered massive obstacles. Eleven major print and television bureau chiefs faxed President Bush a letter expressing concern about restrictions on open coverage in Saudi Arabia. They complained that "Never in American history has this country been faced with as large a commitment in manpower and equipment with as little opportunity for the press to report."

The President's spokesman Marlin Fitzwater replied with reassuring words. But little happened to improve the situation.

The Bush Administration already

had made its preparations to go to war. Not only against Saddam Hussein, but against another foe: the media—and television in particular.

Flashback: Historians remember that General William Tecumseh Sherman gave a memorable graduation address on June 19, 1879, at Michigan Military Academy. Sherman said, "War is at best barbarism ... Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is hell."

The Pentagon was determined to wipe out the memory of the historic words of the Civil War general. War was now to be cleansed. No more blood and guts, people suffering and dying. No corpses, no coffins.

Three recent books underline this theme. They should be required reading for the informed citizen, and especially for all who work in, or watch, television.

The first, and most essential, is John R. MacArthur's *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War*. MacArthur, the publisher of *Harper's Magazine*, has written an exciting, provocative and important work.

It pulls no punches about how, despite the flood of images and words coming out of the Gulf, Americans were systematically deceived by their government, and also about how the media, for the most part, acquiesced in the muzzling.

President Bush and the Pentagon were determined not to allow the kind of realistic media coverage that had helped to inform the public during the Vietnam war.

After the Falkland Islands conflict in 1982, an article by Lt. Commander Arthur A. Humphries appeared in the *Naval War College Review* (May-June 1983). It dealt with the disturbing effect of media reporting on the public's understanding of the Vietnam war, arguing that pools and strict

censorship were the way to go: "The Falklands War shows us how to make certain that government policy is not undermined by the way a war is reported."

The article gave a new formula for what amounted to military subversion of democracy: "Control access to the fighting, invoke censorship and rally aid in the form of patriotism at home and in the battle zone."

Then came two testing grounds—Grenada and Panama.

MacArthur's assessment: "The Pentagon had experienced spectacular success in Grenada, first by creating a pool and then by sending it to the island too late, and in Panama by virtually imprisoning the pool on an army base. In both cases, reporters missed the fighting entirely, and the American public was treated to anti-septic military victories, minus any scenes of killing, destruction or incompetence."

Finally, there were Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The high-tech Nintendo video dished out at military press briefings beguiled the correspondents; they were inundated by positive PR with few negative messages.

Reporters and TV crews were ordered to go nowhere without a military minder escorting them—not to talk to troops without an official eavesdropper. Gary Matsumoto of NBC couldn't even interview a chaplain; an officer physically lunged to block his camera.

Even "pool products" were delayed, 24 to 72 hours. Some footage and dispatches never got through. Other tapes had to fight their way through three separate censors. But the media fought more for market share than for the First Amendment, MacArthur says.

Instead of acting as watchdogs, many in the media became lapdogs, he claims. Some became cheerleaders clad in jingoistic regalia. MacArthur also stigmatizes network

TV's proclivity to sanitize the face of battle with the aid of video graphics, logos spotlighting the "show," and music.

All three networks used current and past Pentagon officials as their special war commentators. Only a few correspondents ferreted out the truth behind Pentagon lies, he contends.

MacArthur relates that "The Big Three TV networks together lost tens of millions of dollars in their vain efforts to 'cover' the Gulf War, but their protest to [Pentagon spokesman] Pete Williams were tepid and tardy."

MacArthur says it was "hard to find" journalists or news executives outraged by their humiliating defeat: "Despite the public statements of some, I came increasingly to believe that the media were themselves largely indifferent to their stunning loss of prerogative."

In his quest for outrage, he found Peter Jennings not well-informed on "press issues." The good-natured Tom Brokaw "blandly suggested that the press and the military needed to find a 'middle ground.'" Only Dan Rather, "the most overtly patriotic anchorman during Desert Storm, seemed angry about censorship and the general conduct of the media during the conflict."

Rather told MacArthur frankly he "probably didn't do enough; we [at CBS] probably didn't do enough" to combat the Pentagon censorship plan "... There was a lack of will, a lack of guts to speak up, to speak out, speak our minds ..."

Rather called it "suck-up journalism." He was worried about the effects on young reporters just starting out.

But even Jennings talked with apparent wonder about "the brilliance of laser-guided missiles," and the "astonishing precision" of the US attacks on Iraqi defense units. It was only much later that we all learned about the fact that upwards of 70

percent of the bombs missed their targets—even the so-called "smart bombs". For the most part, Patriot missiles failed against Iraqi Scuds. Friendly fire casualties were substantial.

Those of us who have covered wars and the antics of officials and governments know that governments and their officials lie—including our own. MacArthur says "It is, after all, the nature of the government and the military to keep secrets, and sometimes to lie. The Pentagon had done it in Grenada, Panama, and now the Persian Gulf. But it is the journalist's job to expose the secrets and lies of the government."

MacArthur is convinced that the Pentagon's war against the media deliberately pitted "newspaper against newspaper, network against network, and television against print", for visas, privileges, interviews, transportation and access to the troops.

As publisher of *Harper's*, MacArthur was a party to a lawsuit brought by *The Nation*, the *Village Voice* and others contesting the constitutionality of the Pentagon's media rules. Mainstream news organizations declined to join the challenge. The quick end of the war caused the suit to be dismissed as no longer timely, but much of the federal court's language was favorable to the plaintiff's arguments.

**J**ohn J. Fialka's *Hotel Warriors* provides an invaluable complement to MacArthur's hard-hitting book. A reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, Fialka gives a first-hand account, chapter and verse, of the fighting and infighting. His slim, 78-page text is packed with facts, anecdotes and reasonable conclusions, delineating in graphic detail military officers' totalitarian mentality, manipulation, censorship and sheer incompetence.

In truth, the journalists themselves

were often ignorant and unprepared, he says ... but that's another story.

CBS correspondent Martha Teichner, a veteran of war coverage in El Salvador, Northern Ireland, Beirut and Romania, summed up for Fialka the frustrating experience of dealing with Army public affairs: "You've got incompetence from the bottom up and you've got resistance from the top down and it met where we were, in the pool. It all came together, and it was disastrous."

The Marine PROs were far better, though their role in the war was smaller, according to Fialka. Where the Army and Navy shafted and blocked journalists at every turn, the Marines, true to their own tradition of boosting the corps, begged for more reporters. (Readers should be advised that I cite this with the partiality of one who is an ex-Marine combat correspondent).

The commander of the Marine forces, Lt. Gen. Walter Boomer, a former head of the Marine public affairs office, put it this way to Fialka: "I don't know why it turned out the way it did on the Army's side. As far as we were concerned, what we did seemed to be fairly natural and the right thing to do. It's undergirded to a degree by the belief that the American people have a right to know, and we the Marines are trying to do the best we can to let people take a look at us."

Fialka recalls that Civil War reporters sent news of the Battle of Bull Run by telegraph to New York in 24 hours, but some film from the Gulf War took 36 days to get to home base via a military courier system known as the "pony express."

ABC Vice-President Walter Porges said "There were a couple of big battles that nobody's seen any pictures of yet ... I guess you could call it censorship by lack of access."

Fialka portrays the media as "an indigestible lump fed into a military media-handling system that was woefully short of resources and teeter-

ing on the verge of collapse." No wonder many enterprising reporters tried so hard to slip the shackles and run, rather than sit at military press headquarters in the air-conditioned Dhahran International Hotel and be spoon-fed official material.

Some of the best reporting of the Gulf War came from correspondents who broke the rules. A "unilateral" CBS TV crew violated the regulations and fed live broadcasts for many hours even before allied troops arrived in Kuwait City. Of course, the crew had three Land Rovers, a ton of equipment, three generators, two satellite phones, two Lorans (navigational devices) and enough gas and water for 10 days to two weeks.

**B**ob Simon was one of those enterprising, intrepid veteran reporters who refused to be fenced in. But even the best of journalists can run into trouble.

When Bob vanished with a CBS crew for several weeks, Dan Rather did a hold-for-release obit on him that said, "No one who knew Bob Simon seemed surprised when he ventured into enemy territory. That was a very Simon thing to do. He was always seeking an edge to his work, pushing himself, moving the story along. Simon was among the best of war correspondents, up there with Murrow and Cronkite. He learned his trade in Vietnam. Ever since then, he longed to be where the action was. We sent him everywhere and for one reason. He was the best we had."

Fortunately, that obit never needed to be aired. But it was a close call.

Chafing under restrictions set by the military, Bob and his crew-producer Peter Bluff, cameraman Roberto Alvarez and soundman Juan Caldera-crossed the Saudi Arabian border into Kuwait in a Land Rover after being assured by a Saudi customs officer that there were no Iraqi troops on the other side.

They were captured and imprisoned for 40 days in Baghdad, more than half that time in solitary confinement. Interrogated frequently, they were blindfolded, beaten and verbally abused. As a Jew, Simon got special abuse.

"We weren't combing the desert for scoops, revelations or prizes," Bob explains, "We just wanted to break away from the pack because it was becoming clear that the Pentagon was not planning to lead the pack anywhere anything was happening."

Bob is convinced the pool system was designed precisely to keep reporters away from the war the way it did in Grenada and Panama. If there had been a pool system in Vietnam, he says, many stories like the Tet offensive and My Lai would not have been covered. The security pretext, he says, was bunk—there was no security violation of any consequence in Vietnam. The motivation now was political: "The war was to appear clean, safe and sanitary; no blood, no pain, no body bags."

As riveting as is the story of his captivity, the best part of the book is Bob's re-entry into free life. CBS and many others had worked tirelessly to rescue him. The courage and devotion of his wife Françoise also shine through the story.

Finally, it was Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev who used his influence most effectively.

CBS spared no expense and went to great lengths to bring him back. And later played the story for all it was worth. When you are the story, they can bleed you dry. Demonstrating the understandable but sometimes insatiable and insensitive propensity of some producers to gobble up people, the network had the fearful idea of sending him back to Iraq to do a documentary entitled, *Bob Simon: Back in Baghdad*.

*Forty Days* is more than a modest, eloquent and candid account of his ordeal. One hesitates to criticize a

highly readable and powerfully written book for minor editing defects or for including day dreams, speculation and nightmares, along with the factual account of captivity and the victim's feelings of oppression and despair.

Bob didn't think of himself as a hero. He says that to some on the left he had become "the personification of the fight for freedom of the press, the struggle against the Pentagon's mendacity machine, and not just a poor schmuck who got caught with his pants down. The right blasted me with all the venom it had left after emptying its guns on [CNN correspondent Peter] Arnett." [for daring to stay and report from Baghdad].

What emerges in *Forty Days* is the courage of a real pro and the strength of the human spirit in the face of shameful brutality. There were barbaric Iraqi captors who beat him mercilessly. But there were also little acts of kindness by an Iraqi guard.

It must have seen a sobering moment when one of his guards said to him, "Mr. Bob very big man in America. But Mr. Bob very little man in Iraq." ■

Bernard S. Redmont is the author of *Risks Worth Taking: The Odyssey of a Foreign Correspondent*, published recently by University Press of America. In the course of more than four decades, he has broadcast to American listeners and viewers from scores of countries overseas, for CBS, and for Westinghouse Broadcasting Co. He was taken prisoner for four days by the Egyptian authorities while covering the Six Day War in 1967.

# CONFRONTING 60 MINUTES AND ITS STORIES

BY CAMILLE D'ARIENZO

## **60 Minutes and the News: A Mythology For Middle America**

by Richard Campbell

University of Illinois Press

**A**lthough I have not kept a scorecard, my guess is that since *60 Minutes* made its debut in 1968, I have seen almost as many of its episodes as I have missed. In reflective moments I have found my loyalty disconcerting. Why do I, in conjunction with millions of other isolated viewers, return to this news magazine when there are so many other options? The question has grown more insistent during the last few years because I thoroughly enjoy an ABC competitor in the same time slot, *Life Goes On*. Why, when the impulse to view both programs asserts itself, do I tape *Life Goes On* and view *60 Minutes* as it is being broadcast?

Upon reading Richard Campbell's *60 Minutes and the News: A Mythology for Middle America*, I realized that my intuitive responses are more than minimally acceptable.

I love stories. This applies to *Life Goes On*, as well as to *60 Minutes*. Not only do I cherish stories, but I am drawn to heroes and heroines, real and imaginary, people who engage in valiant struggles for valid gains and goals, who sacrifice themselves for others and the common good, and who, to use a traditional phrase, "do

the right thing" even when it hurt.

Both programs are episodic. "While *Life Goes On* returns weekly to the fictional family, *60 Minutes* brings us to unit after unit of the human community, each facing its own conflicts, challenges and triumphs.

*60 Minutes*, despite its selectively and sometimes highly criticized edited insights, is reality-based. Its heroes, moreover, often articulate this viewer's experience of powerlessness against negative institutional forces. The reporters—familiar, reliable, constant—demonstrate their heroic, although occasionally quixotic efforts to be a voice of public conscience and concern. To the delight of viewers like me, they succeed in unmasking evil, humiliating arrogance and encouraging a more just world. These stalwarts also provide a badly needed prophetic function: They stand "outside the city" and shout to all who have ears to hear, eyes to see and hearts to care, that something rotten is going on "inside," something requiring exposure, redress.

So for a quarter century, I have been content to enjoy this program as tourist, fan, critic, armchair philosopher and cheering squad of one. Richard Campbell has both affirmed my instincts and complicated my viewing habits.

His analysis, though admittedly not all-inclusive is holistic; he examines the parts, players and pictures, as a way of revealing the mosaic. Campbell says in his introduction, "I view *60 Minutes* in much the same way as a cultural anthropologist—as a rich storehouse of stories and meanings, and as a key development in journalism's history ... My focus is not on the individual 'messages' of particular *60 Minutes* narratives, but rather on how those public narratives—taken as a pattern, as a larger whole—come to signify meanings and how those recurring meanings wind through our culture."

He draws on the wisdom of his



Croatian grandmother in Ohio, as well as that of the show's senior producer, Don Hewitt, who despite his prominence and privilege, "argues that one reason for the program's success rests in his own ties to Middle America: 'My strength is that I have the common touch'."

Campbell philosophizes: "Hewitt's 'common touch' is common sense. His small-town, middle-class history taps into a fundamental mythic impulse in American culture, a nostalgic yearning to retreat from the large-scale bureaucracies and institutions that might rob our lives of meaning and coherence. We are, each of us, seekers of a moral order—a common ground—that stories so often provide."

The power of *60 Minutes*, Campbell says, "rests in its ability to both disclose and enclose social experience, and secure a common sense of place, where we map out our meanings and try to discover once again who we are."

The reader infers that one way we discover "who we are" is by understanding who the reporters are, by recognizing the roles they play and then by trying to understand how, why and in what measure we relate to those portrayals.

Reporters often serve as well-informed citizens, experts about their subjects, individuals imbued with common sense and experience, and determined to mediate between "them" (the news-makers of influential institutions) and "us" who look to them to make sense of complicated, often marginal experiences. To do that, "The reporter in any one narrative might perform as detective, as analyst, as wayfarer and as arbiter." Whatever roles they may assume, the reporters remain storytellers, often as referees who control the interpretation through editing and narration. They often set opposing sides against one another, increasing the tension by diminishing ambiguities and

augmenting differences. The camera itself provides commentary about the character and relationship between subjects (especially villainous ones) and reporters.

Campbell notes that *60 Minutes* consistently offers itself more visual or frame space than it does its subjects. Reporters are usually shot at a greater distance than their interviewees; the latter frequently appear in close-ups; the more extreme the character, the more extreme the close-up. "The reporters ... have more space within which to operate. They appear in greater control. Victims and villains are shot in tighter close-ups; they are less in control and often cut off from the place around them."

Campbell's observation about the relationship of frame space to reporters and interviewees is visualized by two photographs from a story broadcast in 1975, "What Became of Eldridge Cleaver?"

Campbell exercises excellent judgment in the limited photos he includes to illustrate his findings; however, that judgment is even more apparent in the stories he re-tells, right down to the sequences he details. The following segment from Campbell's chapter, "News and Adventure," is a credit to those who produced "Rolls-Royce" which aired in 1980 and to Campbell himself, whose careful analysis re-created the excitement of owning a quality automobile, contrasting it with the pathos of whose social status will forever deny them that possibility. Campbell writes:

"Sequence 3 is the central sequence in this segment, running five minutes, thirty-six seconds, and containing forty-two shots. The first scene established the reporter as tourist by displaying Safer driving a car and visiting a junk-yard in order to set up the first major visual opposition—the lack of durability, the 'junk' nature of society set against the durable timelessness of the Rolls.

"As Safer drives, he recites a line

from Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*: 'Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it's broken. I'm always in a race with the junkyard.' As he recites, Safer maneuvers the car into a junkyard where he sets up a major visual tension—the lack of durability, the "junk nature" of society, versus the durable timelessness of the Rolls-Royce.

"Just after Safer steps from the nondescript, obsolete car and walks to the foreground, in the background a powerful machine dramatically descends and crushes the car as we watch with Safer. He tells us, 'And this will soon be the fate of the car you're driving today.' With machine crushing machine behind him, Safer describes the effects of modernization on authentic experience: 'The trouble really is that nothing these days is built to last ... We live most of our lives in a junk society. Our durables aren't very durable. But when something is built by hand out of materials given by nature, old-fashioned pride is maintained.'"

From this demonstration, the viewers learn what they really want: old fashioned values, hand made, uniquely supervised objects, artisans who care and things that last forever. There's enough of memory and idealism to stimulate nostalgia; probably not enough to inspire a willingness to pay for any car what it costs to produce a Rolls-Royce.

An especially intriguing chapter, "News and Individualism," demonstrates that, regardless of the specific role played by a reporter in a given segment, all contribute to "the celebration of individualism." Campbell says, "*60 Minutes's* stories salute the integrity of the individual and affirm virtues that sustain us in the face of contrary and incomprehensible tension."

Campbell's final chapter, "The Search for Center" admits an ideological discomfort with what he **calls**

"journalism's obsession with the virtues of individualism ... at the expense of misinterpreting our institutions." The bind, he admits, is inescapable. His own book, a critique of *60 Minutes* and interpretation of its stories, represents the mythology of individualism.

Some of his other concerns, "contradictions," appear at odds with the program's formula for success. Having established the appeal of stories as a vehicle for understanding ourselves and our world, he worries, "If the bottom line in news is 'the story'—the reconstructed drama—then journalism runs the risk of sacrificing a traditional role as institutional watchdog for the thrill of the chase and the commodity appeal of the news product."

Then, Campbell issues a call to conscience to *60 Minutes*. He warns its creators to "be wary of serving drama at the expense of democracy." He encourages them to pay more attention to the context which breeds the events that become their stories. He asks for more systematic follow-up on particular characters and issues and more that "analyze both reportorial conventions and social issues raised in the news."

Perhaps, most importantly, he asks that they encourage the viewers to move from being spectators of social problems to taking responsibility "for those human experiences converted to narratives."

The author praises *60 Minutes* for restoring passion and heart through storytelling, "a universal common ground from where we start." The program's sin, he says, is that it appropriates and reconstructs as profitable, melodramatic tales real events that affect the lives and move the emotions of living human beings.

For those who wish to test Campbell's observations against a *60 Minutes* product, there are several run-down sheets in the Appendices.

For the rest of us who will go on

watching *60 Minutes* as long as it and we exist, it might be enough to fit on an index card the roles we might choose to live vicariously during a given episode: "The detective taps into our desires for truth, honesty and intrigue. The analyst helps us come to terms with our inner self, with moral order, and with knowledge about experience. The tourist cherishes adventure, tradition and authenticity. The referee honors fairness, balance and compromise."

Richard Campbell, in providing an analysis of the nation's most popular news magazine show, gives viewers a way to cast a critical eye on their own inner space, as well. ■

Camille D'Arienzo is a professor in the television and radio department at Brooklyn College. She also does commentary for WINS Radio, New York.

## THE MAN WHO WATCHED 103 CHANNELS

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**BY MARY ANN WATSON**

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### **Wretched Excess— The Age of Missing Information**

*By Bill McKibben*

*Random House: New York*

**B**ill McKibben went to extraordinary lengths to pull off a good gimmick. He pushed the envelope of the "one-day-in-the-life" genre and the result is a deep-focus snapshot of American television—therefore American culture—at the dawn of the decade.

One day in May, 1990, the former staff writer for *The New Yorker* arranged to have recorded the entire programming schedule of the most extensive cable system in the United States. The viewers in Fairfax, Virginia, had access to 103 channels. And on that day, more than 1,700 hours of television were available to them. Systematically, McKibben watched it all.

An added twist in his gambit is that he contrasts the 24-hour video glut with the experience of a summer day spent camping and hiking on an Adirondack mountain. It's an easy set-up for dramatic juxtapositions. In the hands of a lesser writer it would be blatant and smarmy. But this author offers a provocative counterpoint.

McKibben's beef with television isn't the typical kind. "I don't fret about TV because it's decadent or shortens your attention span or leads to murder," he writes. "It worries me because it alters perception."

McKibben is a naturalist who is sounding an alarm. The spine of his thesis is that in the so-called Age of Information we are living in deep ignorance because television has divorced us from the lessons of the physical world.

The medium's short history coincides with a period of unchallenged growth in American society. We've been on a consumption binge since the end of World War II; conditioned to believe that an ever-increasing standard of living is the birthright of every U.S. citizen.

Popular television programming, of course, has been a promethean teacher. And since cable's abundance of channels brings a profusion of reruns, this dangerous ideal is regenerated for each new crop of viewers. McKibben—born in 1960—watched *The Brady Bunch* in its original run. The series, he says, became "part of the oversoul" of its era. A big suburban home filled with so many appliances that even the maid had leisure time seemed like a reasonable scenario to a kid contemplating his future back then.

Twenty years later the Brady lifestyle is financially out of reach to virtually every young person watching, but it still compels. The question of being able to pay for domestic luxury, though, is a much smaller issue than the one McKibben raises: "Even if individuals can afford it, it's also become clear the planet probably can't—that the world, were it composed of a billion Brady Bunches, would buckle under the environmental strain."

On the mountain it's plain to see the world is simply meant to be a place of limits. Blueberries ripen in their season and then they're gone, no longer an option for birds or bears or hikers. McKibben builds a convincing case that most everything on TV assures us there should be no limits on our desires. Television alters our perception to believe it's normal to

forever expect more.

Shopping channels and commercials are obviously prime offenders and McKibben deftly provides some repugnant snatches of dialogue to open our eyes. A lady from Long Island calls and chats with the *Home Shopping Spree* announcer, appreciative of her opportunity to "get up at four-thirty in the morning and order something really nice." For a shopaholic, gratification delayed is gratification denied.

Television commercials ceaselessly present excess as the American way—no need to be embarrassed about having so much more than we need. One of the countless spots captured in McKibben's sample was an ad for Rubbermaid storage boxes. A typical family is shown being squeezed out of its home by all its belongings. Rubbermaid to the rescue. With everything neatly stowed, there's lots of room. "Hey!" Mom exclaims. "We need more stuff!"

In *The Age of Missing Information* Bill McKibben reflects on TV preachers, the Travel Channel, tabloid news programs, cartoons, the Weather Channel, *Twin Peaks*, talk shows, MTV, and a score of others. But his commentary is not that of a television critic or a probing industry observer. He's a homilist urging us to ask ourselves "How much is required for a decent life?"

The status of the networks, the fragmenting audience, or the evolution of production techniques are not his concern. What worries McKibben is that television is distracting us from signals being sent by the natural world. The seven warmest years on record have occurred in the last decade. That's not a factoid or an infobit—it's a warning that our wanting ways need to change.

McKibben acknowledges, "I may have cast myself as a killjoy in this book, an anti-materialist." But a fair-minded reader can't deny that his is the voice of reason. Our landfills are

full and there's no place to put our toxic waste. Why is it then that McKibben's pitch for frugality seems more deviant than a commercial prodding us to acquire a second ("maybe to put upstairs") vacuum cleaner? Sanity isn't easily reclaimed after a forty-year brainwash.

Though he's critical of most of what he observed on the screen, McKibben isn't an anti-TV curmudgeon unwilling to recognize that it has at times been a potent force for good. The consciousness raised by nature documentaries, such as the remarkable Jacques Cousteau films, has made a real difference. "Species exist today," McKibben notes, "that would be fossil records if Philo Farnsworth hadn't invented the picture tube."

But television's lapses into excellence on environmental issues are like grass through the asphalt—a great effort is made, but the landscape doesn't change. "Expecting that one exceptional program will matter," McKibben says, "is like expecting that you can eat french fries and gravy all week and then lower your cholesterol with a single spear of broccoli on Sunday night."

What's been called "the greening of prime time"—environmentalists lobbying TV producers to plant enlightened messages in their shows—was evident in some of what McKibben watched. On *Knots Landing*, for example, a talk show hostess (soon to be murdered by a psychotic security guard) is stopped in the hallway by her producer and shown the book *Fifty Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth*. "I think it has a lot of great topic ideas for the show," the producer says—and then back to the story. A plug for a useful book is better than nothing at all. But, unfortunately, in Hollywood somebody's probably going to get a humanitarian award for writing that little exchange.

McKibben anticipates the criticism that his volume is flawed because people just don't watch television in

such marathon sessions and it's pretty impractical for most Americans to set up housekeeping on a mountaintop. "These are, of course, straw days," the author tells us at the outset. "But caricatures have their uses—they draw attention to what is important about the familiar."

The peevish academics who take potshots at his lack of methodology miss the forest for the trees. This is not a research study to be replicated; it's a creative device that allowed an insightful man to write from the heart.

Harnessing the American appetite, though, seems an impossible objective as long as TV works overtime at stimulating it. In fact, television itself has become a metaphor for the boundlessness of our desires. The 150-channel cable system is already a given, and digital compression technology promises virtually unlimited channel capacity within two or three years. What in the world, we wonder, will fill all the space? Having big closets doesn't mean we have more treasure, just room for more junk.

Next year, not one but two 24-hour basic cable services will be launched featuring—if you can believe it—old game shows; the epitome of cosmic consumerism. A spokesman for one of the endeavors said, "We feel we're tapping into something that's ingrained in the American psyche."

McKibben's point exactly. ■

Mary Ann Watson is an associate professor of Telecommunications and Film at Eastern Michigan University.

# THE TELEVISION UNIVERSE

BY BERT BRILLER

## Les Brown's Encyclopedia of Television

(Third Edition)

by Les Brown

Visible Ink (paper): New York

## Why Viewers Watch

(Revised Edition)

by Jib Fowles

Sage Publications

**I**n this fast-changing world of television, it's good to have these two valuable books revised and brought up-to-date. Anyone working in television or viewing the medium seriously will find them helpful in many ways.

Brown's first encyclopedia was published in 1977 under the aegis of the *New York Times*, while he served as its television reporter. He went on to found two publications, *Channels* and *Television Business International*, write several books on TV and become a senior fellow of the Gannett Foundation's media center. The first encyclopedia ran the gamut from *Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* to *Zane Gray Theater* in 640 pages. The 1992 edition goes from the AAAA to iconoscope/kinescope inventor Vladimir Zworykin in 723 fact-filled pages.

Trivia hunters will find George Carlin's "Seven Dirty Words" spelled out, while the serious student of the medium's evolving standards will also find a solid factual summary of the FCC's rulings and the court decisions in the case which arose from Carlin's broadcast.

It's a video addict's paradise. How many of the Whites do you remember? Actress Betty White, NBC president Frank, NET president John F., NBC program chief Lawrence R., FCC Commissioner Margita, CBS News head Paul and *Wheel of Fortune's* Vanna are Whites given Who's Who treatment.

It offers more than biographical detail. The Smothers Brothers entry has an absorbing account of the comedians' dispute with CBS. Their 1968 comments on dissenters to the war in Vietnam and jokes about the female anatomy were often cut or toned down, and the censors' deletions became hot copy in TV columns. Brown comments that ironically two seasons later CBS aired *All in the Family*, which violated all the rules that the Smothers had struggled against and forced the other networks to broaden their continuity acceptance standards.

The problem which has plagued encyclopedists since the Eighteenth Century when Diderot edited the 24-volume French encyclopedia is that of proportion—how much to compress, how much to treat at length. By and large, Brown and his contributors have done well. There are larger entries for such subjects as Soap Opera and Situation Comedy, which survey trends in those genres. There is a two-page article on the Canadian television system. Foreign and international television topics are adequately covered. For example, there are entries on Berlusconi, NHK, Univision, Granada and Thames, including the information that the latter lost its franchise in the "auction" of October 1991. Programs described include *Siempre en Domingo*, Mexico's most popular show and TV's longest format (seven hours on Sunday), and *Coronation Street*, Britain's very popular early-evening serial.

The lingo of the business—e.g., zapping, zipping and grazing—is

defined and put into context.

"Retransmission," for example, is not given just a dictionary definition but succinctly analyzed as a controversial issue among the ranks of broadcasters, program producers and cable interests. Cable, throughout, is given balanced treatment.

Adding to the volume's utility are a bibliography and an appendix. The latter includes a listing of the top-rated prime-time feature films, top-rated sports events; network specials and programs; cable network subscriber counts; historical data on cable and VCR penetration; a list of all FCC commissioners; worldwide advertising expenditures; European satellite broadcasters; subscriber data for multiple cable system operators, and other statistical tables. A 50-page index is also of great use.

It's a fun book to browse in, to find listed between newsmen Roger Mudd and Robert Mulholl and the chimpanzee J. Fred Muggs, who had a five-year contract with NBC's *Today* and later had his own local show. I found it fun to read entries for early shows and stars I had reviewed for *Variety*, such as Ed Sullivan, Walter Winchell and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. Brown calls Sheen "probably the most popular religious personality to have worked in TV" with his own prime-time series on the Dumont network.

Brown knows the business aspects as well as the program side of television and has produced a well-rounded book that belongs on home, office and library shelves. And like the medium it covers, it will both inform and entertain.

**M**ost academics profess the conventional wisdom that television misinforms and uses entertainment to seduce and degrade. Jib Fowles, Professor of Media Studies at the University of Houston-Clear Lake, is that rarity, a scholar who sees the medium's posi-

tive social effects and is willing to risk his peers' calumny for praising it. While working at the Television Information Office, I came across one of his pieces answering detractors of television and TIO gave it some deserved broader distribution. His position is that "Television is a grandly therapeutic force in the lives of virtually all Americans." His is a controversial stance that draws the fire and ire of the literary/educational establishment.

Fowles' first edition of this book, published in 1982, pilloried "TV Prigs." His target: not the academics, researchers and critics who lambaste broadcasters for pandering to the lowest common denominator, but a cluster of elitist attitudes and assumptions they promote.

As an example of this anti-television priggery, Fowles cites a 1990 book, *Television and the Quality of Life: How Viewing Shapes Everyday Experience*, by Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszent-mihalyi. A key part of their research was based on paging a group of people at random times when they would jot down what they were doing and what they were feeling.

These authors reached the troubling conclusion that TV "can leave you tense and passive." The *New York Times* wrote, "People who view a great deal of television report feeling less happy than those who view much less." This negative finding was trumpeted, while television's positive factors were played down. In the same book, among the pro-television findings were these: (1) television is the most relaxing of activities; (2) television is linked to more frequent and positive family interactions; (3) for youngsters, viewing more TV is positively correlated with better school performance; and (4) viewing doesn't cut exercise, as heavy viewers are more likely to be engaged in athletics.

Kubey and his co-author highlighted the finding that people who

spend long hours watching may feel decreasing satisfaction, but Fowles contends they seem disingenuous. The reason, he notes, is that the study also found that those who viewed the most were the most disconsolate to begin with. "Television, which initially alleviated their misery, was after time unable to continue doing so as their strong discontent emerged," Fowles writes. "It was not television that was the cause of their tension and unhappiness; television had been a temporary salve."

In short, Fowles questions the reliability of much academic research that condemns television, examines why his colleagues put down the medium, and probes what viewers get from television. A central idea is that "It is the instinctual need for the management of emotions that brings the audience to the medium."

That is the well-spring behind television as therapeutic agent. Fowles declares: "Television heals, not harms. This is the reason that almost all of us, despite whatever attitudes we profess to hold, resort to the medium; our deep-lying, health-seeking needs for psychological discharge and renewal lead us to embrace it. Americans' extensive use of television is not a comment on personal frailties, but on strengths. The better use we make of fantasies, the more prodigious our future will be."

He quotes former ABC program executive Bob Shanks: "Television is used mostly as a stroking distraction from the truth of an indifferent and silent universe ... a massage, a 'there, there', a need, an addiction, a psychic fortress, a friend." It is a balm, fantasy that allays psychic pressure.

The chapter "Television is Good for Nerves" points up the calmative values of situation comedies. "Television is Good for Spleens" answers the research which says television violence causes violent behavior. "Television is Good for Brains" builds the argument that the medium is

performing an important role in informing Americans, that TV news achieves a good balance between the need to attract audiences and tell them what is important. Other chapters deal with the positive effects of soap operas, children's programming and commercials.

Fowles' material is an antidote to the elitists mired in a print-is-everything rut and to the Puritans who fear greater freedom of expression. His thesis deserves more study in the educational community. But we should not be lulled by his banner that "Television is good for us" into accepting excesses or excusing sins of omission. Television is good. But it can and should be better. ■

**Bert Briller was a Vice-President of ABC-TV, Executive Editor of the Television Information Office and a reporter/critic for Variety.**



# INDESTRUCTIBLE TODAY

BY RICHARD KROLIK

## Inside Today: The battle for the morning

By Judy Kessler

Villard Books: New York

**H**ere's another "inside" book about the *Today* show. It's been fifteen years since we had one—Robert Metz's *The Today Show, an inside look at 25 tumultuous years ... and the colorful and controversial people behind the screen.* It was relatively calm, historically accurate, and a pleasant read.

This one is called, flat out in the subtitle, the battle for the morning, and it's a different cup of tea. It's all conflict, and some nasty conflicts at that. The author is one Judy Kessler, who spent four years as a *Today* booker, preceded by a stint at *People* magazine and followed by *Entertainment Tonight*.

Metz's book covered the origins and the goings-on of *Today's* first quarter century. Kessler gives a brief nod to the show's beginnings—and gets it wrong, putting J. Fred Muggs on the opening program, where he wasn't. What she brings us are two eras: 1980-84, when she was a player, and the eight years since she left the show, for which she had to rely on second-hand reports and research.

Kessler's involvement with the *Today* show began when then-producer Steve Friedman hired her to book "big, no, humongous, celebrities ... the one-of-a-kind, impossible-to-get, biggest-name stars in the world."

"In itself," she writes, "this task was formidable but not impossible. The

problem was that virtually every valuable guest I wanted to get, needed to get, was being hotly pursued by the other networks at exactly the same time, especially the burgeoning *Good Morning America.*"

"As it turned out, it was not a job—it was war."

Steve Friedman set the tone of *Today's* friendly competition with GMA: "David Hartman is dead. He's finished. Over. Done. David Hartman is history. GMA is dying. And it's up to us to get them now. Now is when we get them."

How times change. In the first decade of the *Today* show, the 50's, the only competition in the early morning was CBS, and they had the misfortune to come in after NBC had broken that ground. No matter what they tried: Dick Van Dyke, a puppet lion, Walter Cronkite, Mike Wallace, Will Rogers, Jr., they could never catch NBC. Forty years later, the umpteenth try at finding a format that can beat the competition still eludes CBS. It was a frustration through the Paley-Stanton era, and remains so under Mr. Tisch.

There was no *Good Morning America* for a lot of years. ABC didn't have much of a network for a long time, and when they did, it took a while before they happened upon the notion that an entertainment-oriented show opposite *Today*, hosted by an amiable actor, might topple NBC. From its first day, GMA was recognized by NBC as its true competitor.

Pre-GMA, *Today* was a romp. Its first six years were broadcast from the window of the RCA Exhibition Hall on West 49th Street, a showcase for RCA products until someone came up with the bright idea to appropriate it for a TV studio.

And it worked infinitely better than Pat Weaver's original notion that his brainchild "the communications center of the world" would have to make do with the Howdy Doody studio!

That window on 49th Street became part of the show: fans stopped by to see their newfound stars, visitors to the Big Apple used it as a cheap Western Union—no need to send a telegram saying you arrived safely when the folks at home could plainly see you outside the *Today* window, cheerily waving. I can remember the jostling that went on for a front row position; regulars would be waiting there when the crew arrived at 3 or 4 a.m., I forget which.

Celebrities would stroll by: one day President Truman walked past the window with Georgie Jessel. When a *Today* staffer rushed out to ask HST if he'd come inside and chat with Dave Garroway, Jessel nixed the coup, saying that he, Jessel, was on another network, and he and the President would just continue their walk, thank you very much.

Personal note: those days I was an associate producer. One early morning in the RCA-X as it came to be called, a visitor asked executive producer Mort Werner just what an associate producer did. At that moment the chief attraction of the day, a miniature donkey, did what animals often do, on the floor, and the associate producer who had the early-morning duty that day, Lou Ames, scrambled out with a broom and a dustpan and cleaned up the mess.

Said Werner to his questioner, "That's what an associate producer does."

I was lucky—avoided small animals, and graduated to the assignment of arranging, promoting and producing out-of-town originations.

The advent of J. Fred Muggs is given credit for keeping *Today* alive at a time when its ad revenues were miniscule. Certainly the rotten little chimp deserves some credit, but the real hero was one Joe Culligan, NBC's eye-patched salesman extraordinary. Culligan, a man with enthusiasm, imagination and a touch of the Blarney stone, brought customers into the

Today tent, over the general skepticism of advertisers, and even his own colleagues. To convince wary ad agencies that there really were live people watching television at the ungodly hours of seven to nine in the morning, he carried unopened mailbags addressed to the show, dumped them on agency desks, and said "read 'em yourselves!"

My enthusiasm for the chimp is restrained because, among other adorable characteristics, I saw him turn on a floor manager who thought he was a lovable baby, and bite his ear nearly off. Garroway despised him; when Mort Werner shut J. Fred and Dave in an office in an attempt to make them better friends, the sounds that emanated from their session were truly alarming. The host and the chimp maintained, to put it mildly, an uneasy truce.

Forty or so years ago, there were no women in the upper reaches of management nor producing at the networks. On *Today*, the on-air role of women in the early years gradually evolved from "The Weather Girl" to the one-of-a-foursome (Garroway the Communicator/Anchor, Jack Lescoulie the comic relief/buffoon, Frank Blair the news reader—and the *Today* Girl, then called just that. From Estelle Parsons through Lee Ann Meriwether, Helen O'Connell, Florence Henderson, Maureen O'Sullivan, Betsy Palmer, Aline Saarinen and many others—and eventually to co-anchors Barbara Walters, Jane Pauley, Deborah Norville and Katie Couric—the women increased their visibility and capability.

There were a few minor glitches along the way. When the former Miss America, Lee Ann Meriwether, joined the group, she was wide-eyed about New York and never missed a Broadway opening or other glamorous nighttime attraction. Being young and healthy, she could set her alarm for four or five in the morning and arrive on the set smiley and bouncy.

The only problem was that occasionally the lack of sleep would catch up with her, and when the show went on the air at 7 a.m. and the camera panned over to her, she was sound asleep with her head on the desk.

About half of this relatively-slim book by Kessler (263 pages) is devoted to the business of snagging celebrity guests, with some diversions and descriptions of what was happening on other fronts. In the booking business, Kessler praises with not-so-faint damns her chief competitor, Ellin Sanger of GMA:

"Where I operated on rules of human decency," Kessler writes, self-servingly, "Ellin's only goal was to get her guest, and she would do it in any way she could. She was shameless, but she was successful ... and absolutely relentless."

There are some good anecdotes in the book about the trials of getting guests: the time the Pointer Sisters fell asleep in the Green Room and were barely able to get their act together for the camera; and the scramble for guests with any perceptible connection with a news event, such as the night John Lennon died, when Jane Pauley "came completely unglued", weeping so uncontrollably that the cameras stayed off her.

That one reminded me of a memorable spot on a *Today* show of the 50's. It must have been National Hairdressers Week, or somesuch, and the show had gone along with their press agent's scheme to bring on a young woman whose hair had never been cut in all her 21 or something years. It was down to her knees. One of their hairdresser stars would proceed to cut it, for the very first time, shape it, and present a whole new personality to the viewers.

So the pretty young woman came on the set, Dave Garroway soothed her nervousness. The hairdresser began to cut—and she began to weep. Snip, weep, snip, weep—so it went for agonizing minutes that seemed like

hours. It was a disaster, ended only by the merciful clock which cued the local station break.

**T**here were other unavoidable goofs in the early days, because of course it was after all live unrehearsed television. One that lives in memory was a spot promoted by the Ford Motor Company to demonstrate the utter dependability of their newly-developed seat belt.

A demonstration had been arranged at the Ford proving ground in Michigan: one end of a seat belt would be secured to a giant crane, the other end to a new Ford car. The crane would lift the car by the seat belt, and the watching world would learn how wonderfully strong and safe seat belts were.

The spot began. The crane lifted the car, front end first, then totally off the ground, suspended only by the seat belt.

And then, and then, there was an ominous ripping sound. The seat belt parted, the new Ford car crashed to the ground ... and the Ford public relations man who was explaining it all to the *Today* reporter simply said, "Well, that's the end of this job!" and quickly walked away.

Reading *Inside Today* about the show's trips, to Rome and Paris and the Orient Express and literally all around the world, all made possible by that little wonder in the sky we didn't have in the olden days called the satellite, brings nostalgia and envy.

The first out-of-studio origination for the *Today* show was Miami Beach, circa 1954. The city's persistent press agent offered us free hotel room, cars, whatever it would take to have *Today* and *Tonight*, then presided over by Steve Allen and featuring Andy Williams and Steve Lawrence and Edie Gorme, originate for a week from a Miami Beach hotel.

It sounded like an attractive propo-

sition to executive producer Mort Werner, and it came to pass. Among other things, that week demonstrated that fans will endure almost anything to be near network television: the *Tonight* show went off the air at one a.m., having featured loud music and stunts like Steve riding a motor scooter into the pool, and *Today* began rehearsing such things as a Dixieland band at six a.m. No guest complained.

**A** year or so later, the show began an irregular series of city originations, to glamorous romantic places like Detroit, Cincinnati, Louisville and Schenectady, New York. These visits were good for ratings and for establishing *Today* in important markets. They were, as the polite saying goes, "subsidized by local interest." In other words, because originating outside the studio would put an unallowable strain on the show's budget, producers had to put on local interests. This was standard operating procedure for many years, until corporate ethics intruded.

It got to be a game. Once the *Tonight* show was originating in Springfield, Massachusetts, for some long-forgotten reason. The producers met long into the night before the origination trying to fit into the program schedule the musical numbers, monologues, comedy skits, commercials, promos and appropriate credits for their transportation and lodging, and it just wasn't coming together. Finding time to credit the hotel for its freebie rooms was the problem.

From the end of the table came a weak voice: "Why couldn't we just pay for the rooms? They're only \$16.50!"

What comes through loud and clear from reading Kessler's and Metz's books, and thinking back, is that the person ultimately responsible for

putting *Today* on the air—call that person executive producer or producer—earns his keep. Whether he works 15-hour days or less than eight, he has the ultimate responsibility in choosing staff people who will get their jobs done—as any manager has—but more important, the producer has to deal with the Talent, capital T. And being the ones with their careers hanging on their appearances, Talent can be unpredictable, not to say difficult.

Amiable and unflappable as Dave Garroway appeared on the air, in private, unfortunately, he was a disturbed man. Toward the end of his pioneering and uniquely successful run, he was convinced that poltergeists and communists were after him. One afternoon he abruptly announced that he was quitting, that moment, contract or no. It was a Friday afternoon, and it ruined the weekends of an entire floor of network executives.

Between Garroway and Gumbel, the host chair has been occupied by John Chancellor, Hugh Downs, Frank McGee, Jim Hartz and Tom Brokaw. Producers have included Abe Schecter, Mort Werner, Bob Bendick, Jerry Green, Jac Hein, Shad Northshield, Al Morgan, Stuart Schulberg and Steve Friedman, among others. Today a 26-year-old whiz kid, Jeff Zucker, is the producer of *Today*, and by all accounts doing just fine.

Kessler spends a lot of her book discussing the talent and the producers. Tom Brokaw was instrumental in hiring her, though Friedman did the actual deed, based on her accomplishments snagging celebrities at *People* magazine. She writes respectfully about Brokaw, although she can't resist a friendly dig:

"Steve Friedman knew that one of Brokaw's shortcomings was a tendency to interview everyone from the president of the Girl Scouts of America to Charlene Tilton of *Dallas* as though they were all Watergate

conspirators."

Kessler is not so benign in her treatment of Bryant Gumbel: she quotes him:

"I've never had a failure in my life," he said soon after he began as host. "Maybe it's because I'm a cocky son of a bitch who thinks he can make anything work." Then she also quotes an assessment from program-doctors McHugh-Hoffman, bane of local TV station news directors' existence with their formula recommendations to management. In relentless search of ratings, these consultants are often blamed for the lurid nature of some local newscasts on the theory that "If it bleeds, it leads." They showed equal sagacity analyzing *Today*:

"Gumbel is a real smart-assy young kid and Jane Pauley is vacuous. They are not strong enough to compete with GMA's entertainment style or play the hard news game with CBS *Morning News*. *Today* will get squeezed from both sides." So much for crystal balls.

Kessler gives Gumbel's talent and diligence their due. "Bryant worked fifteen-hour days ... He was proving to be as skilled in interviewing on any subject in any field, from politics to entertainment, as he had been in sports ... By 1986, when *Today* had finally secured its place at the top, it was Bryant Gumbel the anchor who was credited, in very large part, for the show's stunning comeback."

On the flip side, there's quite a lot of malicious gossip and unattributed quotes that may titillate the reader who's in search of such material.

*Today* is more than a television show—it really is a phenomenon that broke open the early-morning hours and changed America's viewing habits. It actually does provide a window on the world, particularly these days with satellite pickups and origination from virtually any place on our planet, most recently, Africa.

It is gratifying that Pat Weaver survives to see his idea celebrate anniversary after anniversary, now

heading for number forty one.

Judy Kessler's controversial judgments about personalities are undoubtedly colored by her own prism, and—block that metaphor—should be taken with several grains of salt. Whether you come away from the hour or two of easy reading liking or disliking the author is beside the point; this book contributes to the history of a durable and valuable institution that provides a daily chronicle of our times and faithfully reflects what television is all about—information and entertainment. They used to ask visitors to the *Today* offices in the RCA building, "Do you want showbiz or newsgame?"

As Jack Lescoulie used to say, "They can beat the *Today* show over the head with a club, but they can't kill it." ■

Richard Krolik says he had more fun as a *Today* associate producer, than later in his career as a corporate executive in broadcasting, or in various Washington jobs.

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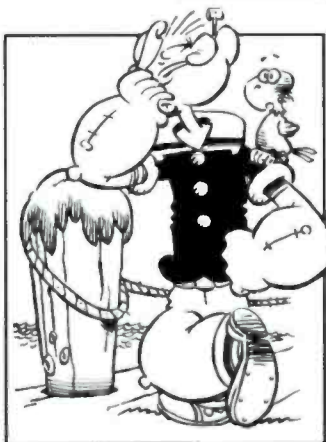


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# CORRESPONDENCE

## To The Editor:

Mary Ann Watson's article *Continental Rift: David Susskind's Futile Fight to Keep TV Drama in New York* in *Television Quarterly* was an apt and thoughtful tribute. Perhaps I can add to what she properly describes as the "... second phase of his career."

David believed that *The Hallmark Hall of Fame* was the last remaining hope for anthology television drama, a form eclipsed by made-for-TV movies from Hollywood. As strong as was his love of New York, he was committed to drama produced anywhere before television cameras in the confines of a television studio and his most notable efforts for Hallmark were taped in Toronto and Hamburg. He began to offer proposals to the *Hall of Fame* in the late Sixties after Don Hall had prompted his ad agency of that period, Foote, Cone and Belding, to open up the series to a broad range of producers and writers. I was the agency's Account Supervisor for Hallmark and among those impressed by the caliber of projects David brought us. He radiated an evangelical enthusiasm for drama and especially for theatre on television. His admiration for Hallmark's commitment to fine television was boundless.

David assembled a string of powerful scripts by such writers Arthur Miller, Tad Mosel, Clifford Odets and Sidney Carroll. He called on many of the actors and directors he had

worked with early in their careers, when television drama was always done in New York, was live, black and white, filled with energy and a powerful vehicle for blue-chip advertisers. Hallmark credits began to include names like Paul Bogart, Fielder Cook, George C. Scott, Joanne Woodward, Richard Kiley and Jason Robards. The critics were generous with praise and the awards added to an already impressive list for the *Hall of Fame*.

But as Hallmark began to venture into film, David was anguished. He was no stranger to theatrical features. But he pleaded with us to keep the *Hall of Fame* oriented toward the stage and original TV studio drama. "You're standing on the edge of an abyss!" he cried out as he heard of some of the film projects we had in the works. "When actors hear it's film and not tape their price doubles! Triples! Below the line charges go crazy. Keep Hallmark where they belong. In the television studio."

But Hallmark had to move with the medium and follow its creative people. More and more Hallmark specials were produced as movies. Today all of them are. Though David's dream of a second wave of fine anthology drama never materialized, nothing diminishes his accomplishment over many seasons on *The Hallmark Hall of Fame*.

**Frank Nesbitt  
Winnetka, IL**

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