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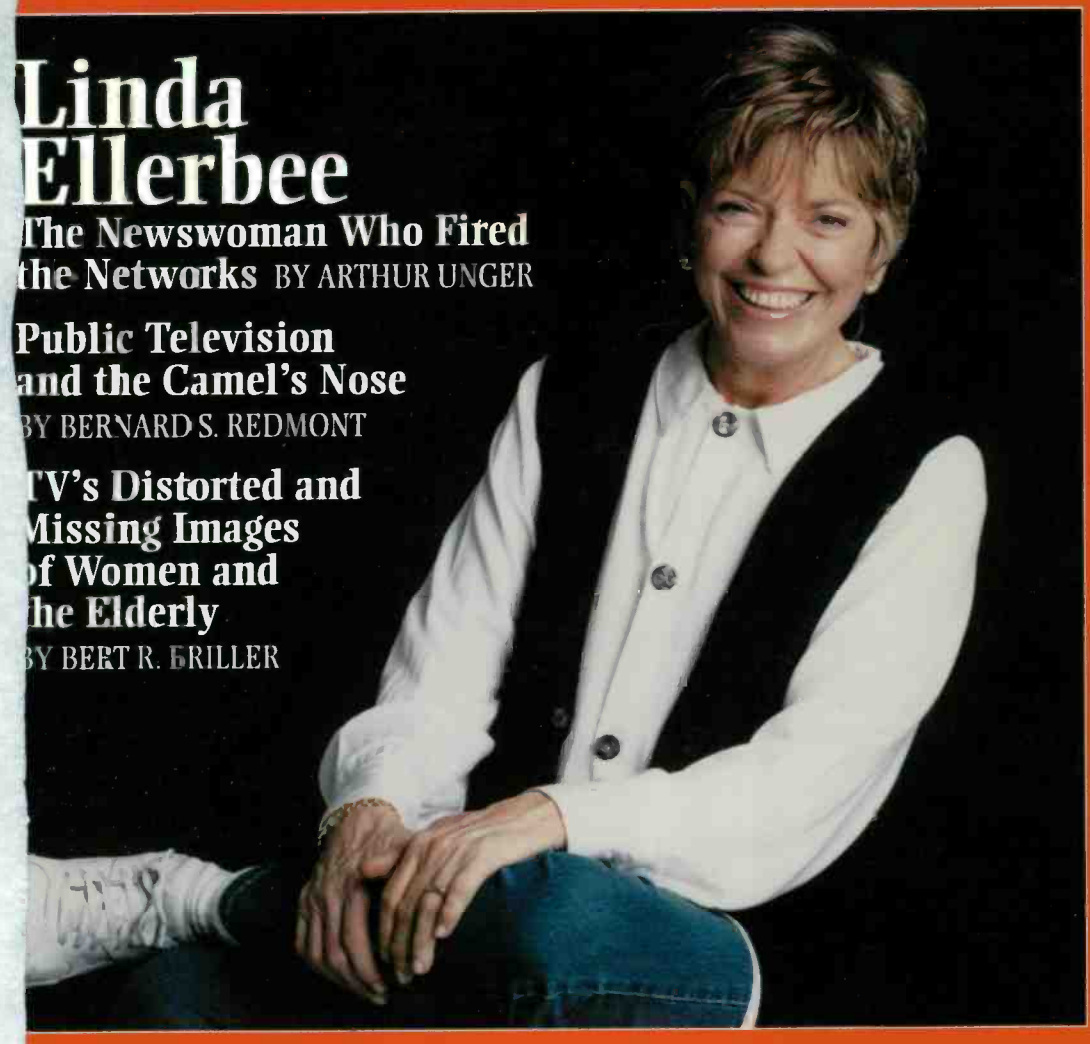

Linda Ellerbee

The Newswoman Who Fired the Networks BY ARTHUR UNGER

Public Television and the Camel's Nose

BY BERNARD S. REDMONT

TV's Distorted and Missing Images of Women and the Elderly

BY BERT R. BRILLER

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Cover photo by Gordon Munro

Linda Ellerbee

The Newswoman Who Fired the Networks

TVQ's Special Correspondent chats with this irreverent woman who defeated cancer, alcoholism and the suffocating influences of network newsrooms to head up her own production company and anchor the acclaimed NickNews *on Nickelodeon.*

By Arthur Unger

Linda Ellerbee has become the poster-girl for TV's independent newswomen. As a matter of fact, for all newspersons who are willing to fight for their integrity.

She has managed to overcome alcoholism and a double mastectomy as well as a fierce independence which seldom fit the network mold.. Now, still brilliant at age 55, she is handsomer than ever, slim, happily mated/partnered with Rolfe Tessem, and ready to take on all comers—network, cable, internet...or destiny.

Interviewed in her office on Morton Street in Greenwich Village, she sports a black T-shirt and makes no attempt to create a false impression. "You remember, Arthur," she says, gesturing toward her flat chest, "I used to have *large* breasts!"

I remember. But I also remember this effervescent personality who pioneered in off-beat network news ventures on all the major networks: *NBC News Overnight, Our World, Summer Sunday...* a newswoman who has won CableAce awards as well as Emmys and Peabodys. Now, with co-exec-

Gordon Munro

utive producer Tessem, she heads up Lucky Duck Productions, which does *Nick News* as well as *Intimate Portraits* for Lifetime channel,specials for HBO, PBS and almost everybody else, including *Ms. Smith Goes to Washington* and *The MTV Interview*. In the works now is a 12-part series on the women's movement with Whoopie Goldberg and Diane Keaton.

Ellerbee doesn't hesitate to talk about her bouts with alcoholism and breast cancer (in fact, she lectures about them all over the country in order to alert people to the problems) but she refuses to flaunt them as her ultimate badge of acceptance. She is proud of the success of her company. Almost as proud as she is of her two children who have "turned out so well."

Her office is decorated with many photos...but the one she focuses on pointedly is of her patron saint, Edward R. Murrow. "He did a coffee commercial," she says with a smile (she has been vilified for doing a Maxwell House commercial in the past.) Also on a shelf are the Emmys and Peabodys, sharing a place of honor with photos of her (now adult) kids, whom she considers her major accomplishment.

❦

What follows is my conversation with Linda Ellerbee. While the chronology has been altered here and there for reasons of continuity and there has been minor editing to fit space requirements, all answers are verbatim.

UNGER: *Writer Hal Rubenstein once said this about you: "She has common-sense intelligence, an ear that listens, a voice that exudes reason, body language that shoots into fourth gear when it senses the presence of bullshit, and a smile that goes 'Yup, that's it' whenever you're on the money...What more could you ask for in a pal?"*
ELLERBEE: That is lovely. But I'm not sure it's true. I've always been uncomfortable with too many compliments. I recently watched the hour that Lifetime did on my life and somebody said: "Well, what did you think of it?" And I said: "Well, first of all, it sort of feels like watching your obituary while you're still alive. And secondly, it's like seeing every bad hair day of your life on national TV. And third, I'm not really that nice as they make me out."

UNGER: *Rubenstein said: "What more could you ask for in a pal?" I want to ask: "What more could you ask for in a newswoman?"*
ELLERBEE: I don't know what I would ask for. But I certainly know the one thing that the networks I worked for all those years would say: "Obedience." I was never very good at that. It always struck me as odd that, particularly in the case of women (and I guess I was part of that first wave of women in network news), that they hired us to do a job that involved going out and not taking no for answer. And then they wanted us to come back in the building and be obedient little sweetie pies.

I looked very hard at that situation and thought: "This can go one of two ways. Either it'll make me crazy or I'll make them crazy, and I know which way I'm going to choose here." But I really never understood the notion of why they would think that all of the qualities that went into making a good journalist wouldn't also go into making, if not an anti-social human being, at least a sort of independent one. I never fit their mold, you know. I just never did. And that was made plain to me over and over and over again. I was fine for fringe times, like 1:30 in the morning.

UNGER: *Have you now grown more into the mold?*
ELLERBEE: I don't think I have. No! But I will say this much. For all the years that I worked at the networks and took potshots at management, after 10 or 12 years of being a manager now, I do have some sympathy for some of the people that I

I would say at the gates of St. Peter: "I am a writer."

worked for that I think perhaps didn't deserve the potshots I took. Others, they deserved it.

UNGER: *But you didn't take the potshots on the air, did you?*
ELLERBEE: No. No, no, no, no. What I said on the air rarely got me in trouble. It was always what I said off the air to my bosses that kept me in hot water with them. Except for [NBC News chief] Reuven Frank.

UNGER: *He has a wry sense of humor.*
ELLERBEE: A weird sense of humor. And is just the single best producer I ever worked for. He understood that quirkiness was not bad; that gray jello was not necessarily something to aim for in television.

UNGER: *You know, so many of those TV executives no one remembers anymore. They're gone and forgotten.*
ELLERBEE: Well, happily in my case, I've either outlived most of them or I'm still around and they're gone. I've either outlived them or I've got their kids watching *Nick News.* There's a nice revenge. You know what the Catholic Church always said: "Give me your kids 'till they're seven." Well, I say: "Give them to me between eight and 12."

UNGER: *I'm going to skip all the basic interview stuff because it's all in the bio and clips.*
ELLERBEE: Thank you. You're not asking me how I was fired by the AP again?

UNGER: *No, we're not going to go through that. However, I am going to ask you: If you were at the gates of heaven and St. Peter asked you to identify yourself by profession, what would you say?*

ELLERBEE: That's a fascinating question. I'd say: "I'm a writer," and then I would explain what I mean by that.

I got this definition from Reuven Frank and I know it to be true: "Writing is the arrangement of ideas." Therefore, if I'm producing a television show, I'm writing it-even if there is no narration. Because I am arranging the ideas in an order; choosing which ones, eliminating the ones I don't think belong, finding the right order for them. That's writing. When I was working at NBC News, the first time that I cut a news piece that had no narration in it because it didn't need it, John Chancellor, who was anchoring at the time, refused to say my name in the introduction to the piece. He refused to say: "And here with that story is Linda Ellerbee," because he said: "She couldn't have written it, there are no words."

And eventually, because I kept on doing those kinds of pieces, eventually we got John to say: "This story was arranged by Linda Ellerbee," which made me sound like a composer or a marriage broker.

So I would say at the gates of St. Peter: "I am a writer."

UNGER: *I had a list of what you might say— newscaster, producer, journalist, broadcaster, editor, TV personality, anchor, agitator.*
ELLERBEE: Agitator—I don't mind that one either. "Rowdy citizen" occurs to me as well. Rowdy citizen, agitator, and writer. The rest of them all fall under one of those three.
UNGER: *Let's consider the relationship between blond hair and news women. There's Jane Pauley, Diane Sawyer, Lesley Stahl, Lynn Sher, and now even Andrea Mitchell.*
ELLERBEE: And me.

UNGER: *Yes, all blonde. And now you, why are you a blonde?*
ELLERBEE: Well, for me, it was a lark. I lost a lot of weight.

UNGER: *You're looking great.*
ELLERBEE: I've never been more fit. I'm in great health. I was in Los Angeles in May. And I woke up one morning-for no good reason at all, I wasn't even getting gray—and I thought: "I think I'd like to be a blonde. I've never been a blonde." My next thought was: "What will your mother say?" And my next thought was: "Linda, your mother died 15 years ago. You're 55, you don't have to ask anyone's permission." And so I went and I got my hair dyed. For me, it was a lark and I don't think I'm going to keep it this way. I think I'm at heart a natural brunette. But I've enjoyed this and it's been fun.

UNGER: *Do blondes have more fun?*
ELLERBEE: Well, I don't know, Arthur, because I was having an awfully good time before I was a blonde too. So I can't really say that blondes have more fun.

UNGER: *Has it affected your persona on TV?*
ELLERBEE: I don't think so. First of all, I don't work for the networks any more. So whatever they might think of how I look on TV truly doesn't matter. When I'm on television, they're from my own Lucky Duck Productions or I'm being interviewed on TV someplace. And for the things that we produce, the only ones I'm on are *Nick News* and the children's specials..

UNGER: Nick News *is syndicated?*
ELLERBEE: It airs on Nickelodeon in New York in prime time at 8:30 pm Eastern time on Sunday nights. And then it's syndicated across the country, shown at various times, usually Saturday morning, in the kid ghetto

UNGER: *It seems to me there's no better way to interview than to quote what I have pulled through various search mechanisms about a person. And I've found that in the course of commenting on these, we're going to answer all the other questions . So let me give you some of the positive things said about you.. Then I'll give you the negatives.*
First— "attained success on her own terms."
ELLERBEE: I hear that "on her own terms" often. And I always think: "That's only partly true. Nobody ever gets it their way all the time." I think that sentence should be amended to say: "What success she got on her own terms, she also paid a price for." I've often thought that had I been different than I am, I might well be sitting and anchoring for $3 million a year at a network. And would I make that trade? No, I wouldn't. First of all, my terms never seemed unreasonable to me. I've always felt that I was in an island of sanity in a kind of a crazy business. So I've never felt that my terms were unreasonable.

UNGER: *Okay. How about "acerbic"?*
ELLERBEE: Acerbic, that's probably true. And even skeptical. But not cynical.

UNGER: *"Free-wheeling"?*
ELLERBEE: I'm not sure how they mean that. Free-wheeling ...

UNGER: *It means one never can be sure what you're going to say.*
ELLERBEE: Well, there is something to that. More often than not, when I got myself in trouble in the newspapers, it was not because I was misquoted; it was because I was quoted accurately.

UNGER: *How about "born with a silver tongue"?*
ELLERBEE: Oh, gosh, that's nice. I'm not sure it's me. I would say "born with her tongue in her cheek" might be more likely.

I have a very good life right now. I have work I love. And I own the company.

UNGER: *"Irreverent"?*
ELLERBEE: That's true. I don't have a lot of use for reverence.

UNGER: *"Lots of fun"?*
ELLERBEE: I've had a lot of fun.

UNGER: *"Unsparingly honest"?*
ELLERBEE: Nobody's unsparingly honest.

UNGER: *"An original"?*
ELLERBEE: No one is an original. I came from two parents and an upbringing. If I were any kind of original on television it was simply that the field was small and I was different. Different is not always the same as original.

UNGER: *"Breezy"?*
ELLERBEE: Breezy, I guess. Some days you are, some days you aren't.

UNGER: *"Raffish"?*
ELLERBEE: Yeah, raffish ... raffish always seems to me something out of the '40s, as if she had her cap tipped at a raffish angle, you know.

UNGER: *"Plucky"?*
ELLERBEE: Plucky, I am. Yeah.

UNGER: *"Inquisitive intelligence"?*
ELLERBEE: Well, I'm inquisitive. I'll leave the intelligence factor ... okay. No, I'm 55 years old and I don't have to be coy. I'm intelligent, yeah.

UNGER: *"Iconette of broadcast integrity"?*
ELLERBEE: Like a baby icon. ..I guess some men would think of women as being iconettes and men as icons. There are just as many who will tell you that I lost my integrity when I did that Maxwell House commercial.

UNGER: *We're going to come to that in the negatives.*
ELLERBEE: I do believe I have some integrity in this business. I think that I have made several significant choices along the way, that I made based on integrity rather than things that would further my own career.

UNGER: *"Non-judgmental"?*
ELLERBEE: On the air, I've tried to be. Yet off the air I have as many opinions as anybody else.

UNGER: *"Sassy"?*
ELLERBEE: That's true.

UNGER: *"Classy"?*
ELLERBEE: Well, class is probably in the eye of the beholder, just like beauty.

UNGER: *"Literate"?*
ELLERBEE: That's true. I am literate.

UNGER: *"A southern gentlewoman"?*
ELLERBEE: My mother would get a great laugh out of that one, for a couple of reasons. One, my mother would say: "We're not southern, we're Texans. That's not southern." And she would say: "If you really meant it, you should have called her a lady, not a gentlewoman." And the third thing she'd say is: "There's very little gentle about Linda."

UNGER: *"Texas sophisticate"?*
ELLERBEE: Well, a Texas sophisticate means you can read. So, I guess I'm a Texas sophisticate, whatever that is.

UNGER: *"She has a beautiful soul"?*

ELLERBEE: Oh, that is very nice. I like that. I hope it's true.

UNGER: *"The embodiment of New Age Texan"?*
ELLERBEE: Hmmm ...

UNGER: *Are you a New Age Texan?*
ELLERBEE: I don't know what a New Age Texan is. I always assumed a New Age Texan was someone who's moved to Texas from someplace else.

UNGER: *Maybe from Sedona.*
ELLERBEE: That's right.

UNGER: *Now something like this comes up very often: "A victor rather than a survivor"?*
ELLERBEE: Yeah. It feels that way. When I look around now, I mean, look at Lucky Duck. The 55 people that work here and the fun I'm having-I mean, we're a multi-million dollar company now. I'm always surprised when people run into me and they say: "Oh, I remember you used to be on television. What do you do now?" And I say: "Well, I own and run a production company." And they go: "Oh, yeah," and they look kind of vague. I say: "I have 55 employees and we have a whole bunch of freelancers in addition ...I have a very good life right now. I have work I love. And I own the company." I'm not going to get up and fire myself just because I had a bad day. I sell back to networks, all kinds of networks. I live two blocks from my office in a townhouse on St. Lukes Place, just around the corner here. And my partner, Rolfe Tessem and I, we just celebrated 13 years together. His office is right at the other side of the conference room here, and we own Lucky Duck together and have lived together for 13 years.

UNGER: *"Ability to talk to kids without talking down"?*
ELLERBEE: I'm very proud of that, because I work very hard at that But I would like to add one thing to the ability to talk to kids without talking down,.. that's not so common in television news either: a sense of humor.

UNGER: *Is Lucky Duck going more into adult programming?*
ELLERBEE: Well, *Nick News* and Nick specials are the only things we do just for children. Every other project is aimed at adults too... we are the largest supplier of portraits for Lifetime.

People associate *Nick News* with me because I'm on it. They see a lot of our other productions, but they don't associate them with me unless they sit and read the credits at the end. And unless you're in the business, who does that?

UNGER: *Let's go to some negatives. We'll start easy. "Blowzy"?*
ELLERBEE: Yeah. I remember the one that called me that. And I had to go look it up at the time. I think that was probably true then. I don't think it's true now ...

UNGER: *You were plumper then.*
ELLERBEE: I was a lot fatter. I had large breasts you may remember...before this happened. And all that big messy hair. And I think that was probably accurate then. I don't think it's accurate now.

UNGER: *No, I don't think so. Now here we're coming to: "Needs to wake up and smell the coffee"?*
ELLERBEE: Well, you know, I've said what I had to say on that. I did the Maxwell House commercial to keep this company alive.My choices were: go back to work for the networks or do a talk show, which I did not want to do, some sort of trashy talk show, or do that commercial and keep the company going.

And I made the right choice. It kept the company going, and it wasn't six months later that Nickelodeon walked in the door and we started.

UNGER: *Has it affected your overall reputation?*
ELLERBEE: Not at all. Since then I've only won two DuPonts, a Peabody for the entire body of my work this last year, and three Emmys. So I would say it has not affected the work situation at all. It hurt my feelings a great deal. And it's not my proudest moment. It's not something that I'm proud of. It's something I did to meet a payroll.

UNGER: *And it worked?*
ELLERBEE: And it worked. And I get regularly offers to do commercials and I turn them down.

UNGER: *So if we see you on a commercial we'll know that you're broke.*
ELLERBEE: You'll know I'm broke.

UNGER: *How about "combative"?*
ELLERBEE: I think I was combative for a long time, I truly do. More combative than I needed to be. I think that being a manager now myself, I've learned a lot. And one of the things that I've learned is that there are times to pick and choose your battles. And I think very often I fought every battle as though it were of equal intensity and equal importance.

UNGER: *Oh, here's one of the positives I'd forgotten: "One of the glorious Texas threesome—Molly Ivens, Ann Richards and Linda Ellerbee"?*
ELLERBEE: Well, I am proud to be in that company. And honest to God, you know, sometimes the two or the three of us are speaking at some women's event and we have this thing that none of us ever wants to follow the other.

UNGER: *Oh, I skipped this too: "Barbara Walters for the MTV generation"?*
ELLERBEE: I like that. I'll certainly take that. Yeah.

UNGER: *We're back to the natives I can't remember if this was supposed to be positive or negative. "Always ready to go in your face"?*
ELLERBEE: I'm not certain that that's negative. It depends on whose face and what the issue is. I'm still ready to climb in somebody's face if it needs it. I was raised not to shrink from a scene if a scene is what it's called for. But I pick my times a great deal more carefully now.

UNGER: *"Supremely egotistical"?*
ELLERBEE: I might drop the "supremely." I don't think I know anyone in our business who's not egotistical.

UNGER: *"A smart-ass"?*
ELLERBEE: Smart assed is true. My own son called me a bad ass on national television in that program about me. And then he stopped and he said: "I liked that."

UNGER: *"Too eager to be with it"?*
ELLERBEE: I'm not sure what that means, because I don't think anyone to my knowledge has ever accused me of being with it.

UNGER: *" Knows what she wants and will kill to accomplish it"?*
ELLERBEE: Well, that's obviously an overstatement. I have never killed anything. But I will say this ... I've always thought of myself, and I think it's pretty true, I'm one of the least ambitious people in network news. I went into television because I was a single mother of two children. And I would try to explain to people

I consider it my mission to beat the pants off the competition and do a better job.

that ambition comes in two sizes. You can have ambition where you're running towards something, and you can also have the ambition where something's chasing you and you're running away from it. And my great fear was that I wouldn't be able to support my children. And that kept me going to work many days when I personally would have blown the job off. However, where that quote is accurate is when you send me out on a story, I am fierce, I truly am. I consider it my mission to beat the pants off the competition and do a better job. In that case, when that's what I want, I won't kill for it but ...

UNGER: *That brings up the next: "Nasty when she has to be"?*
ELLERBEE: I'd like to think I'm not nasty, but I'm sure I have been nasty. And that goes back to, I was raised not to shrink from a scene when a scene is what is called for. I think as I've gotten older I've discovered fewer times you have to be.

UNGER: *And this one you will remember: "A walking disaster"?*
ELLERBEE: Yes, yes. What can I say about that? That's [*NBC Overnight* co-host] Lloyd Dobbyns' opinion of me, but you have to understand, Lloyd and I have rarely said anything kind about one another in our lives. The thing about us is that we don't mean it. We are close friends. We have always been close friends. He still comes up and visits twice a year and stays with me. He is now a professor of journalism in Alabama, warping young minds right and left. He has a big beard now. And I think "walking disaster" is probably one of the nicer things Lloyd ever called me.
UNGER: *Now I'd like to give you a lot of names of women in TV news and have you just off the top of your head tell me what you think of them.*

First I have a lovely quote about Jane Pauley from your book And So It Goes... *You said: "Jane Pauley proves to be one of the cleverest, most able people ever to occupy the* Today Show *seat and one of the most underrated. Jane has never lost her temper or her manners or her good nature. When I grow up I want to be Jane Pauley."*
ELLERBEE: That's true. I still do. Jane is a wonderful woman. I am so glad to see her finally getting the accolades that she has deserved for years. She was so underrated and so dismissed really by so much of management as just a pretty face, a pretty sidekick. And there's so much more to her than that. And she has such courage and such a spine on her. You cross Jane at your peril. And it wasn't until her lowest moment that she came into her own. Until the whole Deborah Norville mess-up.

UNGER: *Then they realized that she was very important.*
ELLERBEE: Yeah. They realized what the audience had realized for many many years: that this woman was a treasure.

UNGER: *Somebody once asked you: "Why didn't you last at the networks?" And your answer was: "Not enough Aquanet. And I wouldn't wear Dana Buchman."*
ELLERBEE: Well, first of all, to set the record straight: I did last at the networks. I was not kicked out of the networks. I quit with three years to run on a contract at ABC, and an offer from *20/20*. There is somehow this impression that I was fired off the networks. The last time I was fired was the Associated Press early in my career. I have never been out of a job since then. I've had shows cancelled. Well, you and I know that's not the same thing. You have a contract with the network, not the show. And when I left ABC, it was to start Lucky Duck Productions with Rolfe. I had looked around and I had said: "Okay, I have pretty much done everything at the networks that there is to do except anchor the evening news. And I don't think anybody's ever going to want me to do that."

Humor has been my teddy bear for cancer and alcoholism and through all kinds of bad things in my own life.

I was ready to try something different. And Rolfe and I were talking about this cable world exploding out there and that there was going to be room for a production company, a high -end production company, sort of a boutique job; and that our criteria would be we wouldn't produce anything we weren't proud to put our names to. That we weren't in it just for the money. And if we didn't get rich overnight or if we never got rich, that was okay. If we could just make a living and support ourselves and do work we were proud of, that would be fine. So I went in and I asked to be let out of my contract. I've never told this next story to anybody.

I went in and I asked to be let out of my contract. And my agent came back and he said: "Roone says no, he won't let you out." Well, Roone Arledge and I weren't getting along. When *Our World* was cancelled at ABC, I found it out from Peter Boyer, of the *New York Times*, who called to interview me. And I said, I did not think that it was very classy. Well, Roone called me the following week and screamed at me and said I wasn't a team player-as if this were news. And so he was very angry at me at the time, but he didn't want me to leave. So I told my agent: "Okay, you tell Roone the following words, quote me exactly: Linda said if you don't let me leave, I'll stay." Roone thought it over and he said: "Okay, you can go."

But Roone and I have seen each other several times since, and that's all water under the bridge. But as I say, I was never fired from a network.

UNGER: *You've fired the networks, basically.*
ELLERBEE: I've fired the networks and started a company, and succeeded.

UNGER: *How do you think that* Nick News *differs from the evening news?*
ELLERBEE: In one simple way, and really one way only. And that is, the national news or the local news presumes prior knowledge of a story. So when you turn on, they presume you already know something about this, in most cases. When I'm writing *Nick News* I can't presume prior knowledge on a 10-year-old's part. So we always have to put stories more in a context, go longer rather than shorter. And in fact I know from our mail and from what people tell me, that is one reason why we so many grown -ups watch *Nick News*— they're either busy or they don't read the newspapers or they don't see the news or they turn it on and they don't know the rest of the story. Peggy Charren, the children's programming maven, said she never understood what was happening in Bosnia until she saw the 15-minute piece *Nick News* did on it. We take a once-upon-a-time attitude. We have to put it in a bigger context and tell more background in a story if we're going to do it for kids. That is the only difference. And there's one other. It's a small one, but it's important. If I'm going to use a word, and I tell the producers when they're out interviewing grown ups, if they use a word you think a 10-year-old won't understand, don't not use the word; simply say such-and-such, comma, which means such-and-such, comma, and go on. Or use it in such a way that the meaning is absolutely clear. I don't want to dumb down the vocabulary; I want to help expand it. But I don't want to confuse kids. I want it to be plain, I want it to be clear.

But you know, my writing for *Nick News*

is really not much different than any of my writing ... because I never looked down on the viewer. I always thought the viewer had as much common sense as I did. And my writing has always been fairly plain and simple and occasionally acerbic. And on *Nick News* it's fairly plain and simple and occasionally acerbic.

UNGER: *How about humor? You seem to feel that humor is an essential part.*
ELLERBEE: Yes, I do. You could look, especially if you are a journalist, you could look at the world around you, or just a citizen, you look at the world around you and you have a number of choices; one of which you could break down in tears. And the other is you can try and laugh. Humor is the teddy bear that gets us through the night. It's certainly my teddy bear and it's been my teddy bear for cancer and alcoholism and through all kinds of bad things in my own life.

UNGER: *But isn't Lucky Duck your teddy bear now?*
ELLERBEE: Well, yes. And that's the Lucky Duck, right up there, the one that was on the desk of *Overnight* all those years and the one for whom this company is named.

UNGER: *Let's go back to the names... Lesley Stahl?*
ELLERBEE: Lesley Stahl is probably the hardest-working journalist in television. She truly is. I have a great deal of admiration for Lesley. She works as though every story were the first story she's ever covered. She gives it that same attention to detail, that same intensity, that same focus. And if young women in this business coming up were looking for a role model, I would say that Lesley would be a very good direction for them to look.
UNGER: *Diane Sawyer?*
ELLERBEE: Diane is a class act. I don't know her as well as I know Lesley—I've known Lesley for years and years and years, back when we both were covering the Congress, she for CBS and me for NBC. I enjoy watching Diane on the air. And the thing I like about Diane personally is her sense of humor. She has a wonderfully wicked since of humor.

UNGER: *Lynn Sher, who we don't see very much?*
ELLERBEE: Lynn Sher is a first-rate reporter. She and I worked together at Channel 2, at WCBS here in New York. And I have never understood really why ABC has not done more to make her—I hate to use the word "star"—more prominent in their newscasts. Because she is a thorough journalist. She and Andrea Mitchell and Lesley are the first names that come to mind, who are not anchors ,that I consider the first-rate women journalists out there.That, for reasons I can't explain, have never become as famous as say Diane or Jane.

UNGER: *Christiane Amanpour?*
ELLERBEE: She's wonderful.
I just met her for the first time at the Peabody Awards last May. And we both kind of went rushing up to one another. We'd never met. And it was sort of like, we've never met and we both knew who we were and we both wanted to meet. I admire her courage, her gutsiness. I admire her calmness and her solid reporting. And also, I got to tell you, she reminds me of all the wonderful female war correspondents from World War II. In the new book that Annie Liebowitz has out, "Photographs Of Women," there's a picture of Christiane and a female camera crew, and she's identified as Christiane Amanpour, war correspondent.

UNGER: *Barbara Walters?*
ELLERBEE: Well, you know, Barbara was there before all of us. And she is another one who continues ... I think she treats

every story as though it were her first. She's not a lazy woman. She's fought many battles for the rest of us. Do you remember when they paired Barbara with Harry Reasoner, and it didn't work out? And it wasn't Barbara's fault that it didn't work out. But she, in doing that, made it easier for the next woman that came along. And she's done that for all of us. She's made it easier in one way or another for the next one of us that came along. And that's saying a lot. We all owe Barbara.

UNGER: *Connie Chung?*
ELLERBEE: Connie is delightful. Talk about a wicked sense of humor. She is another one ... she belongs up there in that A list. She is also at heart one of the best humans I've ever met. She just has a heart of gold. I tell you what, if you need a friend and you've got Connie for a friend, you really don't need a lot of other friends.

UNGER: *I remember the first time I interviewed her was when she was still in L.A. and she was preparing to move to New York. And I said: "Why are you moving to New York?" And she used a very funny word, a Yiddish word. She said: "I was getting shpilkis," meaning itchy. Who knew that she was with Maury Povich then and she was learning Yiddish?*
ELLERBEE: When I first worked at Channel 2 here, years and years ago in the early '70s, I was talking to my mother back in Texas and I said: "I'm learning so much including a new language." And mother said: "Really? What?" I said: "Yiddish." I said: "There are these wonderful words in Yiddish that don't exist in English. And we have no equivalent for these words and they're so marvelous." And she said: "Well, how are you learning this?" I said: "Well, a lot of the people I work with are Jewish. And they'll say something and I'll go: Is that an insult or a compliment? What are you saying to me?" And more often than not they were saying: "You're meshugenah."

UNGER: *That reminds me, a long time ago I interviewed the Jackson Five when they were still the Jackson Five. And little Michael was there; he was eight years old. And I asked him about going to school. He said: "I go to a Jewish school." And I looked at his brothers and I said: "What does he mean?" And they said: "Well, he goes to a school where all the producers' sons go and they're all Jewish. So he thinks it's a Jewish school."*
ELLERBEE: My friend, Cheryl Gould, who's vice president at NBC News now, once told me the funniest story. She's Jewish and she heard a lot of Yiddish when she was growing up in her house from her grandmother and her mother. She told me that she was fully grown and had her own kitchen before she learned that the word "spatula" was not Yiddish.

UNGER: *Enough Yiddish. Andrea Mitchell?*
ELLERBEE: Well, Andrea is another one of the hardest-working women. And she is a good friend. Andrea and I went through one of the worst summers of our lives together, when we did that dreadful show, *Summer Sunday* in 1984. And we stuck it out. We got along; the show was in trouble but Andrea and I weren't. I'd do just about anything Andrea Mitchell asked me to do.

UNGER: *How about Katie Couric?*
ELLERBEE: I remember the first time I noticed Katie on the air-it wasn't the first time she was on the air, but it was the first time I noticed her, during the Gulf War. She had so much on the ball. I knew she is going far. And it turned out to be one of those times, I was right. She is another one that I think has a real sense of perspective about work and life.She knows the difference between work and life. And she's been wonderful. .. When we did the special on the Clinton scandal for kids last year, I called Katie and said: "Will you come and

be on the show with me and help me talk to kids about this issue?" And she said: "Absolutely, in a minute." And she did. And she was just great. If she's not the highest paid woman in television, she probably ought to be.

UNGER: *There's one Linda quote that keeps appearing over and over:*

"Men can run the world; why can't they stop wearing neckties ? How intelligent is it to start the day by tying a little noose around your neck?"

ELLERBEE: About as intelligent as it is to get up and pierce your ears and wear high heels, I suppose.

UNGER: *And were you really the first to say that Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did...but backwards and in high heels?"*

ELLERBEE: No, I did not. And I have denied that repeatedly. I heard it on an airplane and then I used it in a speech in a story about being on an airplane. The next thing that happened was Ann Richards used it in her speech because she heard it from me, and so she quoted me without saying the circumstances where I heard it. And then the story got started that I had said it. It's not my quote at all.

UNGER: *I did an interview with Ingrid Bergman and she told me that when asked the secret of her happiness she quoted Claudette Colbert, who had once said her secret was good health and bad memory. Ingrid said that she often felt guilty because it was then always attributed to Ingrid Bergman. "So" said Ingrid," a few years ago I met Claudette at a party and I said: "Claudette, I feel terrible. I've been quoted as saying: Good health and bad memory, and it was really yours."*
Claudette said: "Well, don't feel badly dear, I stole it from Albert Schweitzer."

ELLERBEE: That's very funny. I just used that line recently on a wrap-around for Lifetime and I attributed it to Ingrid Bergman.

UNGER: *Speaking of Schweitzer, what work have you done that you're proudest of*

ELLERBEE: I'm proudest of my [now adult] kids, Josh and Vanessa. About work...not in order.... *Overnight, Our World* and *Nick News.*

UNGER: *And what have you not done that you would still like to do?*

ELLERBEE: Ooh, I have a stack of show ideas this high. Most of which I hope one day to do. One of the things that's in the works right now is this 12-hour mini series for HBO that Whoopie Goldberg, Diane Keaton and I are doing. It's a dramatic series on the women's movement of the '60s and '70s. I very much want to tell young women their history before it's lost or misinterpreted.

UNGER: *When do you think it might get on?*

ELLERBEE: Oh, it'll be another year at least. It's an enormous project .And I still want to produce a *Sesame Street for Grownups.* Adult illiteracy in this nation is a shameful thing. And I still believe that we can use television. Because so many people who are grown up and can't read and write, the reason they don't get help is they're ashamed to admit it. But you can be home watching your TV and nobody knows. I believe the answer could be a *Sesame Street*-type program for grown ups.

UNGER: *Where do you think network news is going? Do you think they are moving towards the hour program? Or is that idea something of the past?*

ELLERBEE: I don't think whether it's an hour or a half hour matters any more. I think we'll lose one of the networks in the next 10 years. You know all the problems.. the advertising dollars are good but the audience is shrinking every year. When you say "network" now, you and I and a few of

us in this city, in L.A., may be thinking of ABC, CBS, NBC. But Nickelodeon's a network, HBO is a network. Those are all networks now. And since most people now get all their television on cable, they don't distinguish between NBC and the Fox or Cartoon Network. It's just Channel 68 or Channel 2, or Channel 7. The delivery systems are changing so rapidly that that's going to make a huge difference for the networks.

When we get into the fat pipes and you have the fat pipe coming in your house and the one machine is your telephone with your television and your data and/or information—let's call it your computer— all joined in one machine; that may be brought in through cable, it may be brought in by your telephone company. But it's going to change the financial landscape entirely. And the broadcast networks will not be going away immediately. They're doing fine right now. But they've all merged with a lot of other companies. They're all part of big conglomerates now. The old saying used to be that the difference between NBC and CBS was RCA made televisions and CBS made television. Well, none of them just makes television any more, none at all.

UNGER: *Do you think we're moving towards more news or less news?*
ELLERBEE: Well, we're moving towards more news, but that's not necessarily better. I worry when I watch a lot of television news now, to me it looks like the gene pool has gotten down to about a quarter inch. And I worry about the near-news shows-like near beer, almost but not really. I think it's very easy for the audience to watch *Inside Edition* and *Nightly News* and confuse the two. I really do. And I think we ask a lot of the audience to watch this whole spectrum of what's being called news and to separate out what is and what isn't.

UNGER: *Is there any cure for that slippage?*
ELLERBEE: I don't know. Media literacy. It puts a great burden on the viewer to decide who they believe and who they want to believe, and sort of stick there.

UNGER: *Do you think it's going to depend upon personality?*
ELLERBEE: It always has.

UNGER: *You believed Walter Cronkite.*
ELLERBEE: It always has. Why should that change? It's probably more than ever that way now. And Walter may in fact be the person who changed it. Walter may have been the first superstar in television news.

UNGER: *Edward R. Murrow?*
ELLERBEE: Yeah, you're right. Edward R. Murrow. But in his lifetime, while he was alive, he was not nearly as revered as he is now. But Walter was the first superstar.

UNGER: *Do you have a patron saint in broadcasting right now?*
ELLERBEE: Well, I guess Edward R. Murrow would do for me too, you know. I mean, look at this. Not only was he a great great reporter, not only was he a man of integrity, and not only was he never shy of talking back to his bosses; but he did a coffee commercial, too.
UNGER: *What do you think is the state of children's television?*
ELLERBEE: There's not enough good children's TV on the air. I don't believe in censorship when it comes to children's television. I believe in making more better TV. More and better children's television is the answer. A show like *Nick News* is never going to get the same ratings as *RugRats* or *Power Rangers*. But the wonderful thing about Nickelodeon is that it will say: "Okay, look, we don't have to get the ratings we get on *RugRats* for everything. It is good for us to be doing *Nick News* for kids." And I think if more networks were to take a similar attitude, you would see more shows

that parents feel comfortable with their kids watching. While I do believe in the First Amendment, I also believe it stops at your front door. I believe that parents have an absolute right and responsibility about what their children watch. But they don't have a right to tell me what to produce. That's the difference.

UNGER: *What's the age group that* Nick News *aims at?*
ELLERBEE: We aim at 8 to 14. We know that the core audience is 9, 10, 11. And we also know there's a lot of adults who watch *Nick News*. Some are parents who like to watch it with their kids.

UNGER: *Do you let them know ... are you specific with the age level that you're aiming at?*
ELLERBEE: No, we're not specific. That's where we're aiming and we're crafting it for that age. And we work with teachers so we know what the curriculums are in those groups. . And we assume that at about 13, most of them move on to MTV.

But that's not necessarily true. I did have something very funny happen. A young woman came up to me recently and she said: "I watched *Nick News* when I was a child." And I said: "Excuse me?" And she said: "Yes." She said: "You've been on the air eight years. I watched your very first show on the Gulf War. I was 12 years old, and I'm 20 now. I watched *Nick News* as a child." And I said: "You're my first *Nick News* generation to grow up!"

UNGER: *That must have felt nice.*
ELLERBEE: Yeah, it did. I never thought I'd ever have any show last this long.

UNGER: *Let's go back now a little bit to women on television. Do you think a major change that has taken place?*
ELLERBEE: Oh, there are great changes for women in television, both in front of the camera and behind it. We are finally seeing women executives in television; women station managers around the country; women news directors. We haven't seen a woman president of a news division yet-I don't believe. At the broadcast networks we haven't. But we've seen women presidents of cable networks. And we have them right now. Jane Pauley talks about being the lesser of two equals when she was on with Bryant Gumbel.Well Katie Couric is not the lesser of two equals. If one of them is, it's Matt [Lauer].

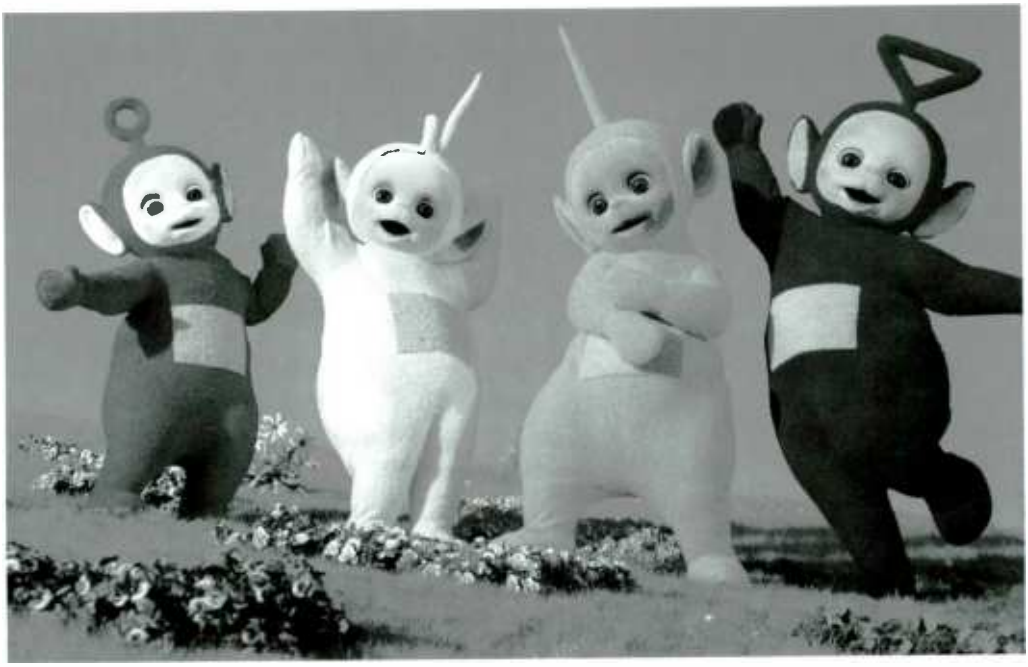
UNGER: *Do you consider yourself a happy person?*
ELLERBEE: Yes, yes. And I also consider that a great deal of that has to do with choice. I think most people have a choice every day whether you're going to be happy. You don't have a choice always of what's going to happen to you. But there's always that moment when you stand and you look in the mirror and you say: "Okay, whatever it is that happens, this is the "what is," and my choice is: How am going to handle it." And I think every morning you get up for the most part and you say: "Here's the hand I was dealt. I can be happy today or I can be unhappy."

I choose happy. ■

During many years of covering television for *The Christian Science Monitor*, Arthur Unger won national recognition as one of TV's most influential critics as well as for his revealing interviews with TV, movie and theater personalities. The Arthur Unger: Collection of 1,200 audio tapes is now housed at the Archive of Recorded Sound at the Performing Arts Branch of the N.Y. Public Library and at the Newhouse School of Communications at Syracuse University. All interviews, including this one, will be available for listening shortly.

Teletubby Trouble

How Justified Were Rev. Jerry Falwell's Attacks on This Pre-School Import from Britain?



By Heather Hendershot

In all the excitement over Pokémon—the entertainment concept that has netted Nintendo millions from video games, toys, and trading cards—*Teletubbies* seem to have been forgotten. Yet it was only a year ago that the Rev. Jerry Falwell made headlines when he claimed that one of the characters on this pre-school television show was gay. And in August of 1999 the show came under attack from the American Academy of Pediatrics, which in response to *Teletubbies* advised parents to keep children younger than two away from television

completely. Meanwhile, some adults complained that the use of baby talk on the show would impair development, while others criticized the show for its crass commercialism. After all, *Teletubbies* does market toys to a mewling and puking audience, one that, as Peggy Charren of Action for Children's Television noted, has to be propped up to watch the show. How shameless is that?

Teletubbies protest was loud, at first, but the furor was soon swept under the rug, and Pokémon became the newest cause célèbre. While adults like to say that television shortens children's attention spans, it is grown-ups who often seem distracted as they redirect their ire from show to show. As each new program comes under attack, the previous program is discarded, the scandal rarely revisited. Ten years ago it was Bart Simpson whose "eat my shorts!" retort had adults up in arms. Since then *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* has been attacked for making children violent, and *Beavis and Butthead* for making them, well, stupid. Ironically, the very parents who objected to *Beavis and Butthead, Power Rangers,* or *The Simpsons* probably spent much of their own childhood watching TV that adults wanted to censor. There seems to be a pattern: the kids who grew up when radio was under attack in the thirties become the censors of fifties TV, which they charged caused juvenile delinquency, and the kids who grew up watching fifties TV would later panic about video games and shows like *Beavis and Butthead.* In sum, our culture's amnesia about media history means that kids keep growing up and turning into the censors that they resisted as children.

One of the greatest examples of this kind of cultural amnesia is surely *Sesame Street.* Currently held up as the epitome of high-quality children's television, *Sesame Street* was attacked on a number of fronts when it premiered in 1969. Right-wingers objected to its picture of racial integration and its housewife-turned-nurse, whom they saw as a concession to bra-burners. Psychologists objected to its fast-pacing, which they feared would impair development. (With its short vignette style *Sesame Street* was modeled after *Laugh-In,* a far cry from the slow-paced *Ding Dong School* or *Romper Room.*) Some parents objected to the show's psychedelic style—bright colors, zooms, and lap dissolves—which they feared would get kids turned on to LSD. Still others objected to the fact that *Sesame Street* was explicitly designed to look like commercial television, and that it made use of advertising techniques. In fact, Children's Television Workshop founder Joan Ganz Cooney criticized cheap locally produced children's programming for its "slow and monotonous pace and lack of professionalism." She envisioned an educational program that could compete with network television. "Children are conditioned to expect pow! wham! fast-action thrillers from television [as well as]...highly visual, slickly and expensively produced material." *Sesame Street* would exploit such conditioning.

Teletubbies will be remembered as the children's show attacked by Jerry Falwell for having a gay character.

No one attacked the show as commercially exploitative for selling toys, for the simple reason that *Sesame Street* was not funded by merchandising but rather by foundations and the government. *Sesame Street* toys were only gradually introduced, and *Sesame Street* did not begin advertising its toys until the mid-

nineties. Currently, of course, virtually all PBS children's shows are funded, at least in part, by toy sales, and this is where *Teletubbies* comes in. *Teletubbies* is unique in that it is directed to the youngest audience ever, one to three years olds. (At least that's the official line; the show actually appeals to even younger children.) Like Barney and Friends, Thomas the Tank Engine, and Nickelodeon's Blue's Clues, *Teletubbies* is yet another pre-school show that receives much of its funding from toy sales. With a steady audience of two million in the United Kingdom, where it was introduced in 1997, the program had proven its profitability before it premiered on PBS. A *Teletubbies* song had even surpassed the Spice Girls on the British pop charts.

Although *Teletubbies* should gain a place in the history books as the first program to target an infant audience, it is possible that it will be best remembered as the children's show attacked by Jerry Falwell for having a gay character. Falwell is consistently opposed to gay rights, and he has a history of censorious action dating back to his Moral Majority activism in the eighties, so one hesitates to defend him. But in this case, he was clearly set up. In February of 1999 Falwell's newsletter contained a "Parents Alert" column attacking Tinky Winky: "the character, whose voice is obviously that of a boy, has been found carrying a purse in many episodes and has become a favorite character among gay groups worldwide... He is purple—the gay-pride color; and his antenna is shaped like a gay-pride symbol [a triangle]." Falwell's editors did not pick up on the gay subtext by themselves; rather, they saw an article in the *Washington Post* that pointed to Ellen DeGeneres as a passé gay celebrity and to Tinky Winky as the trendy new gay celebrity. The *Post* editorial may well have been tongue in cheek, but it was picking up on a story that was old news in the U.K.

Apparently, "there was a big flap in England, shortly after the show's 1997 debut, over the dismissal of the actor playing Tinky Winky," Karen Everhart Bedford wrote in *Current*, the public television magazine. Producers said he had been too rambunctious on the set. But the actor apparently endeared himself to viewers by flamboyantly waving the now-notorious red handbag..." (The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* reports that the BBC wanted to fire the Tinky Winky actor "for dancing in the streets wearing only a balloon.") Presumably because of his purse waving (and occasional tutu wearing), Tinky Winky had been playfully taken up as a gay icon long before Falwell came along, and there was huge buzz about him on gay Internet chat sites. To say that Tinky Winky was gay was nothing new; Falwell was simply the first one to say that this was a problem.

Fundamentalists carefully monitor the mass media because they perceive America as being engaged in a cultural war, a war that Satan seems to be winning.

And he didn't go on TV or issue a press release to make his opinion known. He published it in a newsletter sent only to fellow fundamentalists. The story was picked up by the mainstream media because they thought it was funny. Amazingly, everybody "knew" about Tinky Winky before the story broke. Even *People* magazine had reported that "gay men have made the purse-toting Tinky Winky a camp icon." Tinky Winky's gay adult fan base was well known, but no

one got lathered up about the situation until Falwell was pulled into the picture. Suddenly, this character's possible homosexuality was seen as something to take seriously, and to refute. While many people objected to Falwell's blatant homophobia, no one stood up for the idea that it would be okay for a character on a children's show to be gay. (The same thing happened when *Sesame Street*'s Ernie and Bert were attacked as gay in 1994. The Children's Television Workshop laughed it off and said puppets can't be gay. Maybe not, but puppets can't "really" be female or Hispanic either; Rosita, a *Sesame Street* Muppet, is both.) The U.S. marketers of *Teletubbies*, itsy bitsy Entertainment, denied that Tinky Winky was gay, and their CEO said "There isn't a boy on the planet who hasn't picked up his grandma's purse and carried it around. It's okay to carry this bag. You're not going to grow up to be an interior decorator." A contradictory message: relax about gender socialization, but don't worry, your kid won't become gay from watching our show.

Most adults don't carefully watch the shows that they object to.

The flap over Tinky Winky's sexuality teaches us several important things about children's television. First, we see that although liberal adults often talk about the need for "positive" gender roles on children's TV, they aren't comfortable thinking about sex on kids' shows. They expect children's TV characters to have gender, but not sexuality. Falwell's attack kicked up a lot of dust not only because he raised the specter of homosexuality but also because he made people think about infantile sexuality, something they would prefer to turn a blind eye to. Strangely enough, no one seems to have noticed that the *Teletubbies* are oddly sexual. Exhibiting at least a nascent polymorphous perversity, the *Teletubbies* delight in rubbing each other with their bellies and behinds, and when their tummies turn on like TV's they look down, fascinated, like a child discovering new body parts for the first time. The *Teletubbies*' delight in their own bodies may actually contribute to their appeal to baby viewers. There's nothing wrong with this, but it's not an idea that most adults would be comfortable with.

The second important thing that the Falwell incident reveals is that only certain people are granted the authority to correctly decipher meanings in children's television. Although Falwell's anti-gay discourse is appalling, his interpretation of Tinky Winky's color, his triangle and his purse is not completely insane. Fundamentalists carefully monitor the mass media because they perceive America as being engaged in a culture war, a war that Satan seems to be winning. They have everything at stake in performing careful readings of popular culture. They point out, for example, that *The Lion King* is about patriarchal authority, a riveting pro-God story (although some view the "circle of life" as suspiciously New Age). They observe that *Pocahontas* is multicultural historical revisionism, with a dash of liberal feminism. And, in the eighties, they noted that Saturday morning cartoons like *He-Man* and *Thundercats* were full of occult imagery and story lines. None of these readings is ridiculous. Of course, fundamentalists often call for boycotting and censorship, which is a problem, but the point is that when they criticize children's culture, they are dismissed as backwards, stupid people, when often it is not their interpretations but their censorious moral outrage that should be jettisoned. Who, then, has the cultural authority to

make pronouncements about children's television, or, more specifically, *Teletubbies*?

When the American Academy of Pediatrics responded to *Teletubbies*, they were taken very seriously. In August of 1999, the Academy advised parents not to expose children younger than two to television. Since *Teletubbies* is the only show to target this audience, this was a none-too-veiled attack on the show. The report further advised parents to keep their children's rooms free of all electronic media, and said that kids need interaction, not electronic stimulation. Itsy bitsy Entertainment said the report was "a bunch of malarkey," but, in general, it found a receptive audience. Suddenly, parents who put their toddlers in front of the TV for five minutes so that they could do the dishes or the laundry were vilified by the popular press for "not interacting" with their children.

Although many adults paid lip service to their agreement with the pediatricians, *Teletubbies* remains popular, and product sales are high; broadcast rights have been sold to twenty-two countries. If there is a lesson to be learned from the pediatricians' response to *Teletubbies*, it is that the voices of trained professionals will always win in the popular press, but exhausted moms and dads who need to get dinner on the table will nonetheless do whatever it takes to get an energetic baby to sit still.

There is another lesson to learn from the *Teletubbies* controversy: most adults don't carefully watch the shows that they object to. Adults who criticize *Teletubbies* for using baby talk certainly haven't paid careful attention to the program, or they would know that at least three quarters of the dialogue is non-baby-talk voice-overs done by adults. A male voice-over narrates the show's simple stories, using the familiar rhymes and cadences of children's books: "Over the hills and far away, Teletubbies come to play." Often the adult will say something that the Teletubbies act out, or the Teletubbies will repeat something he has said. In "Dance with the Teletubbies," a popular home video release, the voice-over says, "after all that jumping Tinky Winky was very tired," and Tinky Winky mirrors his language, responding "very tired!"

The argument that *Teletubbies* is not interactive, and indeed, that children's TV in general is not interactive, also tends to come from adults who don't actually watch much children's television. In fact, of all the different kinds of television, it is only children's television (specifically, the pre-school kind) that aggressively strives for interactivity. While cartoons designed for older kids tend to be straight forward adventure stories, historically the shows for younger audiences—*Sesame Street*, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, *The Electric Company* (and, from the fifties, *Ding Dong School* and *Winky Dink and You*)—all strove to get children talking back to the TV screen. These shows would often use direct address or leave pauses where children could try to answer questions or solve puzzles. Many local television shows encouraged kids to send in letters and art work. The best contemporary example of this kind of thing is surely *Blue's Clues*, a pre-school show in which the host, Steve, speaks directly to the audience as he and the viewers try to solve puzzles by using the clues left by Blue, the dog. When Steve asks questions, kids' voices on the soundtrack respond, encouraging kids at home

Some very young viewers may get pleasure but little education from the show.

to join in. It would be foolish to compare this kind of interactivity to what kids get from parents or other kids; the activities are totally different. Yet it is crucial to acknowledge that children's shows try to elicit responses from audiences in creative ways that are rarely seen on adult TV.

Teletubbies is no exception. The Teletubbies often look directly at the audience, breaking the fourth wall, as is so common on children's shows. The Teletubbies often engage in imitable activity such as dancing, and, as the title "Dance with the Teletubbies" indicates, the idea is to join in. The adult narrator often repeats simple questions like, "Where did the Teletubbies go?" or "Where is Po's scooter?" The slow pacing allows older babies time to try to understand the questions, and possibly answer. The most interactive moment in each show is probably when the female adult voice-over says "Time for Tele Bye-Bye," and each Teletubby waves, says bye-bye, hides, reappears, and finally goes away. The idea here, as with so much of the show, is to reinforce object permanence. Repetition is also very important to the show. After the Teletubbies see a clip of kids playing, they shout "again!", and the same clip re-plays. Adults find this incredibly boring, but kids love it. Also, in every show a pinwheel spins, indicating that something magic will happen. Often, this is when the Teletubbies' monitor-stomachs shimmer, indicating that they are activated. The Teletubbies look down at their aroused bellies, waiting to see whose belly will finally show the new video clip of children playing. The repetition of this spectacle from show to show is no doubt appealing, as babies figure out the premise that one of the Teletubbies will "win" in the end.

The youngest children, who are not yet capable of following the very simple narratives (Who spilled the Tubby custard? Can Dipsy catch the ball? Where's the Tubby toast?) probably enjoy the show purely for its spectacle of moving shapes, and, above all, the spectacle of the cooing baby face that radiates sunbeams and rises and sets to frame each show. In other words, some very young viewers may get pleasure but little education from the show. Alvin Poussaint and Susan Linn argue that "proponents of *Teletubbies* point to how much babies like viewing the show. That babies enjoy something does not mean it is good for them." This is true, but the images and sounds of *Teletubbies* simply do not seem all that different from the stories parents read to their kids or the questions they ask their kids everyday. Babies are not drawn to other kinds of shows, which are way over their heads, so *Teletubbies* is really all they can watch, and an hour of this a day, while exhausted parents get a chore done, or relax and watch with their baby, does not seem as *Brave New World*-ish as the naysayers imply. But it is creepy when the show opens with a computer animated image of a sprouting plant, with a Kellogg's logo in the bottom right-hand corner, and a soothing female voice-over says "Rice Krispies-celebrating the joy of kids growing through interaction." Sugar cereal has nothing to do with "growing through interaction"; this is just a cheap plug.

This brings us back to the ethical question of whether or not it is okay to market products to babies. I'm not in favor of it, but, then, I don't like the fact that adult shows sell junk either. I also think that Poussaint and Linn's argument that babyhood is "the only time that children can be easily protected from the barrage of media advertising" is naive. Babies typically come home from the hospital with Mickey Mouse diapers, wrapped in Winnie the Pooh blankets. They drink from Bugs Bunny bottles, and they wear the newest Disney character on their pj's. Parents who choose to resist this merchandising extravaganza are free not to turn on the TV, but the extravaganza will not stop, and if the baby goes to daycare, he or she will

almost inevitably encounter licensed products. Not giving in to the *Teletubbies* hype is a valuable symbolic act for adults, but any victory over merchandising will be short-lived.

It would be nice if PBS were a safe space from merchandising, but it's not. Adults irate about *Teletubbies* should turn their energy from the show and instead look at the real problem: the commercialization of PBS. As Poussaint and Linn argue, "By severely underfunding public television, the U.S. government has left PBS as vulnerable to market forces as any commercial station. *Teletubbies* provides PBS with an undisclosed share of the profits from merchandise sales. Most PBS children's programs are funded, at least in part, by product licensing. Decision about what programs get on the air are unfortunately shaped, more and more, by their commercial potential." This is the big "eh-oh" that Americans need to address. ■

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Public Television and the Camel's Nose

Are PBS stations becoming too commercial?

By Bernard S. Redmont

Public television is grappling more and more with that perplexing problem called "creeping commercialism." Is the legendary camel's nose sneaking under the tent? Are we beginning to see the whole head of the camel? How far will it go? Will the rest of the beast eventually follow in, and leave us admirers of the noncommercial concept out in the cold? Alas, we're even hearing a sporadic debate about whether public television should become more commercial, or be privatized. The Federal Communications Commission at the moment prohibits commercials as such on PBS, and allows only "underwriting credits." They're restricted by Commission rules on what they can say and show. But some station executives think the PBS rules are too tight.

And in case you hadn't noticed, we're now seeing "enhanced underwriter acknowledgements," which many used to think were illegal.

The Communications Act of 1934 forbids noncommercial stations from accepting compensation to broadcast messages that "promote any service, facility or product offered by any person who is engaged in such offering for profit." But over the years, with deregulation, the law has been pretty much ignored, or winked at.

In 1984, the FCC relaxed the noncommercial policy and allowed public broadcasters to expand or "enhance" the scope of donor and underwriter "acknowledgments." This included "value-neutral descriptions of product line or service" and corporate logos or slogans which "identify and do not promote." So it is that

we see a mini-peroration at the outset of the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* about how nobly Archer-Daniels-Midland feeds a hungry world.

What's more, while PBS limits the length of a national underwriting credit to fifteen seconds or less, you may have noticed lately that many large stations routinely sell 30-second credits. A group of prominent stations beat back efforts by PBS to enforce the 15-second rule. A study by the PBS Board in 1999 found that 30-second credits are not common, although half of the stations oppose restrictions to them.

Accentuating the impression of encroachment and clutter, many PBS stations are bundling their credits into expanded time around the beginning and end of programs. The aggregate time for the quasi-commercials that dare not call their name can go to 60 seconds. You may have detected as much as three minutes of an hour for quasi-commercials. We don't yet see the camel's hump, but the animal is inching forward.

Don't get us wrong. We cherish public television and agree with Boston member station WGBH, which calls itself "the best television on television." If PBS did not exist, we'd want to invent it. Where else would we find the *NewsHour, Exxon Mobil Masterpiece Theater, Frontline, Washington Week in Review, Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, Sesame Street, Mystery, Nova, The American Experience, Live from Lincoln Center* and any number of examples of quality programming?

Just what is PBS? It's not really a network—but rather a private, nonprofit media enterprise, owned and operated by the nation's 349 public television stations. It reaches 99 percent of American homes with television sets. PBS is really a local-national partnership designed, according to it's own description, "to enrich the lives of all Americans through quality programs and education services that inform, inspire and delight." It is headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia and has operating revenues of about

If PBS didn't exist, we'd want to invent it.

$450,000,000 annually—rather modest by commercial network standards.

PBS is not a centrally controlled system. PBS stations are operated by colleges and universities, state and local governments and various nonprofit civic groups. Their audience may be small compared to commercial stations, but it's generally higher in educational, income and social class, although PBS shuns any elitist tag and tries to appeal to all. Resources come from member stations (which don't necessarily clear time simultaneously for given programs); from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting; private sector alliances, new initiatives and grants, video sales, fees for educational services, licensing arrangements, cable royalties and U.S. Department of Education grants.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting serves to channel funds appropriated by Congress to the stations through PBS. The stations also get support from viewers like you—and me. The PBS mission calls for quality programming "to advance education, culture and citizenship," serving the public interest and meriting public esteem. Is this mission threatened by commercial infestation and clutter? This is what we have to ask ourselves.

In 1998, some 66 underwriters each gave PBS a million dollars or more—ranging from ACE Hardware to the Xerox Corporation, and including Chevrolet, Ford, GTE, IBM, Fidelity, ITT, Chuck E. Cheese's, Libby's Juicy Juice, Polaroid, Prudential, Scotts/Miracle-Gro, United

Airlines and assorted insurance companies, all vying for public support in helping to expand their bottom line. At one time, so many subsides came from major oil firms that some wits dubbed PBS the "Petroleum Broadcasting Service."

"When is a commercial not a commercial?" Answer: When it's on noncommercial television. You may have seen the spots showing a luxury car speeding along a mountain road, a Citicorp bankcard gleaming behind he slogan, "Anyhow. Anywhere. Anytime. Right now,"and Chase Manhattan advising viewers, "We believe that helping our customers realize their dreams is the best investment we can make." Public TV officials would never subscribe to the theory that such credits could taint programming, particularly news. But those with long memories recall that the *NewsHour* in 1990 gave us a news story about a Soviet delegation visiting a Frito-Lay factory in Omaha and showed them munching Fritos with gusto, later showing Russians quaffing Pepsis and Mountan Dew—both accompanied by a narration full of admiration for the products. At the time, Pepsico was a leading underwriter of the show and plugged its wares at the beginning of the program.

More recently, in October 1998, KCET Los Angeles and *Newsweek* Productions coproduced a one-hour documentary, *John Glenn, American Hero*, with an incidental segment favorable to the International Space Station project for which the Boeing Company had a $5.63 billion contract. Boeing was the sole corporate underwriter for the program. Some veteran PBS producers considered this "content corruption," although PBS execs denied any quid pro quo.

Underwriting deals can easily damage the credibility of programs and their producers. KQED San Francisco in 1996 did a show on the life of the venerable California winemaker Robert Mondavi, but the deal blew apart when critics charged that the Mondavi winery had helped arrange funding for the program through the Mondavi-founded and funded American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts.

"The perception of a conflict of interest."

More recently, at the end of 1999, PBS scheduled a one-hour documentary called *Road Predators*, about drunken driving, underwritten by the Century Council. It turned out that this organization was funded by five leading distilling companies. WGBH Boston and WNET New York hastily yanked the documentary, due to concerns about "the perception of a conflict of interest."

Another problem is airing credits hat can involve public broadcasters in controversies over the products of underwriters. Example: Cheetos snack foods had been proposed for the sponsorship of a children's program in 1996. No underwriting credit may depict tobacco products, distilled spirits or firearms, but diversified companies making them may be acceptable as underwriters.

Business is business, and even PBS stations are thinking along businesslike lines. Six big PBS stations are now joined together in a "sponsorship group" aimed at cooperating instead of competing against each other. WGBH Boston, WNET New York, KCET Los Angeles and WETA Washington formed the group a couple of years ago, and were joined later by WTTW Chicago and by Maryland Public TV to "put all their properties in one portfolio," and decide who calls on what company, on the theory that it serves the companies and the stations better and they would do better working together than against each other. They are leading producers of

programs—WGBH alone produces up to 40 percent of what PBS distributes.

Another private firm, National Public Television, started by a cable entrepreneur, handles so-called "spot" sales of "corporate support announcements" on many stations. Public Broadcasting Marketing, a company that represents public TV and radio stations, has actively touted the "sales potential" of public TV's children's programming to corporations with deep pockets for sponsorship. The head of the company even wrote *Advertising Age* in 1993, complaining about being left out of a "Marketing to Kids" supplement.

Those of us who are particularly partial to PBS... have become increasingly weary of the recurring "pledge weeks."

Those of us who are particularly partial to PBS, in part because we want to escape excessive commercial solicitations, have become increasingly weary of the recurring "pledge weeks." Typically, a public station like WGBH will do on-air fund raising three times a year—in March, August and December—for a ten-day period including two weekends.

WGBH's Vice President Lance W. Ozier, who oversees much of the station's fundraising, told me that "it's crucial to us, the single most effective way, and the single largest source of new donors. There's no immediate future substitute for this." He agrees that "it's annoying for viewers— I don't blame them." But Ozier says the present system works. Still, there's a saturation point, and the more you do the pledge breaks, the more viewers tune out.

FCC Commissioner Michael K. Powell, who admiringly calls public television "a national treasure," told a PBS meeting in 1998 that he heard a commercial radio station advertisement urging listeners to avoid stations that "beg for your hard-earned money." But as public funding dries up due to a Philistine-minded Congress, begging, membership drives, auctions, merchandise sales and quasi-commercials all become standard options.

Critics often question as a semi-commercial practice the direct selling of videotapes and other products on PBS stations. The stations regularly offer books and tapes related to programs, and similar merchandise like T-shirts as premium gifts for pledge-drive donors. Some former PBS fund raisers argue that premiums have become a form of retailing, and not simply thank-you gifts to donors.

Astonishingly, Chicago's big public TV station WTTW tried broadcasting an upscale home-shopping service in 1993. Opponents petitioned the FCC, and two years after this deplorable experiment, the Commission found that the station had violated an FCC rule but didn't agree that the fund-raising technique was too commercial.

WGBH, one of the best and most restrained stations in matters of credits, understands the limitations of the funding conundrum. Andrew Griffiths, a vice-president for finance and administration, told me, "We are playing a balancing act, and it's relatively successful." Griffiths remarks that "As long as the public sees us as different from the commercial stations, we can get funding...To the extent that government cuts back and we get more desperate, and are forced into choosing longer or more explicit messages, in the long run it's a recipe for disaster."

According to *Current*, a biweekly that covers public broadcasting, an influential minority of public broadcasting executives continue to talk about seeking to drop or loosen laws that forbid them from carrying

outright commercials. Some even argue their stations should be given the option of converting from "noncommercial" to "nonprofit" broadcasters, which could maintain high quality standards but also sell commercials. That would be a new kind of FCC license. But most managers consider this anathema.

People I talk to in Boston argue that selling air time that way would make no sense, nor would it make much money. The funding base of public television is the most diverse of any media outlet in the country. Most of the time, this diversity of funding sources enables public TV to withstand unwelcome intrusions into decision-making. PBS believes that "the diversity of a program funding sources is a key element in the preservation of a free and independent public television system." Therefore it encourages national program underwriting from all corners of the public and private sector. Reliance on commercials would probably make public TV more susceptible to outside interference.

Some public TV leaders and Republican Congressmen have toyed with the idea of privatizing public TV. Execs like Lance Ozier in Boston say, "We're not in favor of privatization. It would completely change the culture and approach of our system."

One unusual proposal for ads on public TV came from a former PBS president, Lawrence Grossman, in 1995: PTV Weekend. That would be a new commercial network, parallel to PBS, that would provide high-class cultural programming to public TV stations on Friday and Saturday nights, with commercials. At the same time, Grossman would maintain noncommercial support for the kinds of programming that could only be supported in that way. This would be, in effect, a "mixed economy" on public TV. Those who support it point to Britain's Channel Four, which serves a legislated programming mission while at the same time receiving support from advertising. However, this British channel was created under the long influence of BBC tradition, and with a unique financial structure that at least initially isolated program decision-makers from direct financial incentive.

Many of us who know and admire the BBC consider it, if not an ideal model, at least a worthy exemplar. Founded in 1922 for radio, it pioneered in television ahead of the U.S. I watched the Wimbledon tennis matches on TV in London in summer of 1939, when TV was only a glimmer in the U.S. eye. The BBC's long-term funding is assured by an annual license fee for TV sets. A parliamentary charter keeps it partially insulated from government control. It has managed to produce programming that is both culturally elavated and reasonably popular. We see its exports on *Masterpiece Theater* and other programs that are most successful here.

The BBC of course is the target of criticism, too. It often gets the same catcalls as U.S. broadcasters for excesses of sex and violence.

Would a BBC-model financing work here? Ozier wonders "whether our culture would readily go for it in America." American public funding of culture has always been retarded. Almost every civilized country in the world heavily subsidizes cultural institutions, including public broadcasting, but many U.S. legislative leaders get apoplectic when anybody suggests it might be a good idea.

American public funding of culture has always been retarded.

Many creative approaches to funding could still be explored. It's been suggested that public broadcasters might be allowed to use some digital capacity to create a funding source, say partnering with a commercial

broadcaster to share a DTV facility. However, this could also be another way of letting the camel into the tent.

Over the years, suggestions have been made that commercial broadcasters could discharge some of their public-interest obligations by supporting public-interest programming on public TV. The cable industry, for example, supports C-Span. A few years ago, we missed a monumental opportunity and instead suffered the great Spectrum Giveaway. Major broadcasters spent millions in lobbying and campaign contributions to get an estimated 70-billion-dollar government giveaway of rights to new unused broadcast systems used for digital broadcast technology. Some of its money could have been used to help public broadcasting to fund production of children's programs and fund nonprofit access to advanced TV networking, or better still, to provide a trust-fund endowment for public broadcasting.

Even an auction of new frequencies could have yielded ample funds for public TV, with plenty left over. After all, the broadcasters coin money by operating the public's airwaves and have supposedly pledged to serve the public interest. In an ideal world, we could tax the commercial stations earning excess profits, to support public television, but the politicians—often elected with contributions from the commercial broadcasting lobby—wouldn't stand for it.

Sen. Pat Williams (D.-Mont.) introduced a "One Percent for Culture Act" a few years ago. It would have Congress endow a trust fund for CPB and the arts and humanities endowments, with a one-time appropriation of several million dollars.It never got off the ground. Conservatives in Congress thought it was too much like a new tax. Nor is there enough support for a proposal to put a minimal (2 percent) tax on the sale of broadcasting licenses.

Does this leave us to tinker with the commercial option? Not as long as we have other choices. Commercial television merits commercials. Public television, with other values, would do well to shun advertising as a solution to its funding problems. The humorist Stephen Leacock once defined advertising as the science of arresting human intelligence long enough to get money from it. Why let the camel into the public tent? ■

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NAACP Attacks the Wrong TV Target

New network moves misfire because African-Americans waste an appalling number of hours watching television, to their own detriment.

By Michael Medved

Continued agitation about broadcast "diversity" by the NAACP and other activist groups only serves to distract attention from the more profound and important problems concerning the African-American community and its connection to TV. The most significant challenge in that relationship has nothing to do with the number of black characters or writers on the major networks. It centers, rather, on the appalling (and hugely disproportionate) number of hours that black viewers already waste on network offerings.

Of course, most people of will instinctively sympathize with NAACP President Kweisi Mfume's recent demands for more black characters on network TV. But few commentators have bothered to explain how success in this admirable endeavor would in any way benefit the African-American community.

In a Hollywood meeting in December, Mfume threatened "sustained, focused and continuous consumer action in the form of repetitive boycotts, picketing and large-scale demonstrations." In response to such pressure, CBS President Les Moonves announced a radical new program to force executives at every level on the network food chain to hire more minorities. "Let me reiterate," he declared, "managers' compensation will be directly tied to their ability to bring diversity to their departments." In other words, executives will receive extra pay packages based on the skin color — rather than the performance — of their new hires.

It is difficult to understand how such an emphasis could help the network, or the black community at large. Any consideration of the recent past makes it obvious that African -American writers and producers are every bit as capable of promulgating insulting and demeaning stereotypes as their white counterparts. By the same token, white artists can occasion-

ally create sympathetic and intelligent programming on black themes. To assume that the ability to create quality television is dependent on a writer or producer's ethnic identity is racism, pure and simple.

If you question this proposition, perform a simple thought experiment. Imagine for a moment that all of the nation's broadcast executives follow the lead of CBS and take threats of boycotts and demonstrations instantly to heart. They immediately agree to multiply many times over the number of people of color depicted on prime-time TV series, and the percentage of minorities behind the scenes. Suddenly, the percentage of black protagonists soars to more than 20%— well beyond the 13% of the population identified as African American.

More and more parents of all races have come to think of network TV as a broken-down, poorly designed, rust-encrusted, pollution-belching jalopy.

But as part of this fantasy, also assume that everything else about network television's offerings remains exactly the same—the same crudeness, rudeness, mindlessness, sniggering sex references, immaturity, exploitation and emphasis on instant gratification. Would merely adjusting the skin color of some prominent characters significantly alter the nature of television itself-and automatically improve its impact on black people?

Consider the question another way by looking at TV as it exists today. Broadcasters vastly over-represent the members of the white middle class—who comprise, by most counts, more than 85% of the fictional people whose lives are dramatized on the big four networks. Does this over-representation mean that TV therefore exerts a *positive* influence for white middle-class kids, and that their parents should welcome the more than three hours a day (on average) that their children devote to the tube?

More and more parents of all races have come to think of network TV as a broken-down, poorly designed, rust-encrusted, pollution-belching jalopy. Establishing more ethnic diversity among television characters may provide the clunky old car with a spiffy new two-tone paint job, but it would do nothing to correct the more serious problems under the hood. The pathetic machine still would run just as clumsily, and spew the same noxious exhaust fumes into the environment.

How, for instance, would black children (or anyone else) gain if *Men Behaving Badly* guiltily agreed to add more black members to its cast? One of the relatively few recent shows with a black main character provoked passionate protests from the very community that it attempted to represent. *The Secret Diary of Desmond Pfeiffer* (on UPN) focused on a fictitious African-American White House aide to President Lincoln, but offended everyone with its joking references to slavery and its putrid, impenetrable witlessness. Adding more "authentic" black characters, or even more black writers and producers, would do nothing to redeem such a patently defective product-or to lessen its insulting and mind-numbing impact on everyone unlucky enough to watch it.

Any consideration of the recent past makes it obvious that African-American writers and producers are every bit as capable of promulgating demeaning stereotypes as their white counterparts. By the same token, white artists can occasionally create sympathetic and intelligent

programming on black themes-as the epic miniseries *Roots* most famously demonstrated. To assume that the ability to create quality television is somehow dependent on a writer or producer's ethnic identity is racism, pure and simple.

By focusing on the racial identity of creative personnel, the NAACP also serves to distract attention from far more urgent and pressing problems concerning the relationship of the African-American community to the TV industry.

The sad fact is that even with the current under-representation of black people on network TV, African-Americans already watch more television than white people. The most recent figures from Nielsen Media Research suggest that black families watch an average of 40% more TV than whites — turning to the tube in every segment of the weekly schedule more frequently than any other ethnic group. One can partially explain these figures in terms of higher African-American rates of unemployment, providing more time available for viewing—especially during the day. Higher rates of poverty also play a role—since poor people of every race generally watch more TV than those in the middle class or above.

It's easy to understand why overdosing on television would be a result of poverty, but we should face the fact that it's also a contributing cause. Someone who's spending 30 hours a week (and sometimes much more) watching the tube will predictably lack the time and energy needed for economic or educational advancement.

And even among privileged, successful African-American families, too much television remains a critical problem. Ronald F. Ferguson, a researcher at Harvard, has been surveying students at Shaker Heights High School outside of Cleveland, an academically acclaimed school where both white and black families can be classified as solidly middle class and upper middle class. In attempting to explain why black students perform far worse academically than their white classmates, despite similar economic backgrounds, Ferguson suggests: "Black kids watch twice as much TV as white kids; three hours a day as opposed to one-and-a-half hours a day."

The most questionable aspect of the NAACP's new initiative is that if it succeeds in its ambitious goal of bringing more black characters to the networks, it may well result in even higher levels of African-American television addiction—making the fundamental problem worse, rather than helping to solve it. Instead of pressuring the networks to expose more black characters, Kweisi Mfume might have encouraged black parents to impose more restrictions on the amount of time their children waste on TV. Recognizing that television programming is insulting, often idiotic and yes, generally unrepresentative, the nation's premier civil-rights organization could have helped to organize the one sort of boycott that could immediately benefit the black community. Instead of waiting for the broadcasters to change, African-American families—and all families, for that matter — can instantly change the dynamic in their own homes by consciously committing themselves to watching less TV. ■

Film critic Michael Medved, a member of the *USA TODAY* Board of Contributors, hosts a nationally syndicated daily radio talk show and proudly raises three children in a TV-free household.

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Culturally Diverse TV Would be Better TV

Perhaps the NAACP's appeal to the networks to become more fully representative of American pluralism isn't such a bad idea after all

By Christopher P. Campbell

Certainly we all remember Nancy Reagan's campaign to solve the growing problem of substance abuse among young people in the 1980s: *Just Say No.* And we remember the dramatic success of the campaign. Drug use vanished, the nation's crime rate dropped, schools improved, poverty was eliminated. And all it took was very simple, common-sense logic that went straight to the root of the problem: If people just took more responsibility for their libertine personal behavior, educational, economic and social opportunities would magically appear and transform their lives. And now, in a similarly brilliant proposal, Michael Medved has targeted television "addiction" as the culprit that is at the heart of the most serious problems in the African-American community. If black people would just watch a little less television, they would perform better in school, they would find gainful employment.... But wait, weren't those problems already solved by the last *Just Say No* campaign? Perhaps the NAACP's appeal to the networks to become more fully representative of American pluralism isn't really such a bad idea after all.

Mr. Medved has challenged us to imagine a world in which the television industry was as culturally diverse as American society. He contends that because of its very nature, the TV business wouldn't really change; we would simply get more programs such as *Men Behaving Badly*, only with multi-cultural casts. This may be true, and judging by some of the programming produced in recent years with black audiences in mind— see, for instance, *The PJs* or *Martin* — he has evidence to support such an argument. But perhaps we shouldn't be too hasty to dismiss all of television based on the questionable value of a few sophomoric sitcoms. And perhaps we should consider this: If, indeed, the virtually all white, middle/upper class ranks of TV executives were truly integrated with people from other avenues of American culture, what we might see on television would be dramatically different.

Let's look at a few of television's greatest successes, programs that were substantially successful in the ratings and also lifted the medium's cultural level above the "noxious exhaust" that Mr. Medved abhors. Remember *Roots*? Of course you do, as do the other 80 million Americans who watched night after night, marking the beginning of the era of the mini-series, a genre that — at its best — can rival the theatre and film industries and their potential to provide audiences with intelligent, moving and edifying fare. Or how about *The Cosby Show*? By drawing half of America's television audience week after week, the program set a ratings standard for sitcoms that will never be rivaled. Who would have thought that so many white viewers would come to identify with life in a black family that — in defiance of the stereotypes that still dominate African-American sitcoms — lived in an educated, civilized and culturally rich environment? And then there is *Oprah*. The only remaining talk-show host who doesn't survive by appealing to the most sordid human instincts, Oprah Winfrey is hardly driving the "pollution-belching jalopy" that has Mr. Medved so concerned. The reigning champion of syndicated television, her occasional focus on literature has more Americans reading good books than ever before.

What do these three programs have in common? That they demonstrate the great potential that television has for providing thoughtful entertainment? That they draw the kinds of audiences that make TV execs froth at the mouth? What about the fact that the programs are primarily the enterprise of people of color? Mr. Medved has suggested that "to assume the ability to create quality television is dependent on a writer or producer's ethnic identity is racism, pure and simple." I'll ignore the fact that he is dredging up the most pernicious of contemporary racist arguments— resisting attacks on white supremacy by claiming the high ground of racial equality (at least he didn't quote Martin Luther King, Jr., which my fellow Louisianian David Duke likes to do when he argues that affirmative action is an assault on the rights of white people). But he is missing the fact that people who come from different backgrounds than those who control the television industry might actually have different stories to tell. If Mr. Medved is so concerned about television's "crudeness, rudeness, mindlessness," etc., he should welcome programming generated by someone who comes from outside of the industry's impenetrable walls.

Mr. Medved also seems to have decided that programs produced by people of color would only be watched by people of color. This is not a surprising attitude; indeed, it appears to be a sentiment common among television executives. Quality programs that feature African-American have a history of being

poorly marketed —feckless promotions, bad time slots —then canceled because they fail to draw the audiences demanded by advertisers. In the 1950s, it was *The Nat King Cole Show*, gone after one year. In the 1960s, *East Side, West Side*, a drama that featured major talent — Cecily Tyson, James Earl Jones, George C. Scott— lasted only a season. The networks loved the "ghetto sitcom" era, but in 1987, CBS axed *Frank's Place* after its first year. The program was hailed as a ground-breaking program not only because it featured intelligent and nuanced representations of black people, but because the high quality of the writing and production elevated the level of the sitcom genre. Similarly, Roc and South Central were victims of poor promotion and the quick network ax. More recently, after failing for seven years to figure out how to market *Homicide: Life on the Streets*, NBC gave up on the most intelligent show in prime time. Certainly, the business of prime-time TV is complex, and many factors affect the success or failure of programs, but is it just a coincidence, or do good programs with predominantly African-American casts simply get short shrift?

Mr. Medved seems to have decided that programs produced by people of color would only be watched by people of color.

Black-cast programs these days are generally relegated to the mini-networks, but at least African-Americans can find programs that feature people who resemble them. We can't say the same for Americans whose roots are in Latin America or Asia or the Middle East (or, for that matter, in North America). Perhaps that's for the best; television portrayals of minorities tend to fall into horrendous stereotypes — evil-doing outsiders or thickly accented dimwits. But I can't help but wonder if the industry is paying any attention—at all—to this country's significant demographic shift? By continuing to produce programs designed to draw white viewers, the industry is speeding up the erosion of its rapidly shrinking audience.

I am confident that the TV business will someday open its doors to people who don't happen to be white. This will happen not because it is the morally correct thing to do, but because it will mean that the networks will make more money by producing programs that attract larger audiences. I believe that once the industry embraces America's cultural diversity that prime-time television will be enriched with the different perspectives that people of color can bring to the networks. I also happen to believe that television at its best has enormous potential to contribute to a more intelligent and compassionate democracy, and that programs such as *Roots, The Cosby Show* and *Oprah* actually affect viewers' attitudes about race. Unfortunately, far too many Americans embrace the racist sentiments of people like Michael Medved, who would have us believe that black people would be better off if they were to play an even lesser role in the TV business. To dismiss television as a medium that Americans would be better off without is to dismiss its immense potential to tell the many fascinating stories that our remarkably diverse culture has to tell. ■

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Go Westinghouse, Young Man!"

A pioneer reminisces about TV's early days: Excerpts from an interview with Joel Chaseman conducted by Michael M. Epstein

The Center for the Study of Popular Television, located at Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, is building a practical Television History Archive at Syracuse University Library. To that end, scores of interviews have been conducted with key seminal figures, and hundreds of artifacts, including scripts, videotapes and ephemeral, have been collected and catalogued at the Syracuse University Library. The Steven H. Scheuer Collection in Television History is among the Center's earliest accomplishments. It includes 130 taped in-depth interviews with an array of industry giants including the likes of Frank Stanton, Leonard Goldenson, Steve Allen, Ethel Winant and Gore Vidal.

Joel Chaseman, a pioneering executive at Group W-Westinghouse and Post-Newsweek, is today a respected industry consultant with his own firm, Chaseman Enterprises International. The following excerpt was culled from approximately four hours of an audiotaped session conducted by Dr. Epstein, a professor specializing in law and television at Southwestern University in Los Angeles.

— Dr. David Marc, Project Coordinator,
Steven H. Scheuer Television Collection

ME: *What was it like working for the eleventh TV licensee, WAAM, Baltimore, in 1948?*

JC: When I got to Baltimore, at first I lived with my aunt and uncle and cousins. On 35 bucks a week, you didn't have too much independence. I was 22. [WAAM] was a hole on top of what became Television Hill in Baltimore. Now, by the way, that hill houses at least three of the major television stations in Baltimore. In those days, it was just WAAM. It was a group then of probably about 15 of us in August of 1948. Those of us who were there—whether our backgrounds were technical, or business, or whatever—laid cable, painted, built, worked in the art shop, did whatever we had to do to try to get on the air in the first week of November of '48. We got on the air November 2nd—for the election which featured Harry Truman and Henry Wallace and Dewey. Interesting stuff to start your career.

The program staff was headed by a fellow whose name may appear elsewhere in these archives, Ted Estabrook, who had been a New York producer and later was a New York producer [again], but had been found, I guess, by Norman Kal and imported to Baltimore to act as program manager. The operations manager, who was responsible for all the stuff that the artistic Mr. Estabrook could not deal with, was a guy named Herb Cahan, whose name will show up if you do anything on Group W, Westinghouse, etc. from 1955 or so through Herb's death. He worked with Westinghouse the entire time.

Those two were extraordinarily sophisticated people to be involved with a nascent television station at that time, in 1948, because there wasn't much television. Baltimore had two stations on the air. The idea of network television was basically Boston-to-Washington. Kids' television was defined by Bob Emery's *Small Fry Club*, out of New York, on the Dumont television network. It was said in those days that there were four television networks, and they ranked 1, 2, 5, and 12—with CBS and NBC being 1 and 2, ABC being 5, and Dumont being 12. There are still, I suppose, extant some veterans of the Dumont television network, who might conceivably argue with that, but I doubt it. Allen B. Dumont was a technical guy who had the foresight to establish television stations in places like New York and Pittsburgh and Washington. He had his own camera system and so forth. He later sold out pretty well. He didn't do badly. But the network itself wasn't much, especially when, in a few years, the network extended all the way to the West Coast via microwave.

ME: *You left your first television job in what year?*

JC: I worked at WAAM in Baltimore from 1948 to 1955. In that time, I stopped being the booth announcer, art assistant, etc. My first new job, along with doing some announcing, was director of public affairs and publicity. In that, I created Babs, the finger-painting chimpanzee, and got her publicized in *Look* magazine, in an article by John Crosby in the *New York Herald Tribune*. And a bunch of other stuff. But the one I was proudest of is creating a program in 1952, when I was 26 and the industry was four, that won both the Du Pont and Peabody awards.

That was a program which featured a cantankerous, deaf old man named Gerald W. Johnson, as a commentator on American political life and social mores. Johnson had been a contemporary of Mencken at the *Baltimore Sun*. I knew about stuff like that. I asked Herb Cahan and the Cohens [station owners Ben and Herman] if it would be okay if we had a commentator. It was unheard of in television in those days. There weren't any such. There was no network news. You must put this into context. There was no network news in 1952. They said, 'I guess so.' [LAUGHS] I said, 'You know, you're not going to be able

to control a guy like Johnson.' They thought that was okay. They came from a tradition, too, and it was okay: a good First Amendment tradition. Unconscious [perhaps] but good.

So I found I couldn't talk with Johnson, because he was so deaf. I wrote him [and] had a correspondence with him. He agreed. He would do a fifteen-minute thing. I went to a guy named Ed Sarrow, who was then our production manager, and talked about how we do this, how we stage this. We decided that Mr. Johnson was what he was. He was a mild-looking, wiry little man, probably 5'4"-5'5", probably weighed 130 pounds. Probably ten years younger then than I am now, he was probably in his early sixties. Wry, funny, tough, wonderful writer. We decided we'd stage him in a wing chair, with a music stand in front of him, and he'd read his stuff at the camera. That's it: "Ladies and Gentlemen, Gerald W. Johnson." He was magnetic! He was absolutely hypnotic for those who bothered to tune in. Maybe especially [so] in those days, but I have a hunch it would work today, because he's so different, because it isn't staged, because it's just one person to another, looking you right in the eye and saying stuff that you can't believe. "The oily Mr. Nixon," in 1952! Stuff like that. Anyway, he won, we won. He gave the medal to me, so I guess I was partly involved in winning both the Peabody and the Du Pont. That hasn't been done that often in one year by a program.

In answer to your unasked question, we paid him fifty dollars a week. He liked me and I agreed—[but] I didn't tell anybody I agreed —not to touch his stuff. I said, 'Who are we to censor you?,' which I still believe. So he went on and said what he said. Then he got tired of doing it after a year or so, I guess. But it was wonderful. It was great television. It was great journalism, I guess.

Anyway, I did that. I organized a seminar for college students that ran for about three years, for five different universities, from North Carolina up to Temple. Did a lot of creative things. We did a Netherlands flood relief, a spot campaign for the UN. We did a lot of things that people don't do now and certainly didn't do then. There was a guy named Franklin Dunham, who at that time was running the Office of Education here in Washington for the government. He was involved with UNESCO and the United Nations and television and so forth. I got this blue envelope in the mail one day from the Director of UNESCO. I guess [in] Paris, offering me the job—I had no idea I was a candidate; I had never been interviewed—of Director of UNESCO Radio and Television Worldwide, headquarters in Paris, six weeks vacation a year, and I don't even remember what the money was. I cannot tell you how tempting that was. Had I not made the commitment to [Jake] Embry at WITH, and to Marlene, my then fiancée and still my wife, I probably would have gone to UNESCO and would not have done all this other stuff that you're here to talk about.

I didn't want to be approved or disapproved by the ad agency's account executive's wife.

At any rate, that's how wide open the business was in those days. I didn't know I was making that point, but that might be the point I was making. At any rate, I left Channel 13 in '55. I left Jake in the spring of '57 for a couple of pretty good reasons: (1) I decided I didn't want to be talent the rest of my life. I didn't want to be auditioning. I didn't want to be approved or disapproved by the ad agency's account executive's wife. I didn't want that life. Howard Cosell hadn't emerged at that stage, but I didn't want to be Howard Cosell. I was good, but I didn't think I was probably that

good. The world didn't exist the way it does today, where you make four million dollars a year for doing that. I don't think I would have wanted to do it anyway. Money has never been my drive. Anyway, I left WITH and put an ad in the trades, listing my qualifications. I wrote an ad and got a lot of responses, maybe fifty-sixty responses, offers from exotic places.

ME: *Where did you see yourself going in the business?*
JC: My goals were very simple. Remember, my dad made $75 a week. My goal was to prosper, have a reasonable amount of fun and, if I ever got the chance, to have some leverage on the business. What I used to say in those days—and I think I meant it—was: 'I trust me and I'm not sure I trust them.' I learned I was right and I have retained a lot of skepticism about the people at the top in the networks and their need and their efforts to keep the job, as distinguished from my view of "doing the job." I have seen —and this is jumping ahead of the story—an awful lot of people whom I liked at one level move into responsible jobs at networks and suddenly luxuriate in the opportunity to piss on people below them, take the money of the people above them, and last as long as they could until their options vested.

I've seen a lot of that. The networks during their prime days became, to some extent—and I don't mean to tar everybody with the same brush, but I would tar eighty percent of them—country clubs for people who were retiring on the jobs, thanks to, as Warren Buffett once said, "the tide that raises all boats." They were being credited in their bank accounts and in their PR with having been responsible for the tide. The tide was really the purchase of television sets by millions who hadn't previously had the opportunity, and thus the growth of the advertising market, and the opportunity to exploit the advertisers and the people, and do whatever they wanted to do. It was going to get ratings because there weren't any choices. There were three or four networks. And people loved it. The networks were populated with a curious mixture of opportunists, lucky floaters carried by the tide, and by a few genuinely dedicated, smart, creative people. My fear is that you're going to make me identify some of each.
ME: *There must have been some good guys.*
JC: Frank Stanton was probably a good guy, for the most part. Still is, for that matter, although he's clearly not in a position to be active now. He was smarter than practically anybody. He wasn't family and he had to cope with Bill Paley, who was not a bad guy. Paley does not come off in my book as a villain. Dick Salant was a good guy. Fred Friendly was a good guy, although I have been known to accuse him of carrying the body of Ed Murrow around with him so that nobody would forget. I wish Fred, before he died, had realized how good he was on his own and that he didn't have to invoke the ghost of Ed Murrow to win respect. Fred Silverman, who understands popular taste, is a good guy. I remember Jim Rosenfield, who at that time, I guess, was still at CBS.

He and I had breakfast at the Waldorf one day. Obviously, I was no longer twenty-two and an announcer. But, on the other hand, Rosenfield was no longer twenty-two and a salesman. I guess Fred Silverman had just become president of NBC. I think that was the period. I remember Rosenfield telling me, 'Joel, don't ever forget how simple a man Fred Silverman is.' This is not a negative. Fred had an unclouded, very clear perception of what the industry is, what the public is, and what the connection is. That's a good guy. That's okay. He wasn't being dishonest about it at all. Cronkite is a good guy. Cronkite is a remarkable guy. If he isn't in your archive, he ought to be. He's exceptional.

ME: *What made Cronkite remarkable and exceptional, in your view?*

JC: A little bit of background. During this time in Baltimore, around 1950 or so, I was the summer replacement for a fellow named Gene Klavan, who became a prominent disc jockey in New York, but at that time was on WTOP in Washington. Gene and I were social friends. Anyway, he asked me to be a summer replacement when he went off doing whatever he was going to do on vacation. So I went over to WTOP. At that time, they had two aging news guys on their eleven o'clock news team. I'm talking about radio now, probably 1950. It was a fellow named Cronkite, who had been [with] UPI in Moscow or somewhere, and a fellow named Sevareid. These were two good guys. These were solid, caring, talented journalists who understood what news was and weren't making concessions. That doesn't mean they had highly elevated tastes or anything like it, because Walter has always been a man of the people, in my view. But they were reliable. I could trust them and respect them. I've had a lot of intersections with Walter Cronkite since that time—some social, a lot business. I've never found any reason to lose that respect for his integrity, his ability to communicate, his reflection of America mid-century, and his talent. He could write, he had good judgment, and he had high standards. I don't take those qualities lightly in somebody who has to communicate what should be truth to the American people.

ME: *Do you think someone of the stature and quality of Walter Cronkite could succeed today in television?*

JC: It depends on management, doesn't it? It depends on what management is looking for, because I don't think those people are absent; I think they're around. I went to a ballgame last night with a fellow named Jim Snyder, who is probably the dean of American television news directors. An extraordinary guy in his own sense. He was, incidentally, one of Cronkite's producers while Cronkite was at CBS. We were talking about news directors. There wasn't the usual old fart, 'They don't make them like they used to,' and stuff like that. It was the concern for standards. I guess the short answer to your question is yes, I think somebody could succeed like that. I think Rather, in his prime, was a worthy successor to Cronkite. I'm not sure, looking around, who else is, but I'm sure they're out there, male or female. There was a time, before other things overtook her (and I'm going to surprise you with this one) that Jessica Savitch could have been. I knew Jessica when she was a trainee and was one of her mentors, almost until she died. I saw when her career and her life took a violent left turn, figuratively. She could have been that, but she ran into the wrong people in management. A lot of it depends on what management decrees. If Bernie Shaw leaves that role at CNN, who do they put in there? Who do they give the opportunity to? There are some really good, solid communicating journalists out there.

There are some really good, solid communicating journalists out there.

The question in my mind will be: Is there somebody sufficiently like Frank Stanton, or Jim Snyder, or Dick Salant out there who won't have to submit to focus groups and marketplace research entirely? I'm not suggesting that research is bad; I am suggesting that it takes more than research to make a decision like that, because there are some things that only long-term exposure can tell you about programs and people. [Looking for] the public's "hit-and-run" intersection with a given personality isn't necessarily the best way [to do the news]. In fact, it is hardly ever the best way to tell what the long term will be.

ME: *Do you think the economic realities of a*

competitive, diversified broadcasting industry today make someone with the type of influence that Cronkite had impossible today?
JC: I think I understand the drift of your question. Yes, nobody is going to have the leverage that those people had. In this kind of splintered, fragmented marketplace, it's going to be very hard for anybody to be a Messiah type, as Cronkite certainly was.

ME: *When did it become apparent how incredibly profitable television was going to become as a medium?*
JC: I think the first person to recognize that potential and exploit it was probably [Cap Cities chairman]Tom Murphy. It came from stations. What happened was that the initial birth pangs of the investment in television stations preceded the growth of advertising and the recognition by ad agencies that, with a hundred percent penetration, television could be enormously profitable. While I speak, I'm trying to reflect on your question. I went out to Los Angeles to produce *The Steve Allen Show* in 1962, after a year in New York with Mike Wallace. Let me put it in perspective. A week of *The Steve Allen Show* in 1962, including Steve's money, which was outlandish in those days—$9,000 a week was what Steve got—a week of that show was $43,000 to produce. Now, if you put that in context, even with 1962 dollars, you begin to realize that the marketplace was not so big as to command the kind of leverage and respect that it does now.

At that time, Tom Murphy, Joe Dougherty and others were beginning to buy television stations in places like Albany, New York; Providence, Rhode Island; Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina. It wasn't until they made the deal with Walter Annenberg, who was another one who guessed wrong,[2] and picked up the licenses in Philadelphia and New Haven, etc. that you began to see that Murphy was on to something—much more than most of the others. What he saw early was that there was almost unlimited upside, relatively, in terms of pricing of this "commodity"—the advertising availabilities between network programs and on their own. There were people like [the management at] Westinghouse, for whom I was then working. I put Westinghouse into the syndication business; I am moving now into the late Fifties and early Sixties. [Westinghouse] sought to move on that [assumption] by creating programs for the non-network slots. Now, parenthetically—and this may be something you want to explore—Don McGannon, Dick Pack, John Steen [and I] and others saw that if the networks were able to pick up all the various time slots, there wouldn't be any opportunities for syndicators like us. So it wasn't all public interest, in our view. It was partly a way to establish new revenue lines for the company.

Murphy...began to show us that television stations could gross a lot of money...

Having put that in context, spending $43,000 a week for an hour a night—in those days, I guess it was ninety minutes—meant that the profits couldn't be all that great. I guess you weren't charging all that much, if you understand what I'm saying. My recollection is that we charged a guy named Stretch Adler [at] Channel 5 in Los Angeles, $5,000 a week for *The Steve Allen Show*. I think that's right. If you know anything about what the rates are today, you'll understand the context in which I speak.

Anyway, Murphy, I think as much as anybody, began to show us that television stations could gross a lot of money and could put, for the sake of argument, forty-fifty-sixty percent of the net of what they grossed into the shareholders' pockets. That's a lot of money. What I'm saying is that the margins were 55-60 percent in

places like Houston and elsewhere. That opened a lot of eyes. The other thing that opened a lot of eyes was that Tom took his story to Wall Street. Believe-it-or-not, people didn't do that before Murphy did, but he recognized the growth of the financial analysts as a separate subset of the financial community who had the power to influence investments. Cap Cities was a publicly held company. Murphy's trips to Wall Street helped everybody to understand this business and led to the land rush. Now, it wasn't the sole factor. He wasn't the only guy. But he sure was pivotal. If your archives don't show you this kind of growth in the marketplace, along with the creative side and the network side and all that, they're missing the point of how this industry got to this era.

[Warren] Buffett joined Murphy probably in the Seventies at some point, the mid-Seventies. When I joined the Washington Post Company in 1973, Warren was still an Omaha investor of some repute. It wasn't until he bought about nine percent of the Washington Post Company that he was asked to join that board. That probably was about 1975. He left to go with Murphy, because of a major investment in ABC, probably in the middle-to-late Seventies, '77 maybe. The experience of being with Warren Buffett at board meetings and elsewhere was very educational for me. It may be at that time that I began to appreciate the innate values in these companies. There has always been a split in the business among the sales types, the program types—creative types—and the business management types. A lot of us program/promotion types fought the influence of the sales and business management types. We want to do what we want to do to make stuff better. Given my social conscience, which I mentioned earlier, we got confused sometimes, especially when we were in our twenties. No question about it. I use the "we" advisedly because there were a lot of us. Like most of us, you're carried along by your generation and its values and experiences.

ME: *Tell me about joining Westinghouse.*
JC: I got to Westinghouse, in 1957, when Westinghouse bought Channel 13 in Baltimore. Westinghouse at that time had camera people classified, I think, as "lathe operators," because they didn't have any category for this thing. The Westinghouse Company was run by people who manufactured lightbulbs and turbines and big engines and all that stuff. Don McGannon's division of broadcasters was, in a way, happily isolated, doing its thing and returning thirty percent of what it netted to the shareholders. So Westinghouse didn't want to mess with it. They had this money machine and they were afraid to impose rules on it. But it still had to live within a structure that was dedicated to manufacture. Westinghouse would have management meetings. By that time, I guess, I was at that level. They'd go to some fancy place like Hot Springs [Virginia]. You'd be rooming with a couple of guys who made god-knows-what. "Light bulbs and turbines" were always our figures of speech. I suppose that's what they made. You realized there was no compatibility, no understanding. You also realized—and this is a fact—that a good part of the dedication of Westinghouse (I don't mean to malign anybody; it was just a condition of existence) to public service had to do with [it being] a major defense contractor in those days, [not] owning broadcast licenses, because in those days even the Congress had a social conscience. We've lost that somewhere. But in those days, if you were Westinghouse, you better do public-spirited programming, because you needed

If you were Westinghouse, you better do public-spirited programming

to drag something out when people began to question why GE and Westinghouse would have broadcast licenses.

In those days [Westinghouse] was conditioned by what GE did. When GE decided to become a conglomerate of sorts, so did Westinghouse, except that theirs was stupid. They bought Econo-Car and a motel company and a bottling plant. They didn't have the slightest idea how to run any of them. My point is that, in the broadcast line, they made radios, they made televisions. They don't any more, thank God! But they were trying to do what RCA did. They were a big technical company and they had this thing in Pittsburgh. I really do remember how Westinghouse was dominated by the Pittsburgh country club set. [They had] KDKA; somebody got the bright idea to start that. Then it had a momentum of its own. My guess is, KDKA became moderately profitable and it made sense to have another station, like Boston and elsewhere.

Then you got Chris Witting in there. Witting came in from Dumont. Coincidentally, Dumont sold its Pittsburgh television station to Westinghouse, once Chris got there. Amazing! Witting came in and Witting had the macho thing: grow as much as you can. This was the Forties and the Fifties. This was the pattern. It was the postwar American euphoria of finding undeveloped markets and new technology. Even today, the combination is wonderful. Think of this morning's headline, June 24, 1998: "AT&T to buy TCI for $30 billion." Same thing.

When Westinghouse took WAAM over in 1957, I was responsible for everything on the air. They imported a guy that McGannon had known, another key guy in my career, Larry Israel. Larry had been running two UHF stations, one in Pittsburgh and one in Minneapolis; had worked at the Dumont station in Pittsburgh and, later, at KDKA, perhaps as local sales; I'm not sure. Larry was McGannon's fast-track choice to run Baltimore and then prosper at Westinghouse. Larry interviewed me after I had been passed on to him by the Westinghouse people. I guess part of it was that I was in Baltimore and they wouldn't have to move me. Larry said I took myself too seriously. I learned later he was some guy to talk about that! [LAUGHS] Anyway, I was okay.

We took over and, thanks largely to Larry's vision and McGannon's backing and, I guess, a little bit to what I did, we moved that station from a weak third position in the market in August of 1957 to a 42 percent, No. 1 share in November of 1957. It was absolutely meteoric! We totally reworked the program schedule. We put in a lot of local programming. I was nuts. I didn't know what I couldn't do. I just wasn't very smart. I hired a local disc jockey named Jack Wells to do a two-hour live morning show, which we started off down in Camden Yards, which has since become famous for the Orioles park there. Hired a local disc jockey with whom I had worked at WITH, named Buddy Deane to do a show. This was about the same time as Dick Clark was growing in Philadelphia, but this guy Buddy Deane, who in his own way is a genius, saw the possibilities. And so did I. So we started a kids' dancing-to-records show on Channel 13 from 3:00 to 5:00, or whatever. I hired a handsome, kind of ne'er-do-well, wonderful storytelling, anchor guy named Keith McBee.

This will tell you about news in those days: at 7:23 p.m. and, I think, 10:30 p.m. We were merciless with the networks. Larry had the balls and the clout with Westinghouse to just preempt the hell out of the network. Our network was ABC at that time. We bought a lot of movies. We bought the RKO package and a bunch of other movies and we did an early show and a late show, which Baltimore had never seen. We started the early show at 6:00 and ran it to 7:23, when we broke for local news. Then we ran from 10:40, we ran *The*

Three Stooges until eleven o'clock. Then we went back into the late show. It worked like a charm. It just went through the roof.

So, within Westinghouse, from the management meeting which we attended in September or October of 1957, before the numbers came in, where I stood up and did my monologue about what it was going to be and what we saw and why we were doing what we were doing—from that moment, Larry and I were marked. There was no question about it, because we had done something nobody else had been able to do. ■

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INNOVATION IN NEWS, SPORTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Is Holdup One or Two Words?

Another TV veteran describes some hair-raising news coverage experiences in Maryland's racially charged atmosphere of the early 1960's.

By John Baker

Time back then seemed to stand still. Some of the moments lasted ever so long. Now, pinching and poking myself to remember visions of the past, familiar faces are so fleeting, like riding lead horse on a spinning merry-go-round, looking into the crowd for a brief glimpse of a time gone by.

Mel Bernstein was a small fish in Boston, but he caught the eye of those who counted. He had been a producer/writer at WBZ and wrote some of those do-good documentaries TV stations during the late 50's believed proved their commitment to public service. In 1962 Mel became the news director for WJZ Channel 13, the ABC affiliate in Baltimore — definitely a big fish with great opportunity.

Mel looked the part — tall, well-built, short blond hair. He wore salt-and-pepper suits and thick-soled brogans, the kind of shoes Yankees wore. Mel's open face and the understanding glint in his eyes belied the uncertainty churning him up inside. It was a scary time. Mel tired of meetings with program manager Win Baker and general manager Herb Cahan. He was tired of putting out brush fires of incompetence that constantly sprang up in his understaffed, ding-dong kind of newsroom. He knew he needed to make a statement. He had to keep reassuring his staff he was boss and an advocate of change, and WJZ's news was damn well going to change . . . with them or without them. He wasn't getting through preaching to the incompetence around him. What Mel needed was a deed, not words.

Mel sat in a rest-room stall, assuming the position of "The Thinker." Channel 13's men's room offered four stalls and four urinals down one wall, while five wash basins fronted the mirror along the opposite wall. The area also served as a dressing room for recording artists who

came to appear on the Buddy Deane Dance Show. (Can you imagine 45 members of the James Brown Band cascading off a bus in front of the building and rushing into the limited confines of WJZ's men's room?) On this day, Mel was alone until two voices—one he recognized as a news-film cameraman he'd inherited—broke into his meditation. The cameraman said to the other, "I don't think I can work one more day for that goddamned Jew Mel Bernstein."

From behind the door of his stall, Mel screamed, "You don't have to work another day—you're fired!" Mel punctuated his statement with a chug-a-flush of the toilet. He felt good . . . the jump start he needed, he thought. Maybe no more Mr. Nice Guy. He walked with a quicker step down the hall and through the lobby toward the newsroom.

Norm Vogel paced the lobby, waiting to apply for a news cameraman's job. He didn't hold out much hope. Rumor was they were only hiring from outside, and the new managers were mean and crazy. Mel Bernstein spotted Norm and almost passed him by before stopping. "Your name's Norm Vogel, the cameraman, right?" Mel asked. Norm nodded yes. "You're hired;" Mel stated forcefully, "we just got an opening," offering his hand.

Norm Vogel marveled at Mel's directness and short interview time. Mel left the lobby and entered the newsroom, a smile on his face. A screwed-up, misplaced analogy played over and over in his brain, "kick the torpedoes, full speed ahead."

As I would find out many times in later years, platitudes and dreams of television wonder cost money. Mel Bernstein inherited a news budget that had been squeezed from a turnip by former management. Nevertheless, Mel was expected to perform a silk-purse trick with the present budget.

There are ways to spend more money than is budgeted. The easiest way is to steal it from someone else's budget. Program manager Win Baker was an expert at the shell game. He, Mel and general manager Herb Cahan juggled the books like a latter day savings and loan association. Mel began adding reporters, camera crews, camera equipment, and even cars to transport the newly hired new breed of Eyewitness News reporters.

Many people claimed credit for the title, *Eyewitness News*. My co-worker, director Sheldon Shemer, told me he thought of it first and told Win Baker. Win said, "Not true." He had decided on the title and researched it to avoid any copyright problems. Win found *Eyewitness News* was first used by a radio station, WCCO in Minneapolis, years before. Whoever, whatever — *Eyewitness News* became the title of choice all over the United States.

During build-up resurgence of the new *Eyewitness News*, news personnel were carried on the books as working in accounting, production art or engineering. The sales department traded commercial time with a local Chevrolet dealer for new Corvair station wagons. It was long before Ralph Nader destroyed the Corvair in his book, *Unsafe at Any Speed*. The new Corvair was a fitting vehicle to begin Channel 13's spin-out, turnover, rise-to-the-top-of-Baltimore TV news. Mel Bernstein, artist extraordinaire, painted *Eye Witness News* backwards on the front of the Corvairs. Drivers, looking back in their rearview mirrors, would get the idea. A stroke of genius, everyone thought.

WJZ's ratings put them number four in a three-station TV market. A radio station beat them out for number three. They had a long row to hoe, as we say back in Texas.

Herb Cahan walked into WJZ's newsroom at 6:00 a.m. George Bauman was shocked. The last time he'd seen a general manager up close was at a Christmas party. George usually had the quiet of the morn-

ing to sip coffee and prepare his five minute 6:55 a.m. newscast. Herb looked around the news room. The pushed-together stained desks and peeling paint weren't particularly attractive. "We'll have to do something about this awful news room," he said, almost to himself; then asked George, "Where do you get your news, the copy you read an hour from now?"

"From the newspaper," George replied, holding up the local section of the *Baltimore Sun*.

Herb Cahan's face became red, "This will never do. Use the phone, call police and fire, call politicians and reporters if you have to. Get confirmation and think about what you're reporting. Never read or trust a newspaper again."

The Aricon was a 16-millimeter sound camera big as the motor on your lawnmower and twice as heavy.

George realized then that *Eyewitness News* was more than a title.

The crew, the guys, were impervious to change. They'd never stopped doing things that pleased them. Lenny Lorensky loved adding fictitious names to closing credits. Ozzy Kaplan rolled by as a special-events coordinator for years. Ozzy should have paid union dues.

Carmine Lucendrello, our crack engineering malcontent, was always in trouble with his mouth. He held world records for reprimands and suspensions because of his use of free speech. Carmine finally gave in and offered the phrase "scratch my ass" as a substitute for what he really wanted to say. The union and management reluctantly agreed. From then on, there was a lot of "scratch my ass" going on. Later, Carmine himself shortened the phrase to the first letters of the words . . . "SMA" rang through the intercoms.

The basic news camera was a windup toy made by Bell and Howell. You actually wound it up with a key that popped out of its side. A full wind would expose a hundred feet of 16- millimeter film in just under three minutes. The camera was extremely portable, being the size of your mother's chocolate-covered, two-pound layer cake. It took the pictures, but there was no sound. Unlike the movies, television began with talkies, but no one had invented a camera that could shoot sound and still be portable like the windup Bell and Howell.

TV's standard sound camera was a knockoff from the huge 35 millimeter cameras that shot movies in Hollywood. The Aricon was a 16-millimeter sound camera big as the motor on your lawnmower and twice as heavy. A crew of two or three was needed to lug it around, depending on how many union members were needed to screw in a light bulb. (Negotiating contracts between management and unions on manpower requirements was a pain in the ass.) When video tape replaced film in news gathering, the one-man band was born . . . one man replaced three or four. That day was far down the road in the early '60's.

All early television stations built a client's or sponsor's room. I never knew why; I never saw a client or sponsor in there. The room had windows looking out to the studio in case anyone cared to see what was going on. Most of the rooms became brown-bag lunch rooms for engineers and secretaries. Mel Bernstein kicked all the brown bags out and made a newsroom out of it. News-wire machines and desks lined the walls. There was never enough room-the news staff doubled, then tripled. Everyone was reduced to sharing drawers to keep personal stuff like pancake makeup and half a pack of cigarettes.

According to Mel Bernstein:

People didn't make appointments to watch like they do today. Back then, the lead-in rating was most important. Our ABC network hardly ever gave us a good lead-in at 11:00 p.m. The Buddy Deane Show, the most-watched program in Baltimore, delivered a tremendous audience base. I believe many viewers discovered Eyewitness News for the first time.

The news room always felt like a theater lobby between acts. It forced the new guys to integrate with the old guys. George Kennedy, the new sports anchor, and George Mills, the resident old-guard union steward, got into a heated sports argument in the parking lot, then into the lobby. Finally, Kennedy gave Mills the finger and moved into the news room. George Mills followed, uttering frustration. Suddenly, with no more discussion, Kennedy threw his typewriter at Mills, barely missing Mel Bernstein, who had inadvertently walked into the typewriter's line of fire.

"Enough!" Mel screamed.

The news room fell silent except for the persistent tap-tap-tap of the news teletype machines. "I left Boston for this," Mel said under his breath, then announced, "I'll do the typewriter throwing around here. Understand?" Minutes dragged until the normal voice hubbub of the newsroom competed with the tap-tap-tap.

The news shows definitely got better. They were reporting more than car wrecks and fires. But even the fires had the sound of crackling flames and desperate voices. Politics were being covered. You could debate whether exposing the public to politics was good or bad. Spiro Agnew, our future crook Vice President, was cutting his teeth on dastardly deeds in Baltimore County.

Channel 13 began to do stories that affected people's lives. Sports reports that made sense. Jim Karvellas had joined the sports department. He wisely listened to crew members George Mills and Lenny Lorensky. They told him what was really going on in Baltimore sports. Mel let Karvellas do sports commentary. Having an editorial page on TV was rare. The worker bees knew the shows were better and began to take pride. There was a growing camaraderie among the troops. It was too early to tell if the audience was catching on.

Before pre-recording audio or video for playback became feasible, TV stations paid announcers to sit in a booth eight or ten hours a day, sign-on to sign-off. *You're watching WJZ, Channel 13 in Baltimore,* spoken live in resonant tones on hourly station breaks, was their major responsibility. Other duties included reading live commercials or dressing up like an idiot to host children's cartoon programs.

Announcers who worked the late shift usually became the weatherman. The highs, lows and occluded-front information was provided by the United States Weather Bureau. The booth announcer/weatherman exposed himself to the camera and read the forecast and next day predictions as if he knew them to be true. Everyone knew it was just a wild guess. TV weather presentation was in the dark ages.

Will Rogers said, "Everybody complains about the weather, but nobody does anything about the weather." TV stations around the country did their best. They tried to mix sex with weather. The weather girl, lady or mom, found a niche on early television.

Serious TV weather forecasting began when Channel 13 hired a professional meteorologist. Jim Smith had the training to draw his own maps and charts. Jim could interpret local and national data and make Jim Smith's fearless forecast, not the Weather Bureau's. Jim Smith was one of

the nation's first meteorologists working on television. WJZ produced a huge promotional campaign that asked the question, "Who do you trust, a weatherman reading outdated information provided him, or would you trust a professional meteorologist who knows what weather is all about?" WJZ displayed Jim Smith's weather seal of authenticity as if it was a royal seal. Some of the promotions told the viewers the Baltimore Orioles baseball team called on Jim daily for ballgame weather forecasts at home and on the road.

Jim Smith reeked of credibility. His stature as a professional weather forecaster was unchallenged. It was also painfully true that Jim Smith's TV presentation of weather facts was dull as dirt. Jim was of normal height and weight. He always wore a dark-blue sports jacket over his khaki pants, a rep tie always tied beneath an angular face that looked better on camera in profile than straight on. Jim had no distinctive features or mannerisms. News director Mel Berstein tried to get Jim to smile occasionally. Jim's attempts looked like he needed a quick Bromo Seltzer. A fashion consultant gave up after a week of dressing Jim.

Program manager Win Baker took the presentation of news out from behind desks.

"Jim Smith wears a $300 suit like it came off a thrift store rack," Simon Bezio, the fashion consultant, told Mel Bernstein.

An outside advertising agency came to WJZ's rescue. The agency had a controversial idea. It would be more attuned to today's TV promotions of Letterman or the sports reporters on ESPN and CNNSI.

The sun's brightness through a cloudless blue sky reflects a blinding glare off last night's snowfall. Our TV camera picks up Jim Smith wearing a heavy black overcoat, walking along a freshly cleared sidewalk still dotted with melting salt crystals. Jim approaches a little old lady walking with an umbrella tucked under her arm. Recognizing Jim Smith, she starts shouting and shaking her umbrella in Jim's face. We don't hear the sound of the shouting. We hear the music scale played on a slightly out of tune piano. A silent movie background if you will. Jim waves his arms in apology and moves away from the umbrella-wielding little old lady.

Next, a fat man walking a Labrador retriever approaches. The lab, recognizing Jim Smith, begins barking and straining against his master's leach. Jim moves quickly around the dog and master, only to encounter two children playing in the snow. When they recognize Jim, they pelt him with snowballs. The do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do continues to discord on the piano as Jim dejectedly hurries away, his head down. A voice over announcer says, "Jim Smith doesn't make the weather; Jim Smith just predicts the weather. Have a heart."

The promotion campaign changed, or didn't change, Jim Smith's dull image. Suddenly, dull as dirt was in. The audience felt sorry for Jim. They called to say so every time that promo ran. Viewers respected Jim Smith, and he became the most watched weatherman in Baltimore. Dull or not, another piece of WJZ's success puzzle fell into place.

Program manager Win Baker took the presentation of news out from behind desks. He designed the set himself despite the artistic objections of art director Rocco Urbecci. It was simply a 12-foot-long, six-inch-high welded iron map of the world's land masses. It hung out from a light blue wall. The wall became the world's oceans.

The news anchors and other participants sat in roll-around chairs in front of Win's creation. When we took the wheels off the chairs and everyone stopped moving off camera, it worked pretty well. No desks for the *Eyewitness News* staff to hide behind , a new concept for the early 60's.

Mel Bernstein worked hard on the esprit de corps thing. His challenge was to get the old guard (native Baltimorians) and the new hires, who now outnumbered the originals, to feel at ease with each other. After the Eleven O'Clock News, Mel often took a mixed group of news staffers to a local bar. He wanted them out of the work environment. He believed a few beers could bridge the gap between the "been here" and "new here" people.

Mel and anchorman Allen Smith had a serious conversation about news philosophy one evening. Allen believed news was all in the writing. Newspapers had proven that you didn't need a lot of pictures to tell a story. Mel countered that TV, by definition, was a visual medium. Why not take advantage of it to tell a story better than a newspaper. Their conversation became heated and attracted an audience of onlookers.

Allen finished his fourth scotch with little water and stood up. He pointed his finger and said to Mel, "You're not smart enough to be a news director. Let's arm wrestle. May the best man win."

Allen began to lower himself back down into his chair, assuming his arm-wrestling position, when Mel offered a straight right fist into the middle of Allen's face. The blow propelled Allen backwards over a table and chairs. A couple of patrons avoided an Allen collision as he came to rest spread-eagled on the floor. Suddenly, the only sound in the bar was Patsy Cline singing on the two-play-for-a-quarter Wurlitzer. Mel's hands book-ended the sides of his head. "I've just ruined my anchorman's face," he said to no one and everyone.

He rushed to help Allen, who was struggling to rise. Mel got the dazed Allen into a chair, tilting his face toward a bright neon Miller beer sign hanging on the wall behind the bar. He was looking for the telltale facial signs that indicated he had beat the shit out of Allen Smith. Allen was a little swollen, but no cuts. He would live to anchor another day. Mel put his arms around Allen and apologized. Someone put more quarters in the jukebox. Patsy Cline sang *I Fall to Pieces Each Time I See You Again.*

The eastern shore of Maryland was full of coughing pickup trucks adorned with boat- trailer hitches. Their likes joined the half-scraped boats and rusting tire rims everyone kept in their yards. The center of commerce for this ugly peninsula that separates the Atlantic Ocean from the Chesapeake Bay are the towns of Easton and Cambridge.

The roots of this area go back to the American Revolution (the first one). The state of Delaware claims almost half the land, Maryland claims the rest. New Jersey should have annexed the whole thing. It would have made it easier for map makers. Before they built the Chesapeake Bay bridge, the eastern shore remained remote and hard to get to. Few wanted to get there anyway. It was populated by descendants of Jeffersonian philosophy who made their living over-fishing and over-oystering the Chesapeake Bay. An occasional visitor was quick to recognize the uncomfortable looks from the weathered local faces. Their look was similar to the one received while stopping at a one-pump gas station on a two-lane road in Mississippi. Blacks who dared to invade the sanctity of the shore were turned away from hotels, often ignored at gas stations and home-cooking-to-go diners along the road.

On a sunny day in Cambridge, Maryland, a car carrying four blacks stopped for gas at King's Garage and Gas Station. Their

car's tires rolled over a strip of hose that rang a bell somewhere inside the garage. They waited. No one came to serve them. The blacks, one woman and three men, waited some more. Still, no one came. They were about to leave and try to find another place when a man dressed in oil-stained khaki shirt and pants stood in front of their car, wiping his hands on a dirty rag.

"Why don't you niggers go back to wherein you come from. The only niggers here are slaves," the man said, with a menacing smile.

The driver of the car screamed, "Son of a bitch," and stepped on the accelerator. The gas station man spit tobacco juice on the windshield, just barely getting out of the way. Past the man, the car screeched to a stop. The driver got out, walked back and hit the dirty khaki suit five times, leaving him on his knees, gasping and spitting out chewing tobacco residue. The stained stubble on his chin glistened with sweat. His eyes reflected surprise and hate. He hurt too much to grasp his gas pump to rise, so he remained on his knees while townspeople witnesses arrived. Someone called the state police.

On that quiet, sunny day in Cambridge, Maryland, the unrest began.

On that quiet, sunny day in Cambridge, Maryland, the unrest began. First, rocks being thrown and houses burning for no apparent reason. Then, human beings hurting other human beings. The serene, secluded eastern shore was drawn into a new revolution. Who would have thought . . . Maryland before Mississippi?

WJZ's *Eyewitness News* was beginning to take shape, but needed a cattle-prod poke, the kind you stick into a bucking horse's hindquarters when the gate opens. Easton and Cambridge were a long way from Baltimore. News gathering in the 60's was in the Cro-Magnon age of development. There were no live-shot sats, no cellular phones, no videotape. News crews on the road sent their undeveloped film back to the station on a Greyhound bus. Reporters informed the station what was going on by pay phone. The logistics were a pain in the ass, and pain in the ass usually costs money.

All of the above was known when WJZ decided to make the eastern shore their story. Baltimore's other two TV stations were giving the story news-copy coverage only. They sent no film crews. They hoped the story would go away. Channel 13's news crew was the only one there all the time because the story wouldn't go away.

WJZ rotated camera crews and reporters down to the eastern shore. The locals weren't happy watching news crews roam their space. Some were embarrassed because of what was happening around them. Others were outraged and reacted with long-nurtured, kick-ass racial hatred. Both points of view wanted to resolve the problem themselves. They didn't want the whole world watching. WJZ's news crews became their enemy.

Reporting what you saw was easy. Getting state officials or police to confirm, deny or add to the facts was almost impossible. But attempts to downplay what was happening and freeze out the press didn't work. Reports of new outbreaks, violence and demonstrations kept happening. Channel 13 covered the story as it unfolded despite the foot-dragging interference of state officials. It took only a few days for Channel 13 to piss off all the locals on the eastern shore, the Maryland state police, and every politician who was connected to the eastern shore.

Up the road a piece from Easton, Mary-

land was the quaint, quiet town of Queen Anne. It sat close to the Choptank River. H. L. Menken called the land south of the Choptank River "Transchoptankia." The river separated people of reason from those who had none. Along Queen Anne's paved main street were two gas stations, a post office, a bank and a restaurant that claimed to serve the best catfish on the eastern shore. A billboard on the small movie theater announced *Tammy, Tell Me True* starring Sandra Dee would have its first showing at 7:00 p.m.

South of town, the main street turned into a dirt road that wove through a corn field ending in front of a group of buildings near the river. "It's that colored teachers college," a kid at the gas station told Channel 13's camera crew. Our camera crew had been alerted that something was coming down in Queen Anne. More and more blacks were arriving from the mainland. They were getting organized and told Channel 13 what was going on if we asked them. A lot better response than we received from the local government.

The black students from the teachers college were not welcome in Queen Anne. They couldn't order the catfish in the restaurant, they couldn't buy a ticket to see a movie, and couldn't even enter the beer joint north of town for carryout. How is a college student going to relax or blow off steam? Protest seemed to be a good answer. Help was coming in from more protest-experienced brethren. They got ready.

Without any warning, the dogs were released.

Bright morning sun penetrated three thickly leafed trees, then rose above their tallest branches . . . its rays burning away the low fog that spent the night creeping up from the river. The students, in battle dress of shorts and t-shirts, began their march along the dusty road between the rows of corn. They sang songs, chanted slogans and raised last night's hastily painted protest signs high above the tall corn tassels.

The dirt road had never gotten so much attention. Around the last turn out of the cornfield was the paved main street of Queen Anne. At this juncture, the protesters suddenly stopped. The Maryland state police stood in full battle dress. Two rows of men stood across the road where the dirt ended and the main street began. The front row of police held on to attack dogs straining at their leashes. The second row of troopers stood at the ready with fixed bayonets.

Norm Vogel, Channel 13's cameraman, had filmed the march by walking in front of the students and shooting backwards. Now, he found himself in between the police and the protesters. A great place to take pictures . . . not a good place for survival. Norm dropped to his knees and started filming the barking dogs. Without any warning, the dogs were released. Norm was knocked flat on his back by one, another German shepherd leaped across his body. He grabbed his wind-up Bell and Howell and began filming the dogs attacking the front line of protesters. The dogs knocked demonstrators off their feet. Their powerful jaws bit on arms and legs, trying to drag them down on the dirt road. The protesters panicked, some running into the cornfield, others back down the road. Some tried to defend themselves with their poster sticks. Everyone was screaming. Some dropped to their knees crying out to God. God wasn't listening on that day.

The dust from the road formed a red cloud around the students and dogs. The helmeted state troopers entered the fray, using their rifle butts to inflict damage on heads and stomachs. After the violent

Channel 13's news ratings rose during the conflict...Television stepped up a notch in its power to communicate.

confrontation, the students freed themselves from the attack and retreated back along the dirt road to their college. The state police let them go. "A lesson will be learned, I'll bet," one policeman said to another, as they collected their canine assault troops and left the scene.

Back in Queen Anne, the Channel 13 reporter rushed to a phone booth to call Baltimore to report what he had seen, what had happened. He was thumbing quarters into the phone when some local residents knocked the phone booth over with the kicking, screaming reporter inside. Just doing your job was tough on the eastern shore.

A month later, the authorities had finally gotten the idea that Channel 13 was not going away. Other Baltimore TV stations and one from Washington, DC were occasionally seen on the shore, doing quick reports and leaving. Channel 13 was the only game in town; and at last the authorities began to share information and cooperate. WJZ's coverage lasted over three months. The stories dramatically affected the TV audience in Baltimore, no matter whether racist, redneck or someone who is appalled by man's inhumanity to man.

The camera crews and reporters changed their minds about the eastern shore being a place to take the wife and kids for a vacation. Where's the pleasure in cheap motels with scallopini- thin walls? And, who can eat crab every day, every day, anyway? Low-country cooking didn't include franks and beans.

Cameraman Tony Duphree made an announcement after a grueling day of shooting demonstrations and the charred black beams where houses once stood. "If somebody torches a place after midnight, forget it. I'm not gonna go out and shoot it."

"What?" a reporter responded. "We're in the middle of history here. What we report here will be remembered forever."

"Yeah, well, sure," Tony responded. "Just use the history part of last night's burning building. They're all the same. Use last Monday's if you want. That was a real burn-to-the-grounder. I need some sleep. Wake me, and I'll hit you in the balls with my camera."

Threats had become commonplace on the eastern shore.

Back at WJZ, Allen Smith protected his face until he left for a higher-paying job in Washington, DC. Jerry Turner had been hired as a booth announcer. Suddenly, he became a news man and, by default, became the number-one anchorman for *Eyewitness News*. "Best hire I ever made," Win Baker told everyone, after the ratings kept rising. What's the phrase? . . . better lucky than . . . .?

The unrest on the eastern shore became a national story and attracted black activists. Nick Gregory and H. Rap Brown joined local activist Gloria Richardson. The news reports vividly showed the brutality of the state police and the national guard. Tremendous pressure was put on those who wielded riot clubs to treat civil disobedience with a kinder hand. Meanwhile, back at little Queen Anne, the students at the college prepared to repeat their march down the dusty road. All could almost smell something was going to happen. It was too quiet. No state police were spotted until the marchers reached the edge of the town proper, where Queen Anne's volunteer fire department truck rolled to the center of main street, blocking the path of the marchers.

State police, in their familiar riot gear, backed up the fire truck.

The protesters kept marching, closing the gap between them and the fire truck. Norm Vogel, Channel 13's experienced riot cameraman, ran to the side of the street next to the marchers, trying to capture close-ups and expressions. Suddenly, a flood descended on all of them. The fire hoses sent their missiles of water against the marching front line, knocking them down and backwards. One stream caught cameraman Vogel and lifted him off the ground. Norm swears he never stopped shooting film with his wind-up Bell and Howell.

Months later, confrontation and negotiation brought calm back to the ravaged eastern shore. Channel 13's camera crews and reporters left, most swearing never to set foot across the Bay bridge again.

For WJZ, the benefits were many. Channel 13's news ratings rose during the conflict. Jerry Turner became a recognized personality. All of the *Eyewitness News* reporters gained recognition during this unfortunate time. All of us at the station were rightfully proud WJZ had the guts to see it through. That year, WJZ won the national DuPont award for documentary, editorials, and continuing coverage of what happened on the eastern shore. Television stepped up a notch in its power to communicate. Liberal, conservative, racist, Democrat or Republican all knew what happened on the eastern shore that summer was wrong.

During the unrest on the eastern shore, Channel 13's news department was stretched beyond reasonable limits. Equipment and cars were breaking down. News personnel were working ten- and twelve-hour days. Most worked six days, some seven days a week.

George Bauman was the senior reporter/anchor in the news department because he survived. News director Mel Bernstein had fired most of George's contemporaries and hired new people. George didn't feel great about the changes, but knew Channel 13's news was getting better. He just didn't feel appreciated.

George was a slight, handsome man. He possessed a square jaw that was becoming the fashion for anchormen. The only physical, visual difference separating George from others was his wavy, almost curly, brown hair. His hair seemed to be streaked with shades of brown before hair stylists knew what hair streaking was.

Program manager Win Baker hated George's wavy hair. Mel Bernstein told George to flatten his hair, get some hair straightener or something. Being a good soldier, George attempted to plaster his waves down before he was seen on camera. He knew he was not popular with his new bosses, but was determined not to make a wave.

George finished the noon news, hair in place, looking forward to the rest of the day and tomorrow off. He had worked eleven straight days without a break. Before he could leave the building, George was told, "Get some sleep and return at 5:00 p.m. And, by the way, your day off tomorrow is cancelled." This was too much!

In recollection, George says of this period:

I couldn't take it anymore, so I quit . . . just quit. Righteous indignation took over. I was dumb not to read the signs earlier. Win Baker was a son-of-a-bitch. He'd walk through walls to get what he wanted. I quit. The son-of-a-bitch got what he wanted; I got my hair back.

Righteous indignation doesn't always provide a future or a job. I didn't plan my quitting very well. I had no job and no resume tape to pass around. Unreliable freelancing was my only option.

Two months later, my problems started backing up on me. My daughter developed rheumatic fever and had to be hospitalized. I had no insurance, my insignificant savings were paying for her hospital care. I was in a box.

A couple of days later, that son-of-a-bitch Win Baker called me. "George," he said, "it's time to come back to work." I couldn't believe the son-of-a-bitch called. "And, by the way George," Win continued, "stop messing with your hair." The son-of-a-bitch saved me. I went back to WJZ and have been there 38 years.

Branch banks in Baltimore were experiencing serial bank robberies. The robberies were always on Fridays (payday) when customers stood in long lines to cash or deposit their checks. The dastardly felon waited in line with the others to make a large withdrawal. When it became his turn, he shoved into the window a new, still creased paper sack with a grease pencil message written on the flat brown paper. This is a holdup. Fill the bag with big bills. Three guns are aimed at your head.

While the frightened teller stuffs bills into the paper sack, our robber pulls a silk stocking over his head. Most of the customers standing in line have no clue to what is happening. Others stare in disbelief as the modern masked man walks past them carrying his bulging paper sack.

ROBBERIES HAVE BECOME AN EPIDEMIC headlined *The Baltimore Sun*. Some banks were hosting repeat visits from the robber, now named by a clever TV reporter "The Paper Sack Man." Standing in line at your bank had taken on a whole new meaning.

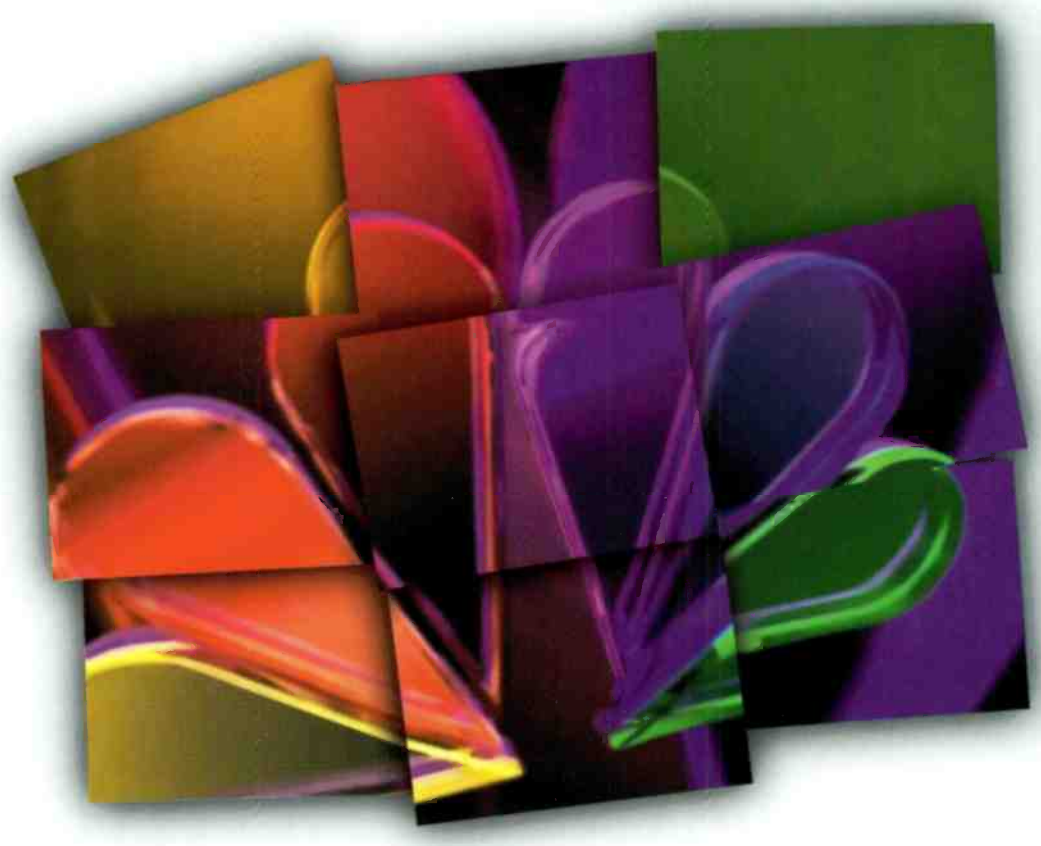
Norm Vogel and Tony Duphree, two of Channel 13's crack news-film cameramen, stood in line inside the Baltimore National Bank on Falls Road. "Hold still," Norm demanded, while attempting to endorse his paycheck against Tony's back. "Is holdup one or two words?" Norm asked Tony louder than necessary. "Either way, they'll get the idea," Tony responded.

Police appeared from everywhere. They had guessed this bank on this Friday could be the Paper Sack Man's next target. Tony and Norm were roughly escorted out of the bank and taken down town. WJZ TV's news crew waved their arms in protest. The police thought they had nabbed the Paper Sack Man. Not exactly. And, not exactly the notoriety on TV and in the newspapers Channel 13's news director Mel Bernstein had in mind.

The flip side was that any publicity was good. Another segment of the TV audience discovered or rediscovered Channel 13. *Eyewitness News* was on a roll. ■

Production manager at WJZ Channel 13 in Baltimore at the time of this narrative, John Baker also served television time in Houston, Philadelphia, New York, Washington, DC and Detroit. He was among the originals who started Cable News Network. Currently residing in Atlanta, he has a book in progress describing 40 years in broadcasting.

THE GOLDEN AGE



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

NBC

Once There Were Three, Now There Are Seven

In the wake of the AOL Time Warner tidal wave, an expert examines the thorny issue of TV ownership as it has very recently evolved

By Douglas Gomery

Last January, ten years to the day Time and Warner merged and similarly shook the world, Steve Case, head of AOL, and Gerald Levin, head of Time Warner, announced a truly blockbuster of deals. Better than any fact I know, the new corporate title — AOL Time Warner — reflected the recent ascendency of the Internet, but it surely also seemed to reflect a new concept of ownership for the television industry. Less than two weeks into the new millennium, AOL bet its considerable corporate wealth on something we might call Internet-TV by buying Time Warner.

For those of us old enough, the world of 21st-century television surely looks different. Through the 1970s, it was a world of but three networks, plus a PBS station if we were lucky, and maybe an independent station with sports, re-runs, and old movies. Now it takes a whole page of *The New York Times* to simply list what's on each day, and even that is not complete. There seem to be so many choices, and with AOL taking over Time Warner lots more owners, right? Well sort of...

Leaving aside home video and pay-TV, which I believe are simply extensions of Hollywood's movie world, only seven corporations dominate a world of television divided into three parts: broadcasting, cable and satellite-to-home delivery (DBS).

The AOL merger with Time Warner does not change that.

Thus the seeming plethora of choices collapse to seven media conglomerates. But to the customer, she or he in nearly all cases has but a single franchised cable company to choose, and as DirecTV takes over DBS, one alternative in the satellite market.

As a consequence, while we no longer have a TV world of three network owners, we surely do not have the dozens of companies competing promised first during the 1970s cable revolution, and lately in the DBS revolution.

For broadcast TV, networks still dominate. Only now there are five owners: Disney's ABC, Viacom's CBS and United Paramount Network, AOL Time Warner's The WB, News Corporation's Fox and General Electric's NBC. These six — all parts of vast corporations — define what most of us watch most of the time. Broadcast TV reaches millions and millions of households, while cable network rivals often reach viewers best measured in the hundreds of thousands. The stations themselves function simply as spigots, drawing their programming from these networks plus some syndicated fare (such as *Oprah* or *Judge Judy*), and locally only produce news broadcasts.

AOL purchased Time Warner and promised some sort of Internet broadcast-television synergy. But that will not come any time soon.

Since the middle 1980s, all the familiar networks have new owners. Enter Hollywood. All save NBC are tied directly to a Hollywood studio. Thus broadcast television has become a classic case of what economists call vertical integration. It used to be that the networks only produced news and sports. Now their Hollywood parents can create all forms of programming. The ability to produce the show, then distribute by your own network, and then to much of the nation show it on your owned and operated station has become the defining force of broadcast television.

So today's networks have greater economic clout than TV networks of the past. The Hollywood connection helps five, and while NBC stands studio-less, its partnership with Microsoft allies it with the biggest company in the nation. (Of course, NBC's parent, General Electric, is the second-biggest company in the nation.) With these deep pockets, a direct tie to Hollywood seems unnecessary. We shall see as AOL has added equally sized deep pockets to the executives of The WB.

During the middle 1980s a new set of owners moved into broadcast TV. General Electric grabbed NBC while simultaneously Australian Rupert Murdoch redefined the television- Hollywood relationship by first buying a studio — Twentieth Century Fox — then purchasing Metromedia stations (for his owned and operated group), and launching Fox.

Murdoch was such a success during the early 1990s that Viacom followed his lead and fashioned its United Paramount Network (supplied by its Paramount studio), and Time Warner followed with The WB network. Disney underscored the importance of this new broadcast network economics when in 1995 it acquired ABC for what then seemed a staggering $17 billion.

Two significant changes occurred since then. In 1999, Viacom purchased CBS, thus owning two broadcast networks. And it looks as if the FCC — despite rules prohibiting a single company from owning

two networks — will make an exception for Viacom.

Then as the 21st century commenced AOL purchased Time Warner and promised some sort of Internet broadcast-television synergy. But that will not come any time soon.

These five giant corporations control broadcast TV. On the margins public television struggles along despite threats of elimination. PBS used to be the lone "quality" alternative to the broadcast networks, but now it has rivals from A&E to C-SPAN. Indeed, in terms of audience size, it is best to think of public television as a cable-like network, one with audience shares measured in two or three ratings points. The future of government-owned television would seem secure, but perpetually underfunded — surely as compared to the monies available to the five billion-dollar broadcast corporate rivals.

Yet the distinction of all of us watching broadcast TV most of the time seems to be disappearing. As the 20th century ended, cable television was where most Americans watched most television. About two-thirds of us paid from $30-$50 a month to our local cable company, with rarely a second cable provider from which to choose.

Here the world of cable is worse that the three-network world of the 1970s. Then there were three choices; now the single local cable provider chooses which channels we can watch. Few systems carry all of those channels listed in *The New York Times*. And there are dozens the *Times* does not list. The cable company chooses; the consumer gets no vote.

The news about cable-franchise ownership in the late 1990s — since the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act — has been consolidation. Here we have a new player, unconnected to Hollywood. In deals worth an estimated $120 billion, AT&T acquired cable franchises for about third of all customers.

Forget AT&T as a long-distance company: CEO Michael Armstrong has bet the future on cable, based on two principles. He loves the fact that cable is a legal monopoly, reminding him of the old phone company. Secondly, AT&T seeks to use these broadband cable wires to offer not only television but also the Internet. If this two-part strategy works will be a defining question of how cable TV is owned and operated through the next decade. AT&T adds a sixth company to the list of giants dominating television.

Following AT&T — at about half its size in terms of cable customers — is AOL Time Warner. Indeed AOL Time Warner figures that it can follow AT&T's two-part strategy: (1) produce programming from its Hollywood studio to give it an extra edge; (2) offer the Internet as well. Here we shall see if AOL's presence makes a difference.

In the 1970s there were three choices; now the single local cable provider chooses which channels we can watch.

The age of small, locally owned cable companies is over. There still exist a few holdouts, mostly in rural America, but they should be acquired before the decade is out. In the 1970s who would have imagined that the then-small cable system operators would be consolidated before the decade was out? But they should and will disappear as cable-system ownership continues a process of consolidation begun with the freedom provided

by the 1996 Telecommunications Act.

But what about all those cable networks? The BETs, the TNNs, the MTVs? Well—surprise!— most are owned in part (or completely) by one of the major cable companies, or one of the parents of the broadcast networks. The cable powers — led by AT&T and AOL Time Warner — take the tack that owning the franchises guarantees their networks favorable treatment. Thus we ought not be surprised to learn from the National Cable Television Association's own list of the "Top 20 Cable Networks," that AT&T — through its corporate partner Liberty Media — controls the Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel, BET and others, while AOL Time Warner controls TBS, the network piped into the most cable homes, plus CNN, the Cartoon network and both CNN services.

Not all cable networks, however, are controlled by these two vertically integrated giants. An alternative tactic reasons that if one controls the top programming fans desire to see, viewers will find those channels that serve it, and whoever is the local cable operator will run it. Disney, Fox, Viacom and NBC executives reason it is not necessary to spend billions of dollars to acquire and/or build a system of cable franchises to make money owning and operating a cable network.

The 1990s introduced a whole new means of gaining access to television—DBS.

In particular, Disney owns the ESPN family, Fox has FX, Fox News, and its plethora of sports networks, and Viacom controls MTV, VH-1, TNN, TV Land, and Nickelodeon. Here the surprise is how little, so far, their Hollywood divisions have contributed to these cable networks original programming. Look for that to change as the 21st century unfolds.

Again, NBC offers a different sort of cable network strategy. Microsoft and General Electric have gone the way of news radio. That is, their MSNBC and CNBC may not be watched by millions of viewers, but their audiences are have high incomes, and so are valued by advertisers. Make money with niche cablecasting. Who cares if the audiences are measured — on average — at less than one million households?

Cable networks add no dominant new owners to the list of TV powerhouses. As a consortium, media corporations already noted above finance C-SPAN. Indeed, only one of the Top 20 cable networks can be called independent — Landmark's The Weather Channel out of Norfolk, Virginia. It is more efficient to think of the dozens of cable networks as simply outlets for the Hollywood-broadcast TV-AT&T-AOL axis discussed above.

To think of a separate "film," "broadcast TV" and "cable TV" industries no longer makes sense from an ownership perspective. They all own sizable broadcast and cable television properties. I note that they also dominate pay-TV (Viacom's Showtime and the Movie Channel), and Time Warner's HBO and Cinemax), as well as the creation and distribution of movies on rented and sold video (Viacom's Blockbuster defines that sector).

But the 1990s introduced a whole new means of gaining access to television—DBS—and with it the hope that new owners would add to the "Big Six" discussed above. Indeed, many new entrants flooded in; one in ten of us signed up so we would not have to be limited to the 50 channels on the average cable system, but could choose from 200 to 300 channels. DBS pioneers took direct

aim at TV's junkies.

Broadcasters did not cooperate. Until the final month of 1999, one could not get one's local TV stations though DBS, but in the most significant TV related legislation, the Congress removed this restriction, and DBS will be able to compete "equally" with cable as the twenty first century begins.

Yet by the time the law was changed, in November 1999, the world of DBS competitors had be winnowed to a reality of one dominant player. DirecTV owned by Hughes Electronics, a division of General Motors, possessed more than 90 percent of the market, with tiny EchoStar and its DISH Network struggling to stay in business. So while DBS has promised to be able to offer up competitors to cable, by 1999 it was offering up but one dominant company. Looking back, it does not seem surprising that a division of a company almost the size of Microsoft or General Electric would survive.

DirecTV thus completes the list of the seven dominant TV companies. In nearly all markets across the United States it alone is positioned as an alternative to the monopoly cable company. DirecTV pushed hard for the new law enabling it to offer local stations. Now, will cable switch? Will DBS replace cable as the choice for those willing to pay?.

What to make of these trends and questions about the future? How will seven dominant companies — General Electric, Viacom, Disney, News Corporation's Fox, AOL Time Warner, AT&T and DirecTV — treat their viewers?

First, there will be no return to a world of simply three broadcast networks — except for the poorest among us. The world of TV ownership changed during the final quarter of the 20th century, Hollywood was the big winner, and we should expect to see more movies and TV series on cable than ever before.

But within each genre of programming, the choices will be limited. So for news, for around-the-clock coverage of breaking stories and regular summaries of major news, for example, we can pay for and watch CNN, MSNBC and Fox News— depending on which services our cable company has contracted with. But that will be it; there will be no new entrants, and so while choices have expanded, they will also be constrained.

In a world of one local cable company and one DBS provider, the seven are best imagined sitting at a poker game. They compete among themselves, and try — within the rules— to win ratings. But they also have a vested interest in keeping more players from the game. They will seek to protect their monopolies.

More alliances will be formed as those at the game keep barriers to competition high. In the extreme cases, an AOL Time Warner cable system will promote AOL Time Warner-owned channels and try to keep all the revenues in-house. AOL simply added Internet possibilities to cross promotion. Yet AOL Time Warner will surely permit movies from other studios so that when it needs cooperation from another member of the dominant seven, it can obtain the needed channel slot or some other favor.

So in the end, are we better off in terms of TV ownership? The complaints of the domination by NBC, CBS and ABC seem far off, indeed something strange to young folks. ("Really? That's all you could watch?") Cruising TV will remain a way of life for those Americans who can afford the money and time to watch TV day and night. There will be a limited set of choices of news channels, for example. The complaint of "why does there really seem to be nothing on television?" will grow worse as the seven seek

to squeeze maximum profits from their new economic organization.

There is no new TV technology on the horizon to alter the domination of this seven (surely not HDTV). The monopoly problem of cable vs. DBS will define the very base of future ownership in the TV industry. We will remain a long way from the promised world of 500 channels. We remain a long way from Internet TV, as AOL Time Warner will roll out new choices, but no one is sure if the audience is there to make them profitable. The bottom line is simply this: we had three companies in charge a quarter-century ago, and now we have seven. ■

Douglas Gomery is professor in the College of Journalism at the University of Maryland and the author of a dozen books on the economics and history of the mass media. His column, "The Economics of Television," is a regular feature of the *American Journalism Review*. This article is adapted from his chapter on the television industry in his and Benjamin Compaine's book *Who Owns the Media?*, just published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (Mahwah, NJ).

TV's Distorted and Missing Images of Women and the Elderly

Two studies highlight how the elderly and women in newscasts are shortchanged in prime time

By Bert R. Briller

Senior citizens and women do not get a fair shake on television. We know that in a general way, but new studies of program content document the extent and specifics of the discrimination, with results discussed at two recent forums at New York's Newseum.

How to tackle those shortcomings was explored by experts in panels moderated by Marlene Sanders, broadcast journalist and resident professional of the Media Studies Center. Both panels found the basis of bias in economic factors—and in misperceptions of economic factors. They pointed to anomalies and raised several salient, sometimes controversial issues.

Let's start with the question of age bias. In the forum "The Missing Image: Older People in the Media," Robert Prisuta, associate research director of the American Association of Retired Persons, quantified a disturbing contradiction. Although 13 percent of the US population is 65 years

or older, only about 2 percent of the characters in prime-time television are in that age group. The data was developed under the direction of Temple University Prof. George Gerbner, who has been statistically surveying TV program content for more than two decades.

There is also a strong gender disparity, Prisuta reported. Although women represent 60 per cent of the older population, they account for only one-third of the older characters in prime time. Prisuta called this a "double whammy" against women, not only are there fewer of them on the screen because of their gender but also because of their age. "So they truly are virtually invisible in prime-time network television," he declared.

Sanders asked David Poltrack, veteran researcher at CBS— traditionally the network with the oldest-skewed audience—why having the most older viewers was considered a detriment. Poltrack replied that advertising-media activity is largely based on age—and in 1998 CBS did no business where a program's large number of viewers over age 55 would be an attraction to sponsors.

That did not mean that advertisers give no value to the older audience. Rather, many advertisers explain their reluctance to direct commercials to the elderly by citing two myths: first, that seniors are "set in their ways" of brands they buy. Secondly, these advertisers contend that "older people watch more television and we'll get them by default; they'll have to watch the programs for younger people anyway."

On the myth that the elderly are stick-in-the-muds who keep buying their favorite brands forever, Poltrack recalled meeting with a General Motors executive who rationalized why the company doesn't direct advertising to older people: "We have to get people when they're young, to buy their first Chevrolet. Then, when they get older, they buy a Buick, and hopefully they eventually buy a Cadillac, and we've got them for life. That's why we advertise to the young." Poltrack countered by saying that the experience of the Lexus car explodes this concept. Most Lexus owners, he said, are over 50 years old. "Lexus is a car that didn't exist four years ago," he stressed. "So how did these older people come to buy it; did they think they were buying a Cadillac?"

He added that the age bracket with the least amount of brand switching actually is the 18-to-34-year-olds, "because they've just discovered their first brand. And, by the way, their brand of detergent is the one that Mom told them to buy. The myth that the elderly don't try new products persists, but I think it is gradually wearing away, because the economics are wearing it away."

"The myth that the elderly don't try new products...is gradually wearing away."

In the revival of interest in Frank Sinatra and Fifties and Sixties music Poltrack sees inspiration for advertisers to change their marketing strategy and look to the older generation. "Particularly," he says, "now that the baby boomers, who have been courted since they were teenagers, are moving into that category."

Poltrack reviewed the circumstances of the cancellation of the highly successful series, *Murder She Wrote*, because of its older-age appeal. "The decision was made by certain people at CBS that we couldn't effectively sell the show, despite the fact that it had one of the most upper socioeconomic audiences. Moreover, it had one of the most highly educated audiences in television. The two very positive qualities

of *Murder* were basically cancelled out by the 'negative' trait of an older audience."

After *Murder* was dropped , two comedies were substituted in its Sunday 8 PM hour. The result: the networks collectively —not just CBS, but as a group including ABC and NBC— lost 17 percent of their 50-plus audience on Sunday evening. Media-watchers were perplexed: "Where did all these people go?" The myth that older viewers "just watch television by default" began to crack.

The displaced older viewers were not in any one specific place. They moved to watch old movies on TNT, they caught the news on CNN, they were all over the dial, Poltrack recounts. The two comedies failed. Two years later, when CBS replaced them with *Touched by an Angel*, the whole 17 percent came back. The lesson, Poltrack prophesizes, is that if the networks continue a narrow, single focus where they are all targeting the same audience, the majority of viewers will go somewhere else.

Poltrack makes another point, ironically. Although the program *Dawson's Creek* was far down on Nielsen's list, in 100th place in terms of total audience, it was the number 1 show with teenage girls. As a consequence, *Dawson* got twice as much money for a unit of advertising as did *Touched by an Angel*, which was the fifth-highest-rated show on network television - and had about ten times *Dawson's* audience.

Barbara Lippert, ad mavin for *Adweek*, cautions that to be perceived as an old product or medium is the death knell. Magazines with a name indicating an older readership have failed. For example, readers didn't want to be seen with a magazine like *Fifty Plus*. People don't want to be grouped, they want to think they are unique, an individual, Lippert underscores. She said that there are marketers who are geniuses at transgenerational branding. An example, she cited, is The Gap, where everybody from babies to grandparents can go in and buy something. Benetton is successful in bringing races and nations together. "New global marketing strategy calls for a new imagery that adapts to the fluidity of the culture and the fact there aren't rigid definitions and lines any more," Lippert suggests.

The AARP's Prisuta noted that entertainment programs distort the realities of older people. "If you look at the resolution of outcomes in dramatic fictional programming," he observed, "usually an unsuccessful or ambivalent resolution is associated with older people. In a nutshell, older characters don't come across as effective in problem solving, in dealing with issues, as do younger characters. And this is especially true with older women."

Older men are shown in a different social context than older women, he reported. Male characters aren't necessarily associated with a family or with a spouse. By contrast, female characters are and they are family motivated. As a result, viewers are not only seeing fewer older people on their sets, but those they do see are not necessarily reflecting the real lives of the elderly. And especially, they don't see effective, attractive older characters.

They don't see effective, attractive older characters.

Sanders quoted Sybil Shepard, the former CBS sitcom star, at age 49 saying, "Think about it. In one year *Murphy Brown*, *Ellen*, *Roseanne* and *Sybil* all went off the air. They took all the women in their 40s off TV. When you're a woman in your 40s, where are you represented in this culture?"

Asked about the plethora of programs pitched to 18-year-old males, Poltrack

said, "The whole creative community is oriented to the New. It's not necessarily the young. It's the New. But the New is equated with the Young."

Poltrack cited material from the National Council of Families in Television, which reported a disturbing influence. Between the ages of nine and 14, as a normal physiological development, a female will gain 40 pounds while a male will gain about 60-80 pounds. He added, "Yet people are telling the boy, Great, you're getting bigger, while people are telling the girl, You're getting *heavy*, you're getting *fat*."

Progress is starting to be made in changing attitudes toward gender, he believes, but it's probably going to be another generation that realizes this, not ours, unfortunately.

Poltrack related that he asks students in a college media course he teaches to describe people in their 50s. The descriptions they give are of oldsters, people in their 70s. Then he asks the students, do those descriptions fit your parents who are in their 50s? And the students say, "No, no." Their fuddy-duddy characterizations actually had described not their parents, but their *grandparents*.

He concluded that CBS has regained its number 1 position by recognizing the importance of programming to older viewers as a constituency. "A hit show on CBS starts old and gets younger. A hit show on Fox starts young and gets older. You'll continue to see programming that will reach the older viewer ... it's part of our strategy," Poltrack declared.

Covering the Economy

The Media Studies Center's eleventh annual survey of Men, Women and Media focussed on the coverage of the U.S. economy on the three networks' evening news reports. It found some progress has been made in terms of more women speaking as "experts" in the business-economics reports than was the case ten years ago. The percentage increased from 12 percent in 1988-89 to 18 percent in 98-99. But women are still seen and quoted far less than men.

Andrew Tyndall, whose ADT research company has been monitoring the nightly newscasts since 1987, noted sharp gender differences in coverage of the economy. He divides economic and business news into eight areas—five of which depict "the commanding heights of the economy" and three dealing with "the everyday economic life of ordinary Americans at home and in the workplace."

The first five areas, which deal with power, Tyndall found can be called the Male Preserve, and include:

- Financial markets (stocks, bonds, interest rates, currencies, etc.)
- Banking (Federal Reserve, bank regulation, insurance, etc.)
- Fiscal policy (federal budget, taxes, Social Security, etc.)
- Trade (imports, exports, foreign competition, globalization, etc.)
- Business (corporate profits, takeovers, industrial sectors, etc.)
- Macro economy (expansion, recession, inflation, consumption, etc.)

The three areas which deal with people on the lower rungs of the economic ladder, and which Tyndall classifies as the Woman's Sphere, are:

- Labor (unemployment, job market, wages, work conditions, etc.)
- Family finance (retailing, retirement planning, housing, etc.)
- Poverty (welfare, minimum wage, homelessness, etc.)

Although these three topics are desig-

nated the Woman's Sphere, the stories were not covered most of the time by women. Moreover, the experts selected for soundbites were still mostly male. In a significant finding, Tyndall reports, "The world of high finance receives six times as much coverage as the world of the poor."

The networks have made welcome changes in their reporting of the economy during the past ten years, according to Tyndall's research. Notably, they have expanded their horizons outside the Beltway. They are giving more airtime to women reporters. And more soundbites are coming from female experts. But these advances, Tyndall finds, are overshadowed by a fourth, dramatic change "which has ensured that, taken as a whole, economic coverage remains a man's world."

That factor is heavy coverage of the financial markets, in particular the bull market in stocks, since Wall Street is Boy's Town. High finance got three times as many reports as ten years ago. Market reports alone account for fully one third of the Economy beat, and as a bastion of the Male Preserve it features very few women.

"The world of high finance receives six times as much coverage as the world of the poor."

Tyndall's data points up an imbalance in network business coverage. In the 1998-99 season,for example, there were 148 reports on the financial markets, more than the other five areas of the "male preserve" combined (144). It seems that Brokaw, Jennings and Rather's editors are obsessed with the numbers but neglecting the deeper forces shaping the economy.

How television's coverage of the economy might change over time to represent the sexes more equally was explored by Tyndall. He made suggestions under five headings:

• Patience: The exuberance of Wall Street's bull market will fade and attention to the male-dominated financial markets will inevitably shrink.
• Hiring: As the networks continue to hire more women journalists, they will interview more women and the number of female sound bites will increase.
• Awareness of Two Approaches: The way economic stories are covered in the Women's Sphere is radically different from treatment of reports in the Male Preserve. Activists should learn the differences and tailor their efforts accordingly.
• Rolodex: The roster of experts queried on economic news should expand. There should be an expanding proportion of female experts who are routinely consulted in the Woman's Sphere.
• Economic Power: When covering stories in the Male Preserve, it would be inaccurate, and therefore shoddy journalism, to feature women as if they held equal power with men in the economy, Tyndall argues. On the other hand, coverage of the Male Preserve could expand to include more about how the policies and decisions of the economically powerful affect average Americans - and quoting more "real people" (as opposed to politicians, government officials and experts) would make women more visible.

Summing up the media report on the economy, Robert H. Giles, executive director of the Media Studies Center, concluded, "While it is encouraging to hear news of progress, the coverage of women's contributions to the economy is still far from adequate. The key to continued progress is assigning more women to cover the story of the economy and

encouraging journalists to seek more women sources for their business stories."

Getting a more representative staff and more balanced coverage will probably require methods of consciousness-raising and protest. During the Media Studies forum it was recalled that some women on the *New York Times* told the editor that the front page included no stories whose source was a woman. He replied sarcastically that there would only be more articles coming from female sources when the daily began featuring "news about tea parties" on Page One. In protest over his insensitivity, the next day most women on the staff wore tea bags in their buttonholes.

Solidarity, even of the tea-bag genre, can make a point. And tea parties may trigger bigger events — as Boston history reminds us. ■

Bert Briller has contributed articles on media to publications including *Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia* and *Scribners Encyclopedia of American Lives*. He was executive editor of the Television Information Office, a vice-president of ABC-TV and a reporter/critic for *Variety*.

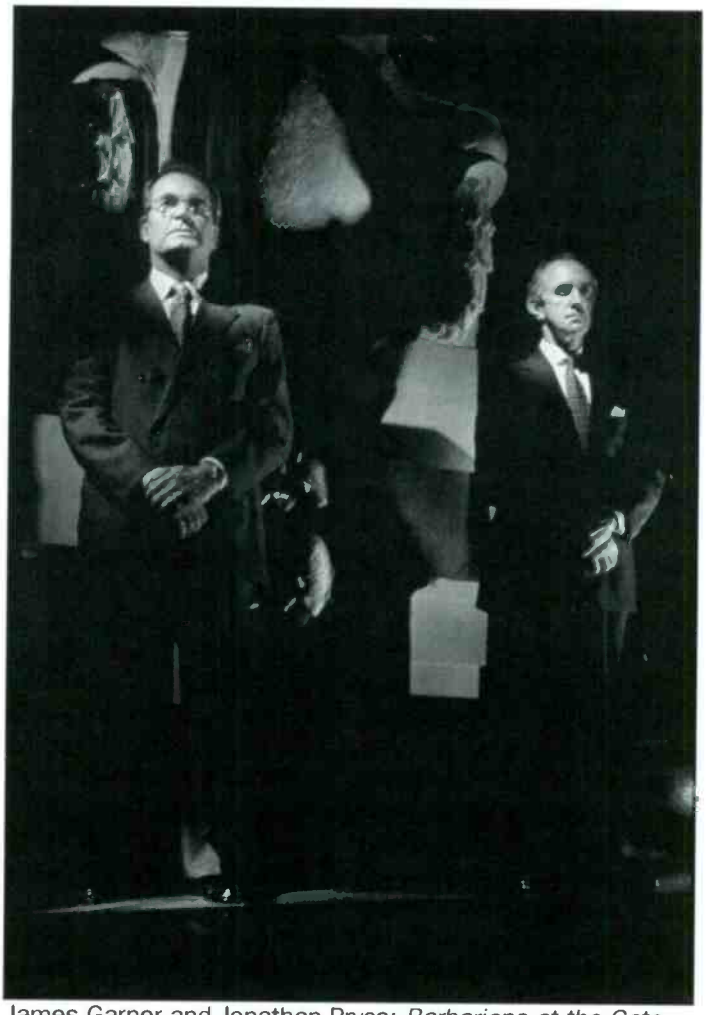
HBO Movies: Has Risk-Taking Made the Cable Giant the "Auteur" of the New Century?

By Al Auster

"The American Cinema is a classical art, but why not then admire in it what is most admirable, i.e., not only the talent of this or that film-maker but the genius of the system."
—André Bazin

A trip to any local video store might include a number of big suprises. The biggest of these is still the fact that the recently released video you've been wanting to see is actually available. At the same time, a glance along the shelves in the vain search for that coveted video might lead you to notice how many titles there are formerly made-for-tv movies. Upon closer inspection you might even notice that many of these films were produced by Home Box Office, the premium cable service. Indeed if you wished to do some further research you might find out that HBO has won nine Academy Awards for best documentaries in the last 15 years, and 26 Emmys for prime time television programs (including one for last year's best made-for-tv movie, *A Lesson Before Dying*). And casual glance at your local newspaper, or perhaps TV Guide, would alert you to the tremendous critical acclaim for such recent HBO series as *The Sopranos, Oz, Sex in the City, Arliss,* and the now terminated but highly regarded sitcom, *The Larry Sanders Show.*

Perhaps it's time finally to acknowledge what seems to be among the best-kept secrets of the television industry: that HBO is the auteur studio of the nineties. As originally coined by French critics in the fifties, the concept of "auteur" anointed the director as the artist primarily responsible for the art of the cinema. However, in television, where a different



James Garner and Jonathan Pryce: *Barbarians at the Gate*

Randy Tepper / HBO

set of circumstances exist, it has been most frequently applied to the producer. Thus, HBO is to the nineties what MTM and Tandem (Norman Lear) productions were for the seventies, and Lorimar and Aaron Spelling productions were to the eighties — the premier producer of innovative television.

It would seem, then, as is the case in discussing any auteur's work, that it's necessary to point out the factors that make HBO so distinctive. To this end, I screened a selection of HBO made-for-tv movies produced between 1983 to 1999,attempting to determine what makes them so unique in contemporary television.

HBO has come a long way from the days when it programmed old movies and polka contests, and so have made-for-tv movies. When NBC produced its first made-for-tv movie, *Fame is the Name of the Game*, back in 1966, it was in response to the slackening stream of new Hollywood features available for scheduling. By the eighties, with some truly classic tv movies (*Brian's Song*, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*) and even a few future auteur directors like Steven Spielberg (*Duel*), who earned their stripes directing them, the made-for-tv movie had come of age.

True to the pattern set by the networks, HBO turned to producing original films when the stream of new theatrically released films, which were the backbone of its schedule, dried up in the eighties. That transition was not taken without some risk, since HBO had made its reputation by providing previously released theatrical films to its subscribers virtually within six months of their release date. And now here it was scheduling films that hadn't had the benefit of a studio ad campaign, word-of- mouth publicity , press reviews or even live audiences of movie goers.

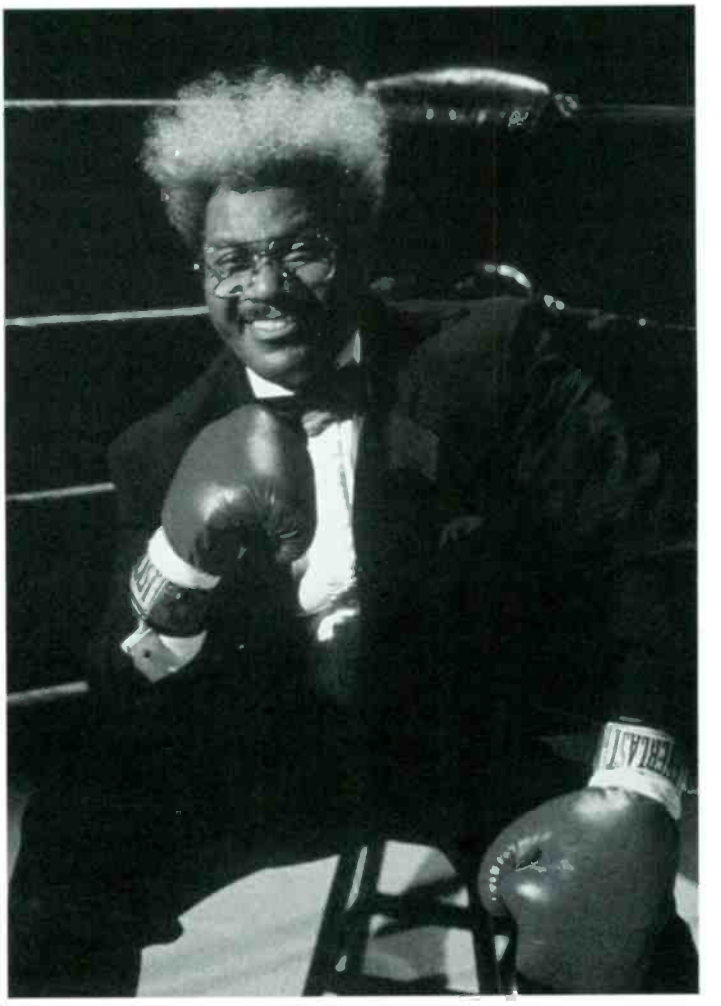
To put it mildly, HBO's first made-for-tv movies played it relatively safe. The roster for 1983, the first year HBO produced original films, reads something like Billy Wilder's waxworks scene in *Sunset Boule-*

vard, populated by a host of previously great but over the hill stars such as James Stewart, Bette Davis, and Elizabeth Taylor.

The sole exception to that was the first made-for-tv movie of that year, *The Terry Fox Story*. That film provided a hint of things to come for HBO films. Terry Fox was an athletic Vancouver boy who had had a leg amputated because of bone cancer and then became something of a Canadian national hero when he attempted a cross-Canada marathon to raise money for the Canadian cancer society. This could easily have degenerated into a tear-jerking "how sweet are the uses of adversity" film. What saved it from that fate, and was suggestive of what the future might hold, is the fact that Terry Fox (Eric Fryer) was a jerk.

Not only does Fox continually dump all over his best friend and his brother, who voluntarily accompanied him on the marathon, he also does his best to alienate his girlfriend, who has stuck with him through thick and thin, and when the cancer society sends an advance man (Robert Duvall) to help him with the publicity for his run, he barely tolerates him. Adding a bit of authenticity to the film was also the fact that Eric Fryer, who played Fox, was both an amputee and a Canadian. Certainly, Fox as a cranky and unlikable cancer victim was a departure, but what was also unusual was telling a story about someone most Americans probably hadn't ever heard of.

A couple of seasons later another sign that HBO films weren't going to offer the usual run-of- the-mill features, was their decision to produce a biopic on Edward R. Murrow. This was triply risky. For one thing, there was the fact that even before his death Murrow was conceived of as the patron saint of broadcast journalism. Coupled with that was television's reluctance ever to take a serious or critical look at its own history (no network, including CBS, had ever even attempted to do a Murrow biopic).Potentially even more



Bob Greene / HBO

Ving Rhames: *Don King: Only in a America*

troublesome were former Murrow's colleagues such as William S. Paley, Dr. Frank Stanton and Fred Friendly, who were still around at the time of the production, and were proven veterans at protecting the Murrow legend as well as their own reputations. Suffice it to say that HBO's *Murrow* (1986) was a way of tweaking the networks at the same time as it compelled them to take notice of HBO films.

But the networks needn't have worried. *Murrow* was your basic hagiography, albeit hagiography with a slight difference, the major one being that the film had sufficient faith in its hero's integrity to include even some of the less than noble moments of his career. As a result it didn't hesitate to include Murrow's (Daniel J. Travanti) firing of his oldest friend and collaborator, Bill Shirer (David Suchet), when Shirer claimed that he was being purged for his too liberal sentiments about the Cold War, and Murrow argued that work had become shoddy. Of course it doesn't help Shirer's image that he's depicted as a something of a scold.

Similarly, the film allowed a bit of complexity to creep into the depiction of such traditional Murrow-legend villains as William S. Paley. Far from being portrayed as just another plutocratic waffler and fair-weather friend, Paley (Dabney Coleman) truly admires Murrow, but is also acutely conscious of the need to deal with his stockholders and, as he puts it, the "real world." Not so fair was the portrait of Dr. Frank Stanton (John McMartin), who was depicted as Murrow's "evil twin": an icy numbers cruncher, who even at the moment of Murrow's greatest triumph following *See it Now's* McCarthy show, reminds Murrow that 38 percent of Americans think he's a communist. It's no wonder that CBS stalwarts such as Dan Rather, Walter Cronkite, Richard Salant and Don Hewitt rushed to Stanton's defense, protesting that the movie was both inaccurate and unfair.

None of these early made-for-tv movies are particularly memorable as works of art. Nor are any great claims being made for them. But taken together they present the image of a creative apprenticeship that was growing increasingly aware of its strengths— first and foremost being how to use cable's natural advantages over the networks. Most important of all of these was HBO's lack of advertisers, which allowed HBO to tackle almost any subject without having to fear advertiser interference. Aesthetically, the absence of commercials also had the advantage of allowing for the omissions of artificial script crises and cliff-hangers every eight minutes or so to keep the audiences hands away from the dreaded remote, and thus allowing for a theatrical feel to the films. Finally, HBO films could also freely use nudity, adult language and violence in ways that television hadn't ever seen before.

A number of these qualities are on display in what proved to be HBO's 1991 breakthrough made-for-tv movie, *The Josephine Baker Story*. This biopic traced the career of the black washerwoman's daughter from St. Louis, Mo. who danced her way to international fame wearing nothing but a bunch of bananas. Despite her near universal acclaim, as a black women Baker suffered her share of racist indignities, especially whenever she returned to the U.S. Thus, at the very moment Broadway critics were savaging her starring performance in *The Ziegfield Follies* of 1936, the posh hotel where she was staying was forcing her to enter the premises through the kitchen. Then in the fifties, when she was refused service at the Stork Club, she got into a bitter battle with gossip columnist Walter Winchell, which resulted in her subsequent blacklisting as a communist.

Along the way there were moments of real bravery and eccentric generosity: Baker's participation in the French resistance, her groundbreaking World War II refusal to do any USO shows unless her audiences were integrated and her multitude of adopted multi-racial children, nicknamed the "rainbow tribe." Needless to say, what prevents the films from falling hopelessly into mere historical tableau is the erotic charge that the film delivers in its full frontal nudity re-creation of some of her famous numbers, especially her *Danse Sauvage*. Indeed the audience got to see a lot more of actress Lynn Whitfield, who won an Emmy for her performance, than they ever did in such network made-for-tv movies as *HeartBeat* and *The Women of Brewster Place*.

Angelina Jolie: *Gia*

Larry Watson / HBO

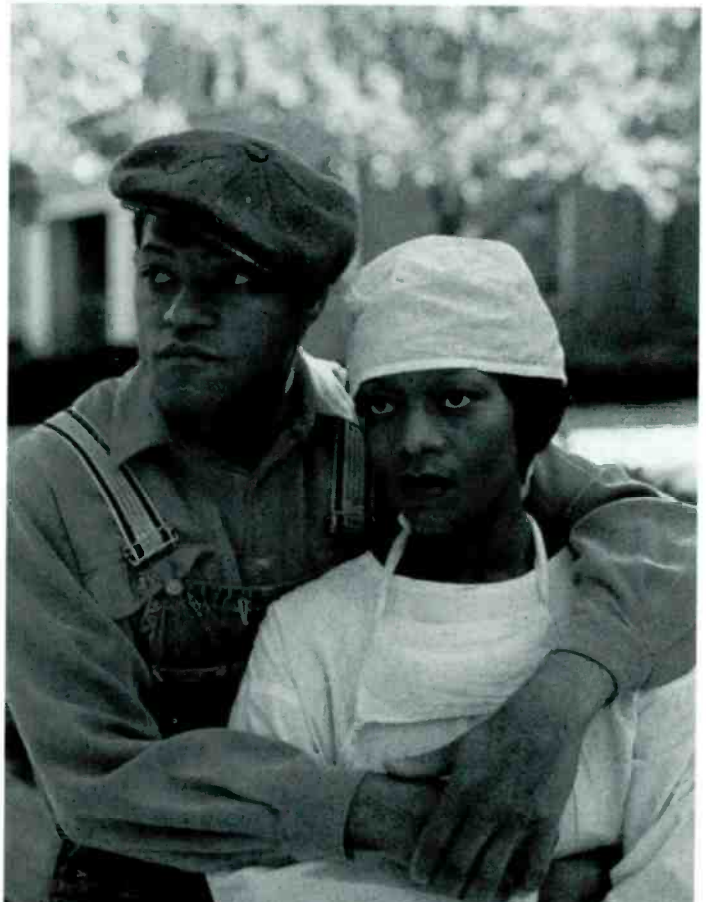
The Murrow and Josephine Baker movies are just one of the genres that HBO films have made its own. Indeed the quantity and quality of the biopics that stream from HBO would have even made Jack Warner and Darryl F.Zanuck envious. Some in retrospect, such as the 1987 made-for-tv movie *Mandela*, might make HBO execs wince, since among other things it celebrated the melancholy love affair of Nelson (Danny Glover) and Winnie Mandela.(Alfre Woodward); a tale that would have to be considerably altered today in view of the revelations of infidelity and charges of kidnapping that currently plague the ex-Mrs. Mandela.

Not so the HBO biopic of the life of President Harry S.Truman. Produced in 1995 and based on a 1992 Pulitzer Prize winning biography by David McCullough, the movie won the 1995 Emmy award for best original movie. It was especially refreshing and compelling, in our era of political spin, triangulation and soft money to see the career of a politician(portrayed by Gary Sinise), whose decision-making relied on nothing more statistically sophisticated than his own sense of right and wrong, and who almost had his 1948 presidential

whistlestop campaign derailed by a lack of funds. A truly priceless moment in the film, and one that strikes just the right note of contrast with today's political world, was Bess Truman's (Diana Scarwid) initial press conference as first lady. In it Mrs.Truman, who was notorious for her hatred of Washington, DC, answered questions in monosyllables, and when asked how often she intended to hold press conferences, announced that this was her last one.

Of course, the way to undo the credibility of any biopic is excessive reverence. And while HBO biopics did not always succeed in avoiding this flaw, their strategy for maintaining their productions legitimacy was to produce just as many films about sinners as they did about saints. Thus, HBO's list of biopics also include a rogues gallery which ranged from the practically demonic Stalin (1992), to the merely villainous Gotti (1996) and Lansky (1998), to the morally ambiguous Don King: Only in America (1998), and Winchell (1998).

The tactic with any of these evil characters, as Darryl F. Zanuck once so piquantly put it, was to maintain "rooting interest." In the case of *Stalin* (Robert Duvall) it was hard to make an audience identify with someone whose happiest moments were spent consigning millions to the gulag. HBO's solution HBO was to portray him as a character whose insatiable ambition made him a dysfunctional husband and father: a tyrant who not only spent too much time at the office in paranoid plotting, but a man who hated his own father, ignored his first wife and child, alienated his political mentor Lenin (Maximilian Schell), drove his much beloved second wife to suicide, and so alienated his adored daughter, that she took off for the west the first chance she got.



Laurence Fishburne and Alfre Wood *Miss Evers' Boys*

Bob Greene / HBO

Making Stalin into the workaholic CEO of communism may not have been HBO biopics finest hour, but with 1998's *Don King: Only in America* they hit their stride creating the image of a world-class entertaining rogue. Stage

managing the narrative of his own life, King (Ving Rhames) pulls no punches in the tale of his rise from Mafia leg breaker to boxing's king of the hill. In this blemish filled story, wherein no friend is left unbetrayed and no boxer unexploited, there also lurks the intriguing and seriously interesting theme of a black man who used his blackness to gain control of a professional sports empire where blacks make up a proponderance of the athletes (unlike other sports such as baseball, football and basketball, where whites are still in control). In the process, King is never anything less than lethally charming, whether it is initiating a black preacher and his wife into the joys of obscenity, or conning Zairean dictator General Mobuto into agreeing to stage the Ali-Foreman bout in Africa.

The epic of the life of an outrageous black confidence man straddles the gap between HBO's penchant for biopics and their production of quality films with themes devoted to African-American history and personalties. Already mentioned have been Josephine Baker and Don King. Add to that list Mike Tyson and Dorothy Dandridge, in addition to the non-American but no less of a black hero, Nelson Mandela. Even more compelling, however, is HBO's roster of films that have dealt with the portions of black history that have for the most part been left out of the history books. This revisionism included the story of *The Tuskegee Airmen* (1995), about black World War II aviators who fought a two front war against both fascism and racial prejudice, and the tragic story of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, *Miss Evers' Boys* (1997).

The latter is especially moving for the light it sheds on how racism permeated even well-meaning government-sponsored attempts to dispel racial prejudice. Thus, Eunice Evers (Alfre Woodward) started out enthusiastically assisting in the study of the effect of syphilis on a group of black men, and then when government funding gave out collaborated in the withholding of treatment to these men, so that the researchers could trace whether the disease ran the same course in black men as it did in white.

The equally compelling subtext of the film was the lengths to which black middle-class professionals were forced to go to puncture myths of racial inferiority in the ol' south of the thirties and forties. Indeed Evers and her boss, the committed and brilliant black physician, Dr.Brodus (Joe Morton), while never wavering in the love and support for the infected men, took comfort in the fact that they were doing this terrible deed for the greater good of their race. They still felt proud of their activities 40 years later, when the study came to light and caused a national furor, culminating in congressional hearings, amidst charges which compared their work to Nazi medical experiments.

Despite bearing some resemblance to a "ripped from today's headlines" story, *Miss Evers' Boys*, is too much a tale of history, character and morality to be considered in the same breath as that genre with its preference for extravagant incident over character. This isn't meant to imply that HBO films never attempted that stormy and crisis-laden genre. However, what sets many HBO "ripped from today's headlines" films apart is not that they avoided sensationalism (some sensationalism is an essential ingredient of the genre) but that the sensationalism was frequently infused with irony, and the often simplistic morality of these films was leavened with character and ambiguity. Thus, the stories were lifted out of the realm of pure "yellow journalism" into what one might justifiably call "quality tabloidism"—films which harnessed the energy of contemporary headline grabbing stories

with quality writing, gifted performances and innovative film techniques.

A case in point is HBO's 1993 rendering of the bizarre story of the mother of a Texas junior high school cheerleader who tried to hire a hit man to eliminate her daughter's rival for that position . In 1992, ABC-TV produced a version of this story called *Willing to Kill*, whose solemn treatment of the facts undermined the essential wackiness of the tale. Titled *The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom*, the HBO version of the story, directed by Michael Ritchie (*The Candidate, The Bad News Bears*), and starring Holly Hunter as the mom, Wanda Holloway, captures the off-beat nature of this story. Indeed some of the characters, such as Wanda's brother,Terry Hollaway (Beau Bridges), whom she tried to enlist to hire a hit man, would make Jethro of *The Beverly Hillbillies* seem like a prodigy of sophistication and intellect.

Nonetheless, this is not merely a story of the comeuppance of some trailer park trash, it also shines a happy satiric spotlight on the media circus the affair became. Indeed the setting of the story is a version of the *Oprah Show*, or *A Current Affair*. A high point for the characters in the film comes when Johnny Carson tells a joke about the incident on *The Tonight Show*, and when Wanda learns that the story may be made into a tv movie with Holly Hunter playing her, her sister-in-law comments that, "No,I think it should be Susan Lucci." Thus, *The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom*, became a tale of how the eccentric often chases the conventional in the American landscape.

Of course not every HBO contemporary drama was a masterpiece or even a clever spoof. Some ranged from the journeyman, such as *Shot Through the Head* (1996), and *Citizen X* (1994), which were about the Bosnian conflict and the search for world's most muderous serial killer in the old Soviet Union respectively, and merely sustained the popular belief that the real failure of communism and the danger of extreme nationalism was that nobody ever smiled enough. Others such as *And the Band Played On* (1992), about the early years of the AIDS epidemic, and *If These Walls Could Talk* (1996), a triptych of tales about abortion, starring Demi Moore, Sissy Spacek, and Cher (this latter the highest rated of all HBO movies), mostly impressed with their earnestness.

This was hardly the case with HBO's *Barbarians at the Gate* (1993). Here HBO's producers faced the formidable task of turning a tale of the 1988 takeover battle for RJR Nabisco, chronicled in Bryan Burrough and John Helyar's best seller, complete with such unsexy topics as LBO's, junk bonds and assorted other financial machinations, into a story that would keep audiences awake. To make matters worse, the major characters in this epic tale of greed, Henry Kravis (Jonathan Price) and F.Ross Johnson (James Garner), strain Darryl Zanuck's "rooting interest" theory to the limits. Indeed they quite literally made Gordon Gekko, *Wall Street's* malevolent mogul, seem almost penny ante by comparison.

Faced with such a daunting task HBO turned to Larry Gelbart, who for starters had already turned the Korean war into the classic sitcom *M*A*S*H*. Gelbart essentially saw that the essence of this story was excess. On one side was a millionaire, Johnson, who headed a company (RJR Nabisco) that had one of the nation's largest air fleets at its disposal (26 pilots), and who thought nothing of sending his dog home on one of the jets accompanied by a stewardess to keep it from getting lonely. On the other side was an icy billionaire, Kravis, who made Don Corleone seem cuddily: a "master of the

universe" whose tantrums included smashing companies and laying off thousands whenever he felt a little miffed or couldn't have his own way.

Indeed, playing it for laughs was the only plausible route for a story that begins with RJR Nabisco's experimental cigarette—a new product which was supposed to save the company and reward them with additional billions—reportedly tasting like "shit." Of course when this news hits the fan, the limos, faxes and buyout numbers start flying about with such intensity and illogic that the takeover battle that results resemble nothing less than a corporate foodfight.

In *Barbarians at the Gate* HBO realized that greed was not only good, as those eighties moguls used to say, it was also hilarious and a source of great television. Choosing a very serious story of the eighties, one that literally rang down the curtain on that financial high-flying era, and playing it as farce, is symptomatic of the daring displayed by HBO . If there is a hallmark of the HBO auteur style in the nineties, it has been this willingness to take risks.

There is no better example than HBO's made-for-tv movie *Gia* (1998). From the moment Gia Carangi (Angelina Jolie) utters the words, "Do I make you nervous? Good," the screen becomes so intensely alive with passion that it practically sizzles. Gia—the seventies supermodel whose life made an understatement of the old Hollywood film cliche, "live fast, die young and make a good-looking corpse"— is a torrid bundle of breathtaking beauty, punk aggression, childlike emotional need and self-destructiveness. Of course it's her loves in addition to her supermodel status that defined Gia, and these included not necessarily in this order: women and drugs.

Gia's lesbian love scenes in the film are torrid enough to make the producers of *Ellen* blush. The brutal realism of the drug-taking scenes at times makes you want to turn away. Yet the story of Gia, who died of AIDS in 1986 at 26, is more than just one of soft- core supermodel sensationalism. It is also a cautionary tale (which has made it something of a cult film among supermodels) about the world of modeling, where the best that can be said of their treatment is that models are conceived of as an infinitely replaceable commodity, or as one agency head says of Gia, "This is meat, this is sirloin."

HBO's willingness to tackle a project like Gia— or even, on a more somber level the life story of union organizer and rain-forest savior Chico Mendes (Raul Julia) in John Frankenheimer's *The Burning Season* (1994)— is symptomatic of what has become of HBO made-for-tv movies in the nineties. These films are energized by the passion of writers who model themselves after such gifted television writers as the late Dennis Potter.They want to write for television but don't want the strait jacket of network limitations. They also benefit from such creative and talented directors as Paul Mazursky, Michael Ritchie, John Frankenheimer, et.al., whose names and previous achievements seem to have inspired contemporary Hollywood amnesia. As a result HBO has been able to produce a roster of films that would have gained approving nods from some of the Hollywood moguls of old. Like those old studio heads, the producers at HBO have a passion for making films. The final result is that what matters most about HBO is its desire to make good films, rather than to make films that get good numbers. ■

Al Auster teaches in the communication and media-studies department at Fordham University in New York City.

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Remembering Edgar Bergen

A former script writer evokes a revealing episode from the waning days of Charlie McCarthy's beleaguered creator

By Gordon Cotler

In the spring of 1954 I received a call from an acquaintance at the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency asking if I would consider doing "some part-time work," that he was not at liberty to discuss over the phone, for the Edgar Bergen show.

Edgar Bergen? At the time I was a Talk of the Town reporter for *The New Yorker*. I had never done comedy writing and hadn't the remotest interest in it. Edgar Bergen had certainly been a background presence in my life. He had gone on the air in 1936, when I was 13, and by 1954 his network radio career was nearly a decade longer than the one Jerry Seinfeld would later enjoy on television. Bergen had been number one for several years, in the top five for many more, and had long since become a national icon. Every performer then and since who works with puppets has acknowledged a debt to him.

My acquaintance at Thompson was a P.R. man named Al Durante. We had met only once, when I did a Talk story about a television show sponsored by Kraft Foods, a Thompson client. Durante thought I might be right for this small job for Bergen. I was a new father and a few extra bucks would come in handy.

At the agency I was taken to see John U. Reber, who was, and had apparently been forever, the head of radio programming for Thompson, the nation's largest agency. Reber, I was told, had launched the radio careers of Bergen, Rudy Vallee, Ozzie and Harriet Nelson and Eddie Cantor, among many others. He was said have changed radio listening habits from what did you get last night (meaning what city) to *whom* did you get last night (meaning what stars). When he had okayed a ventriloquist for a radio show those many years ago the move had been looked on as unworkable, even ludicrous. Bergen's instant and extraordinary success had added considerably to Reber's luster.

Long-limbed and stern-faced, Reber fit my image of a circuit-riding preacher in an Arkansas backwater, except for a rare glint of wicked humor in his flinty eyes. He spoke in rambling generalities but his point was clear. Sponsors would no longer support radio shows with big orchestras and high-priced guests. The stars who could had already jumped to television, taking their budgets with them. Edgar Bergen didn't have that option. He had

come to radio from the nightclub circuit as a technically proficient ventriloquist. But after 17 years of making sure Charlie McCarthy's and Mortimer Snerd's punch lines went out clearly to a national audience he had lost the ability to keep his lips from moving. Anyway, ironically, ventriloquism was too static an act for television. Bergen's big-time performing days were clearly numbered.

Reber had devised an ingenious format to keep him on the air a while longer. The new concept would slash all costs (except, of course, Bergen's movie-star salary). Bergen's dummies were going to do what no human comic could get away with: they were relocating to Washington, D.C., to tease, badger and deflate prominent figures in the government.

Bergen was resisting the proposed move and needed reassurance. The one-hour show would not lack for comedy writers. But before the dummies came on Bergen would have to do a straight interview with each guest to allow him/her to make a pitch for whatever was the inducement for him/her to appear. Once the show aired a writer would be brought from Los Angeles to handle this job. Meanwhile, could I supply a few dry-run Q&A script segments to show Bergen that the format was doable and painless? And would a weekly check that was a bit more than three times what I was making after six years on my job be all right?

A few weeks later Bergen showed up from L.A. He had read my samples and asked to meet me at his hotel. The prospect shrunk me to the boy who had first heard Charlie McCarthy on the family Stromberg-Carlson, and I certainly wasn't put at ease by the two Thompson people who separately drew me aside to caution, "For God's sake, don't call Charlie and Mortimer *the dummies*." What kind of oddball was I being introduced to?

Charlie McCarthy was loud, pushy and crude, so naturally Bergen turned out to be soft-spoken, modest and gentlemanly. He spoke in elliptical and glancing fragments— like stones skipping across a lake. The first unequivocal statement from him began, "Now, about the dummies..." He was making it clear that he was not a kook. But I never heard him use the word again. Nor did I ever hear him speak in Charlie's voice unless Charlie was sitting on his knee. And Charlie never just sat around. Until he worked he was out of sight.

The stars who could had already jumped to television... Edgar Bergen didn't have that option.

After that vague meeting, Reber took me aside. Bergen was still not happy with the format but he had been comfortable with me. Why didn't I take a leave of absence from *The New Yorker* and come aboard full time? Not to worry about the comedy parts of the show—two crack writers were coming east to handle the humor. Oh, and Thompson would double what they were paying me.

Bergen took a suite in Washington at the Mayflower Hotel, where the show would be broadcast from a function room. Another, larger, suite had been reserved for the show headquarters. Flanking a huge living room that served as office and rehearsal space were two bedrooms, one for me— I would be away from home three or four days a week— and one for the show's director. All I knew of this gregarious man's credentials was that he had been an American volunteer fighter-pilot in the Battle of Britain. This was confirmed by a magnificent RAF mustache.

The rest of the staff of the stripped-down hour comprised the following: a posse of hotshot Washington P.R. mavens

who would lasso guests at, I think, so much a head; the long-promised comedy writers, two middle-aged men who arrived bewildered and terrified from L.A.; Charles Stark, Kraft's signature announcer, who would come down from New York each weekend with an actress who would read the recipes; Seymour Peck, an entertainment editor at *The New York Times*, who would select the one or two cutting-edge records that would stand in for a live orchestra and who would write a savvy paragraph for Bergen introducing them; two network engineers from New York, a show secretary hired in New York, a secretary for Bergen hired locally, and three or four local women who would type scripts and perform office chores.

Three hours before broadcast time the Sunday of the first show our large living room was crowded with almost all of the above plus a pair of Bergen's agents from William Morris and some suits down from New York to observe the premier. John Reber arrived with an expensive-looking antique volume tucked under his arm. (He had once told me that he preferred reading first editions because they made him feel closer to the authors.)

Reber was the only serene presence in an angry, chaotic atmosphere. Bergen had until now endured with outward good humor a cavalcade of humiliations. Instead of a large theater-like studio with uniformed ushers and glassed-in control booth his show would emanate from a room where a hardware firm had just held a regional breakfast meeting, and the broadcast equipment would be stacked on a buffet table. Rather than, say, the Ray Noble orchestra and a vocalist like Anita Ellis he would be backed by the week's cutting-edge platter, "Rock Around the Clock", featuring Bill Haley and the Comets. The promised big names from Congress and the administration had turned out to be at best medium names, and a slapdash, fragmented dry run earlier that day, adjusted for the complex schedules of the guests, had revealed them to be no match for Don Ameche as straight men. The director had timed the various segments and calculated the length of the show to within, he believed, two or three minutes.

Two or three minutes? Bergen had finally exploded. He was dealing with amateurs, the enterprise was a disaster, and he would not subject himself to ridicule. No way would he go on the air in three hours with this sorry mess. His agents stood firmly at his sides.

Some of the women were near tears, while the men offered noisy excuses for the state of affairs. During the crossfire of accusations and recriminations I saw the show going down in flames, my heart sinking with it. I had that week been given another raise and was now making nearly eight times what I was paid at the magazine only a few weeks before.

In this charged atmosphere John Reber dragged a chair forward and called for silence. He had a finger in his first edition and looked as if he was about to read a passage from the Book of Job. "This is from the novel about Gargantua and Pantagruel by the Frenchman François Rabelais," he began in his preacher's voice and opened the book. He then read in its entirety the quintessentially Rabelasian passage listing in graphic detail the myriad substitutes in nature for toilet paper, and the advantages of each. At first he was greeted by a shocked silence, and then a stifled giggle or two. But as the bawdy list kept growing, great gales of laughter, including Bergen's, convulsed

This enterprise was a disaster and he would not subject himself to ridicule.

the room. The crisis had passed. The show went on.

Or rather, lurched on. Mid-broadcast, the director jettisoned "Rock Around the Clock," one of several hasty cuts. The interview segments struck me as interminable, the bits with Charlie and Mortimer too polite. Missing was something like the raucous banter between Charlie and W.C. Fields. ("Is that your nose or the headlight of an oncoming train?" "Be quiet or I'll whittle you down to a coat hanger."). The engineers had to work to "sweeten" the tepid reaction of our small audience. Reber pronounced the broadcast a success, but he may have been the only one.

The comedy writers fled back to Hollywood. From then on we phoned them a list of next Sunday's guests and they phoned back a bunch of jokes for me to adapt into some sort of continuity. I was told that one of these writers maintained a vast library of file drawers crammed with jokes cross-referenced to a fare-thee-well. Radios planted all over the house were timed to go on, along with a recording device, when a show aired that might yield jokes. A secretary came in once a day and collected the product, much as she might the sap from a stand of Vermont maples. Despite this mighty resource we were sent the same jokes week after week. This didn't bother Edgar. Old jokes were like old friends; he trusted them.

Anyway, it wasn't the quality of the jokes that made Charlie McCarthy popular but his larger-than-life personality that leaped across the airwaves— the brash, monocled, arrogant brat, horny beyond his years, in constant rebellion against Bergen's avuncular guidance. He was easy to write for; he almost wrote himself. Even easier was Mortimer Snerd, Bergen's exasperatingly dim-witted country boy dummy, whose failure to comprehend the workings of government probably echoed the listeners'.

Bergen was a good editor, and he had a light hand. He knew that I could write for him before I had the least idea that I could, and the comedy segments went at a gallop. My concern was the straight interviews. I explained to the guests when I pre-interviewed them that the answers I would write to Bergen's questions merely indicated how much time they had for each and to change them as they saw fit. I was surprised that none of them ever did. And then I realized that these were people accustomed to having speeches written by staff members. They read what they were handed. Incidentally, some of these makers and shakers became tongue-tied with awe when they were first presented to Charlie McCarthy.

Dwindling listenership was only one source of Bergen's increasing unhappiness. Why, he kept asking, did we have so many Democrats on the show? He was, I gathered, a generous contributor to Republican causes. The answer was that with Eisenhower in the White House the Republicans were more conscious of their image, less willing to chat with dummies. One week we took the show to a hotel in New York, where Governor Averell Harriman was our principal guest. During a read-through in a cocktail lounge Bergen kept interrupting to complain about the Democratic program Harriman was espousing. Harriman put down the script and said, "This is interesting. Why don't we forget the script and just have a free-wheeling discussion?" Bergen clutched his script to his breast. Oh, no. No way. He never spoke a word on the air that didn't come off the printed page.

He never spoke a word on the air that didn't come off a printed page.

To lift Bergen's spirits Reber let us go to

Los Angeles for a few weeks, where Edgar could be with his family and interview movie people. One night he had the staff to his home for a buffet supper and a screening of an Edgar Bergen movie. He must have seen the film countless times but he remained fully focused on it, his attention diverted only when he had to go back to the projection booth to kick-start the stalled state-of-the-art projector. He was fascinated by machinery. One afternoon he drove me deep into the San Fernando Valley, all orange groves then, to a weathered shed that held a large piece of antique farm machinery he owned. He got it started, we watched it throb and jerk for a couple of minutes, and then we drove back to town.

He owned and flew a small airplane and pressed me to fly to Palm Springs with him. I couldn't picture him as a pilot and I kept making excuses. Finally our fighter-pilot director said, "What's the big deal? I'll go." He returned chalky white, the RAF mustache wilting, and proclaimed it the worst flight of his life. Bergen didn't see very well, couldn't find an airport, and landed in a factory parking lot.

Back in Washington we tried to liven up the format with a couple of shows from embassies. The first, from the Swedish Embassy, was a nod to Bergen's ethnic roots. The second was from the Japanese Embassy. During the live broadcast a confused servant passing hors d'oeuvres thrust the tray invitingly between Charlie and the microphone, and looked as if he wasn't going to move until the dummy took one. He had to he led away.

It didn't much matter what we did, the ratings kept sinking. Listeners interested in politics were better served elsewhere and those who wanted comedy were impatient with the format. Where was the old Charlie, bantering with Hollywood studs and drooling at the sight of Dorothy Lamour? Bergen looked more and more the gloomy Swede. Tired and discouraged, he missed his California life. After six or seven months of stoically enduring these Sunday nights he announced abruptly one Tuesday that he wouldn't do another. And he didn't. Rudy Valee was brought in to finish the season with a different format.

A year or so later, I was surprised to hear Bergen's voice on my telephone at home. John Reber had died suddenly and Bergen had come east for the funeral. It would be held in the far reaches of Pennsylvania and he assumed I would go with him. The expedition would require being away two or three days and despite my respect for Reber I couldn't manage that. When I told Bergen so I sensed his disapproval. It was the last time we spoke.

He lived another twenty-something years and played occasional dates right up to his death, but his glory days had ended with radio's. ■

Gordon Cotler is the author of half a dozen novels. His television credits include movies and pilots for Richard Widmark, Art Carney, Margot Kidder, Lindsay Wagner, Tony Roberts, Rock Hudson, Richard Crenna and others, most of them written with long-time partner Don M. Mankiewicz.

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Network Expense Accounts in Olden Times: A Course in Creative Writing

A veteran of the restaurant-and-travel wars remembers what it was meant to be enterprisingly inventive

By Mort Hochstein

Did you hear the one about the writer who had lunch with a horse or the news correspondent who submitted a bill for cab rides on a submarine? They're part of the lore of another time when expense accounts were considered by many to be part of their pay and ranked among their most creative efforts.

In his "On the Job" column in *The New York Times* recently, writer Lawrence Van Gelder did a roundup entitled "Expenses Extraordinaire." Several of the stories were volunteered by former newspaper and broadcasting personnel. One that I particularly related to came from Steve Zousmer who reported his creative use of the expense account while working at ABC-TV.

"I once put in for lunch with a horse," he writes, "I was at the Kentucky Derby as chief writer for *Good Morning America* in 1978, the year of the great Affirmed-Ayldar rivalry. A Churchill Downs representative had been assigned to the television staff, but there was a limit to how many people could plausibly claim to have taken him to every meal every day. So I alleged that I had gained editorial perspective in an $11 lunch with "Derby insider" Raymond Earl.

"Raymond Earl, with his conveniently human, but unrecognizable name, did indeed run in the Derby, and as far as I know, he's still running. But I finished in

the money. If challenged, I would have claimed for my hamburger and $5 in oats for the big fella."

Van Gelder quotes another creative expense account report from Dick Smyster, founding editor of *The Oak Ridger*, a daily newspaper in Oak Ridge, Tenn. Smyster recalls that in the paper's early years, one of the sundry jobs of its small news staff was to conduct tour groups, usually children, through the plant.

After one such tour, a staff member submitted the following expense claim: "Three peppermint candies @2 cents each in order to cover up odor of Friday lunch beer before taking Girl Scouts through office on tour."

"My God, they hung the wrong guy!"

All of this brought back torrents of memories from my days as an NBC publicist and later as a writer and editor for NBC News.

In Paris last Spring, I found myself swapping expense-account stories with a former Time-Life editor. He told me of a *Time* correspondent who had gone on a long voyage aboard an aircraft carrier and returned home to submit an overblown voucher that included several long taxicab rides.

"How," demanded his incredulous boss "can you charge for taxi cab rides on an aircraft carrier?" Unflustered, the correspondent responded that it was a very large aircraft carrier.

"Funny," I told the man from *Time*, "I've heard that same story attributed to Martin Agronsky, when he worked for NBC News. Although in his case, I think, he was on a round-the-world cruise in a nuclear sub." The late Martin Agronsky was legendary among the big spenders. On another occasion, he was sent to Israel to cover the Eichmann trial and apparently lived very well during that lengthy examination. When his expense account came before Julian Goodman, then heading up NBC's Washington news bureau, Goodman stormed out of his office, waving Agronsky's submission and shouted for all the world to hear "My God, they hung the wrong guy!"

As a writer on the *Today* show, I worked frequently with Molly Sharpe, who produced our Washington political segments. Molly's job depended on being able to deliver Washington bigwigs, politicos and such, with very little notice. So she was expected to wine and dine the major players in the capitol, and she really did it. Her favorite lunch spot was the Jockey Club where her maitre'd, a pal, knew her so well that he gave her a book of receipts and told her to write her own tickets.

Today, in these times of computerized everything, it would be almost impossible to get a blank receipt from a restaurant, but I am sure there are enterprising people who've overcome that problem.

There's also a story that Molly had a rubber stamp made with the name of some fictitious restaurant so that she could print her own receipts. Those were the days, former NBC Washington producer Bob Asman observes, when everyone winked at such devices.. "The main thing," Bob says, "was that Molly got the guests when we needed them, always beating the competition."

Asman's favorite story is about Charley Jones, of the Korean War Jones brothers, who were daredevil cameramen in the early days of that era. Charley became a director at NBC Washington and built a career as a get-it-done field operative and occasional producer. "Charley once returned from a trip to Florida where he directed a feature for *Today*," Asman relates.

"His expense accounts were always filled with odd elements, but one caught the auditor's attention and was questioned. Charley had done a feature on those water-skiing young men and shapely

ladies who put on shows on the Florida waterways. The item that raised a question was a pistol.

"Why," Charley was asked, "did you buy a pistol?" He had an answer ready," Asman relates: "To kill the snakes that were around those shallow lakes." Everyone laughed and he got his reimbursement.

A British friend tells of a writer at BBC News in London during World War II. Each week he would submit a generous bill for entertaining a certain Colonel Sikorsky of the War Office. Eventually it was questioned and he escaped injury by declaring that Colonel Sikorsky was a valuable contact and great source of information. Finally he was summoned to his superior's office, who told him that he had called the War Office and was informed that there was no Colonel Sikorsky on their staff. The correspondent responded indignantly "That man must be an impostor. I shall have nothing further to do with him!"

"Look on it as creative writing"

Robert Heller, formerly with the *Wall Street Journal* in New York and now an author and consultant on business affairs in London, told of the first time he had to submit an expense account and didn't know the game. "Look on it," a co-worker advised him, "as creative writing."

That same sort of thing happened to Peter Hochstein, no relative, on his first job as a cub reporter on the *New York Post* in 1960. "While running around town on breaking stories," Peter relates, "I'd managed to run up a few expenses, some 15-cent subway tokens, a few dimes, which in those days got you a phone call, and one cab fare for $1.15. All told, my expenses for the week came to $4.35."

He was about to hand it in when a reporter at the next desk, read it over his shoulder, ripped it from his hands in horror and tore it to shreds. "What are you trying to do," he growled, "ruin it for the rest of us?" "Here, let me show you how to do an expense account." "And that," Peter recalls, "is how my first weekly expense account at the *New York Post*, came to something more than $15, the price of a dinner for two in those days."

NBC's affiliate-relations department always had a good-times, playboy kind of reputation inside the company. Harry Bannister, NBC's legendary Station Relations VP, was asked in the early '60's by one of his brand-new regional managers for guidance on the company's travel expense account policy. Harry's reply: "A man who can't get a new topcoat out of a trip to Cleveland doesn't belong with the company."

Former NBC technical wizard Frank Vierling tells of one of his bosses who lectured his engineering crew on how to make a few extra dollars at a national political convention in Chicago. The man advised his staff to use the subway and charge for a cab on their trips to the Stockyards, not exactly the sort of advice you'd expect from a company official those days and these days.

In the mid seventies, NBC producer Arthur White took a group to a small town south of Oaxaca, Mexico, to cover a solar eclipse. "We stayed in primitive conditions, three in a room, $8 a night," Arthur recalls. One day, our rooms became unavailable and we had to find new lodgings. We got into two cars and roared up to Oaxaca. I knew the town, so I told the crew and reporter Jack Perkins, to have a drink at the local bar while I scouted around. I came back and we all headed toward an imposing, gated building, where the manager gave each guy a towel and a bar of soap and told them to enjoy their stay. He snapped his fingers and 28 girls came out and the guys realized I'd rented the local brothel for the night, at $25 for the rooms.

"Back in New York," White recalls, "I

warned Shad Northshield,, our executive producer, that he'd see a $25 a night charge among all the eight-dollar billings. I also did not know and did not want to know if the crew availed themselves of the local talent."

Necessity, of course, is the mother of invention. Asman recalls being similarly creative while covering an Eisenhower round-the-world trip. "In those days," he remembers, "shipping film was an art and we aimed at getting it to London, where it could be transmitted frame by frame on the undersea AT&T cable to New York. This was before satellites, of course.

"If it had not worked I might have been burned at the stake"

"We were in Delhi and I learned of a commercial jet flying from Karachi to London, but I had no way of getting my film bag from Delhi to Karachi. So I chartered a plane for about $1,500 — an enormous amount of cash in those days — just to deliver one can of film to our contact in Karachi, who would get it on that plane to London. Then he was faced with the problem of getting a charter to fly from India to Pakistan, which was 'enemy' country. I went to the Pakistani chargé d'affaires in Delhi and had him sign a form and call his government to allow that charter to land in Karachi, and it all worked. Since NBC's film from London was fed to NY and aired before any other coverage of Ike in India, the cost of the charter was not challenged. But if it had not worked," Asman laughs, "I might have been burned at the stake."

As a publicist for NBC before joining the news department, I was chief column planter, which meant I was free to share the company's largesse with any newspaper person in town. That covered a lot of entertaining ground, how much I didn't realize until the day when my department manager came to me and asked, "Mort, can I use ['use' being a euphemism for putting a person down on the expense account] *so and so* this week?" He wanted to "use" one of my press contacts on his expense account.

Later, as a writer on *Today*, I enjoyed a $50-a-week expense account, which I often had difficulty filling. After a while I somehow acquired a book of receipts from a place called Yellowfingers, where I had never gone. I submitted chits from Yellowfingers for several weeks and finally the unit business manager called me in, to tell me: "Mort, Yellowfingers is a coffee shop. If you wanted to spend $23 there," he said, pointing out that item on my expense account, "you'd have to eat the full menu. Find yourself another restaurant."

Joe Coggins, a former NBC News writer and producer, tells about the radio commentator Morgan Beatty's first and last days at the network. "When Mo Beatty first came to New York, he was very deferential to his new brass hats and somewhat timid about submitting his first expense account, which included such items as a nickel for the subway and something at a Horn and Hardart cafeteria. He learned better," says Coggins. "When he left NBC, he submitted an expense account for his final day. It came to about $125. When asked about the charge, Mo explained it was low "because I didn't have lunch."

From what I know of the current business world, the big spenders are still out there and I am sure that expense-account writing remains as creative an activity as it was in the sixties and seventies. ■

Since retiring from NBC in 1986 Mort Hochstein has been writing about wine, food and business. This article is adapted from a piece he wrote recently for *Peacock North*, a journal written, produced and financed by former NBC employees.

Madness in the Morning: Life and Death in TV's Early Morning Rating War

By Richard Hack
New Millennium Press, Beverly Hills, CA

If It Bleeds, It Leads: An Anatomy of Television News

By Matthew R. Kerbel
Westview(Perseus), Boulder, CO

Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media

By Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel
Century Foundation, New York

By Lawrence Laurent

Americans keep learning, over and over, that the late Philip L. Graham, publisher of *The Washington Post*, was correct in his observation that our daily journalism — at its very best — provides only "a first rough draft of history." Or to interpret his words in another way, the term "journalism" comes to us from *jour*, the French word for "day." (Our word, "journey," was, originally, the distance a person could travel in one day.)

Which should tell us moderns that we may be asking for trouble when we insist on permanence in the news-gathering activities of daily broadcasting and publishing. Writer-Editor Pete Hammill put it another, highly accurate way, when he cautioned in his book, *News Is a Verb*, that "40 percent" of anything learned the first day of a breaking story will turn out to be wrong.

In supposedly less rushed forms, such as the television documentary or the printed and bound pages of a book, we expect a higher standard of accuracy. And sometimes, our expectations are even fulfilled. We can, for example, virtually wallow in the details of Richard Hack's new history of weekday morning news programs on what used to be the only three networks. His book is called *Madness in the Morning: Life and Death in TV's Early Morning Rating War*. This madness began when *Today* arrived on NBC (January 14, 1952) and had only local station competition for over two years, before CBS began the *CBS Morning Show* (March 15, 1954). The third network waited until January 6, 1975 to join the competition with the beginning of *A.M. America* on ABC-TV.

Hack brings to this history his experience as "television critic and editor of *The Hollywood Reporter* and West Coast National Programming Editor for *TV Guide* magazine." He is currently identified as an "investigative writer" and he displays fine determination and great endurance in cataloging every twitch and shift in the ratings, the impermanent casts of performers, and the changing producers

in the three-way competition for viewers between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. (E.S.T.)

The ratings for each show may be small, but advertising is sold five days a week, 52 weeks a year. The billing prizes in the competition annually run into many millions.

One of Hack's early discoveries is the existence of what he calls "the Curse" on many of those who appear in the "Battle of the Dawn." He says the curse was there right from the beginning and afflicted the calm charm and wide-ranging intellect of *Today* host Dave Garroway. Dave arrived with a bad habit: a dependence on a Chicago physician's prescription for a "magic elixir," a combination of "vitamin B-12, molasses, and liquid cocaine." Garroway referred to this potion as "The Doctor," and, writes Hack, "Garroway carried it everywhere and used it often. It was the beginning of a dependency on cocaine that would shadow him the rest of his life."

Long after Garroway had left the *Today* show and had been unable to find a job in broadcasting, he "committed suicide by putting a gun to his head" on July 21, 1982. He was dead at the age of 69 and, according to Hack, "[t]he curse had won."

This curse fascinates Richard Hack. He concludes that the early morning ratings wars have been overwhelmed with "tragedy and drama," and he ticks off a list of past and, he thinks, future victims. He writes: "The names are familiar, if no longer the faces: Dave Garroway, the first human sacrifice, lost his sanity; David Hartman, his power; Kathleen Sullivan, her fortune and her waistline; Joan Lunden, her marriage but not her happiness; Bryant Gumbel, his popularity if not his future. Add Lauer and Couric, Newman and McRee, and the story becomes too laden with tragedy and drama to be mere coincidence."

Or perhaps, a simpler explanation is possible. The supply of talented and attractive persons who desire a career in broadcasting has always been greater than the number of good jobs. Competition for top spots is endless and continuous. This held true among the three national TV networks even before their power was diminished by the arrival of 400 non-network TV stations and the hundreds of narrow-gauge, "niche-oriented" specialized offerings of the cable networks. Performers do wear out their welcome. They do age. They pick up bad habits, and they get replaced. No other way is even possible. Moreover, television, like professional football, tends to belong to the young. Experience often constitutes a detriment to further success.

Richard Hack is to be commended for his determined command of minutia as he follows the winners and the losers. His book will prove invaluable to students of broadcasting's history, particularly this view of the never-ending battles between entertainment and news divisions for control of these income-producing early morning hours. As soon as the other side's ratings start to sag, either news or entertainment is quick to move in, convinced that it has the answer to attracting more viewers.

Hack's command of details, however, makes a couple of silly mistakes even harder for a reader to understand. Millennium Press Publisher Michael Viner's energy and show-business know-how have led to a successful career in a hazardous business. He should have hired an editor to rid the book of two inexcusable mistakes. For example, Hack refers to President's Clinton's "1994 inauguration." Sorry, Clinton was elected in 1992 and 1996, meaning that his inaugurals took place in 1993 and 1997. (Almost any politician can spotlight 1994 as the year

that control of the Congress changed, as the Republican Party took over the House of Representatives for the first time in nearly 40 years).

The second inexcusable error occurs in an account about African-Americans who emigrated to settle in Liberia, on the west coast of Africa. Somehow, the Liberians become confused with the descendants of slaves, who "dominated Libya's politics until recently." Sorry, Libya is on the north coast of the African continent and is an Arabic dictatorship. (We know that a certain candidate for president can't tell Slovenia apart from Slovakia, but publishers ought to be held to higher standards.)

Such errors as those two cannot be found in another valuable addition to the literature of electronic journalism. The title comes straight from any TV newsroom: *If It Bleeds, It Leads: An Anatomy of Television News* by Matthew R. Kerbel.

Kerbel, 42, has worked as a radio news reporter and a PBS newswriter, and this experience enables him to have a lot of fun with both local and national TV news. He uses transcripts of daily news programs and the TV talk shows to demonstrate that little difference can be found between the two. Meaning that those deep tones from the serious "newsman" can sound very much like the scurrilous, lowest-common-denominator, sex-shock-scream gatherings of the dreadful, dishonorable daytime syndicate offerings of Jerry Springer, Jenny Jones and Ricki Lake.

Kerbel's documentation is also detailed, and he takes great care with his selections. The content of the broadcast is set in italic type, contrasted with the regular typefaces for his commentary. He makes an exception only for *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, which Kerbel says has "steadfastly avoided the sort of programming described here. Its absence from the book makes it too easy to forget that responsible programming exists and that is can command an audience. Like the local news operations that eschew sleaze and embrace a more balanced perspective, Oprah should be remembered — and applauded."

He does have a grand time with such standard practices as the hyping of news stories during the Nielsen ratings sweeps. Carefully chosen phrases lend great importance to rather mundane and ordinary events. He has most of his fun, I think, with the way that the daily weather forecasts are produced. Kerbel notes: ". . . people seem to love weather reports. Lots of people tune in local news primarily to get the weather. They just put up with the stuff about murders in popular restaurants while they're waiting. . . ."

Kerbel cites what he calls ". . .the Fundamental Rule: Successful weather reports should contain as much extraneous information as possible." Another vital rule reads: "Weather segments are the only place where they try to keep things complicated."

He makes use of material that was actually telecast in four of the largest U.S. media markets: Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Phoenix and Detroit. He takes samples from ABC's *World News Tonight*, NBC's *Nightly News*, and *The CBS Evening News with Dan Rather*. He compares the content of so-called straight news programs with the content of emotion-laden talk shows headed by Sally, Jerry, Ricki, Jenny and

Montel. Quite often the result reminds a reader of the kind of dialogue found in the first comic novels of Max Shulman or H. Allen Smith.

Another aspect of the nation's determined reliance on daily journalism can be found in the scholarly and sober book called *Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media* by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel. A newspaper journalist for more than 30 years, Kovach now works as Curator of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard. Rosenstiel directs the Project for Excellence in Journalism, a journalists' group affiliated with the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

This fine book begins with David Halberstam's preface and his conviction: "The past year has been, I think, the worst year for American journalism since I entered the profession 44 years ago." This conclusion, of course, stems from broadcast and print coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky story that led to the second presidential impeachment trial in U.S. history.

Kovach and Rosenstiel's first concern is the newly developed "Mixed Media Culture." They write: "These new characteristics of the Mixed Media Culture are creating what we call the new journalism of assertion, which is less interested in substantiating whether something is true and more interested in getting it into public discussion. The journalism of assertion contributes to the press being a conduit of politics as cultural civil war.'

They add: "Television is well suited to symbolic, polarizing issues. And the growing heterogeneity of the press, while it more accurately reflects the diverse interests of the audience, makes it difficult for the press to find common ground."

The authors' chief concern, then, is whether the long-standing and useful "journalism of verification will soon be overwhelmed by the new journalism of assertion."

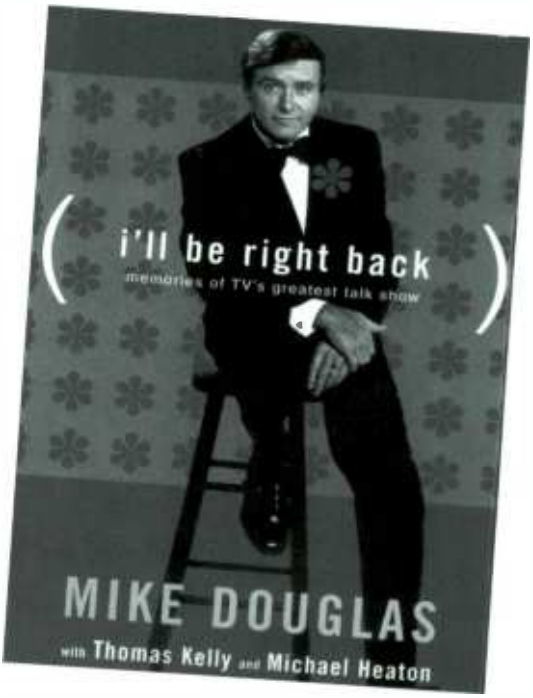
Or, to cite a concern of one final book, called *The Entertainment Economy*, the number of news outlets has expanded far more than ever before. Yet the amount of news remains no greater than it ever was. The newer "niche-oriented" news programs quickly found a solution: they hire high verbals, available for a price, who hurl insults at each other in 15-second sound bites. ■

Lawrence Laurent is the Television Critic (Emeritus) of *The Washington Post*. He teaches "Critical Writing and Reviewing for the Mass Media" at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

I'll Be Right Back: Memories of TV's Greatest Talk Show

by Mike Douglas with Thomas Kelly and Michael Heaton
Simon and Schuster, New York

By Bernard M. Timberg



Echoing, mirroring, listening intently, laughing and responding to guest after guest, Mike Douglas was a kind of Zelig or Forrest Gump passing through two decades of the social history and performing arts on television. His show was nationally syndicated from 1961-82, and he set a number of important precedents for Merv Griffin, Dinah Shore and other syndicated daytime talk-show hosts. Years before Barbara Walters obtained her highly publicized million-dollar contract in her move to ABC, Mike Douglas broke that mark in negotiations with the Westinghouse "Group W" network that distributed his show. The book claims he was the first television talk personality to do so.

Douglas sums up and celebrates his success on TV in a book that might be unbearable if it were not leavened with the self-conscious and self-limiting humor that was one of his distinguishing trademarks. He tells us right at the beginning that he wrote the book with the help of a writing/editing team who forced him to organize, condense, and critique today's talk shows. (This latter request was almost unbearable for Douglas, whose innate tendency was to be positive about everything, and it led to one of the weaker chapters in the book.) Still, the talk-show host's voice comes through clearly in the book from its opening lines:

Looking back, there are times when it all seems like one long, wonderful dream... Was that my television show that started in a tiny Cleveland studio and ended up being broadcast all over the world for two decades?... Was that really me singing duets with Barbara Streisand? Dancing with Fred Astaire? Running roadwork with Muhammad Ali? Trading barbs with Bob Hope? Doing bits with Jackie Gleason and Jack Benny? Playing straight man for Bill Cosby and Billy Crystal? Chatting with presidents, kings, and goddesses?"

If the reader can accept his over-the-top, gushy style, there is a good deal of information in this book. The author explains how he was chosen to host this daytime show. He includes chapters on the singers, composers and songwriters who appeared, the comedians, the film stars, athletes and politicians, funny, memorable and exasperating moments, and includes generous tributes to his production team and wife.

Mike Douglas' memoirs will undoubtedly both please and exasperate readers. It will please fans and historians searching for nuggets of information about the first decades of syndicated talk, and irritate readers who would like him to go farther

with this material. Those readers will not be satisfied with the book's breezy approach. They will want more background on the economics of the show, more depth to his explanations of the show's success, and more context to the stories he tells.

One strange absence in the book is any reference to the city of Philadelphia, where *The Mike Douglas Show* resided from 1963 to 1978, the bulk of the show's time on the air, while nine pages are devoted to his first two years in Cleveland. Is this a reflection on Douglas' relationship with the Group W station in Philadelphia during his final years there?

Unlike many chatty show-business biographies, however, the book is well indexed, and it provides a consistent portrait of a certain highly recognizable and influential type of TV host personality. Mike Douglas' talk-show host persona is by now a familiar one. Part Horatio Alger, part Dale Carnegie, he is the loyal and enthusiastic boy next door, the devoted husband, the conservative pater familias, a regular guy. He is someone who devoted his life to pursuing the American dream-and achieved it. He is willing to hear the other side but not embrace it. Indeed, it is a type that is so recognizable that it is easily confused—as Mike Douglas was with one of his chief daytime rivals, Merv Griffin. (Douglas' confusion with Griffin is a running joke in the book.)

T*he Mike Douglas Show* began in 1961 as the brainchild of an ambitious producer, Woody Fraser, who had been a production assistant when Douglas was a staff singer at the Chicago NBC station. Fraser convinced Group W executives to hire Douglas for a new show out of Cleveland that revolved around a new "co-host" concept: a different performing personality teaming each week with Douglas for live broadcasts. The qualities Douglas possessed on the air were uniquely suited to the co-hosting role. He possessed a strange combination of ego and egolessness, the drive to host a show 90 minutes a day, five days a week, no breaks or vacations, as Douglas often reminds us, and a simultaneous willingness to work with new situations and guests, to go with the flow, whatever that might be, week after week. Douglas possessed an intense curiosity about people, a star-struck fan quality in the presence of celebrity performers, a relentless cheerfulness and conviviality, and a pliant, "silly putty" quality (Douglas' own words) that enabled him to respond to any guest or situation. He would become the background, the frame, the responder, the mime or the straight man. He would put on hats, join a guest in a hot-tub, do whatever it took to book a guest and convivially accompany him or her on the air.

Douglas' career is summarized by 75 photographs that show him in combination with guests over the years. It is striking to see how Douglas fits the moods, costumes, and personalities of his guests. He listens respectfully to Mother Teresa; leans like a one-sided teepee into a duet with Pearl Bailey; or puts on a matching apron for a cooking demonstration with Sophia Loren. Sitting quietly to the left in a triptych with Little Richard and Liberace, Douglas' conservatively cut suit is a perfect offset to Little Richard's flamboyant sash, bellbottoms, and silver boots and Liberace's exquisitely tailored tiger-skin tuxedo. In another photograph Douglas imitates, in sync, Jackie Gleason's famous "away-we-go" two-step. In another he echoes Red Skelton's tramp costume in a "Freddie the Freeloader" routine.

One of the contributions of which Douglas remains most proud is his showcasing of African- Americans during an era when, in Nat King Cole's famous words,

"Madison Avenue was afraid of the dark." Douglas has a chapter that discusses the African-Americans who appeared on the show. One out of every five photographs shows musical performers like Ray Charles and Chuck Berry, comedians like Richard Pryor and Bill Cosby, sports figures like Muhammad Ali and Reggie Jackson, activists and intellectual leaders like Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson, Angela Davis, Bobby Seale and Malcolm X. Douglas made a point of inviting African-American performers, intellectuals and political leaders on his show and would talk with them seriously. *The Mike Douglas Show* may have been for many Americans the first direct exposure to black perspectives, and sometimes counterculture perspectives, unfiltered by formulaic news media accounts. Here the "soft" entertainment of *The Mike Douglas Show* did the hard work of cultural information, but here, as elsewhere in the book, the reader is left without context. It would be nice to have more information about this policy of entertaining black guests. How much was that policy due to Douglas' own convictions and previous experience, and what part did the demographics of the show (he alludes to having a significant black audience) influence this decision? We never know.

Douglas was also proud of his show's policy, initiated by producer Woody Fraser, of presenting radical "mixes" of guests: unlikely pairs or opposites who would encounter each other on the air within the safely combustible, ritualized world of a TV talk show. Dick Cavett's show would later capitalized on just these kinds of "mixes," and others would attempt them as well. But Douglas's disarming personality and programming independence on Group W allowed him to entertain an unusual range of guests.

In the midst of the culture wars of the late 1960s and 70s Mike Douglas transcended his own limited on-screen persona on television. He became a highly visible, flesh-and-blood representative of mainstream American ideas and values. This cultural role was recognized 20 years after the show had gone off the air when in 1998 the cable channel VH 1 replayed an entire week of *The Mike Douglas Show*. Rhino Video then took the unusual step of reissuing this week in a five-volume boxed video edition with a commemorative book. It was the week in 1972 when John Lennon and Yoko Ono co-hosted the show and picked its guests, including singer Chuck Berry, consumer activist Ralph Nader, Surgeon General Jesse Steinfeld, Yippie activist Jerry Rubin, and Black Panther representative Bobby Seale. After 20 years of neglect, *The Mike Douglas Show* had become, once again, a cultural event.

Mike Douglas' memoirs come at an opportune time. Up to now what has been written about television talk shows and hosts has tended to focus on CBS, ABC, and NBC. This has been reinforced by retrospectives, advertising and public-relations campaigns rehearsing or celebrating network history. As the number of nationally syndicated shows accelerated, the picture began to change. In pre-show publicity for her morning program in 1998, Rosie O'Donnell paid tribute to the hours she spent with Mike, Merv and Dinah. She said she planned to return to the comfort of her syndicated forebears with a "nice talk" format in distinct contrast to the "trash talk" of hosts like Ricki Lake and Jerry Springer. O'Donnell writes a short introductory homage to Douglas at the beginning of his memoirs. The choice is fitting, linking one generation of talk-show hosts to another.

From the evidence of the book, Mike Douglas was a genuinely nice man. Unlike Carson, who rarely made friends on the set and was notoriously uneasy in social

settings, Douglas appears to have made friends easily among his celebrity guests. "Niceness" is a basic ingredient of the daytime talk format he helped create. Perhaps it came from his childhood as the son of an alcoholic (he briefly alludes to this and the role his strong mother played in his early life), but one is struck by the consistency of Douglas' role as talk-show host and narrator of the book. It is the conscious role of being a "good boy," staying on track, being good to his mother, wife and family and providing them with a solid income, all this from the heart of the notoriously unstable world of show business. His biography begins and ends with these themes.

In the end, it was perhaps Douglas' very surface-ness that made him a success. He was a tabula rasa, a foil for all those around him. The surface quality of Douglas' narrative is both the strength and weakness of the book. He alludes, for example, to a "rough transition" when the show went off the air after he was brutally "fired" by Group W executives in 1982. The show was still at the top of its ratings. He never fully explains why this happened. (One suspects that singer John Davidson, who had a brief run as Douglas' replacement, was significantly cheaper.)

For Douglas, the main effect was that it jettisoned him back into civilian life after a brief syndication run when, as Douglas puts it, he and his wife went out "on our own terms." He tells us at the end of the book that he is now happily retired and that his life revolves around his four G's- "Gen, the girls, the grandchildren, and golf." For a good part of his life he has been a television man, and he is telling a television story. His grandchildren come in and want to play at the end of the book. "You know the routine," he says. "Think of it as a commercial. Get a quick snack if you want, make yourself comfortable, and don't worry—I'll be right back."

What is surprising to many television viewers, critics and fans is that this mostly forgotten television personality does keep coming back—in his book, on the screen and in the avatars of the electronic personalities who followed him. ■

Bernard Timberg is an associate professor in the communication arts department of Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, NC, and the author of *Television Talk: The History, Subgenres and Stars of the Television Talk Shows*, to be published later this year by the University of Texas Press.

Correction

In a review of Lesley Stahl's book, *Reporting Live*, in the Winter 2000 issue of this publication her first name was misspelled. Our profound apologies.
—Ed.

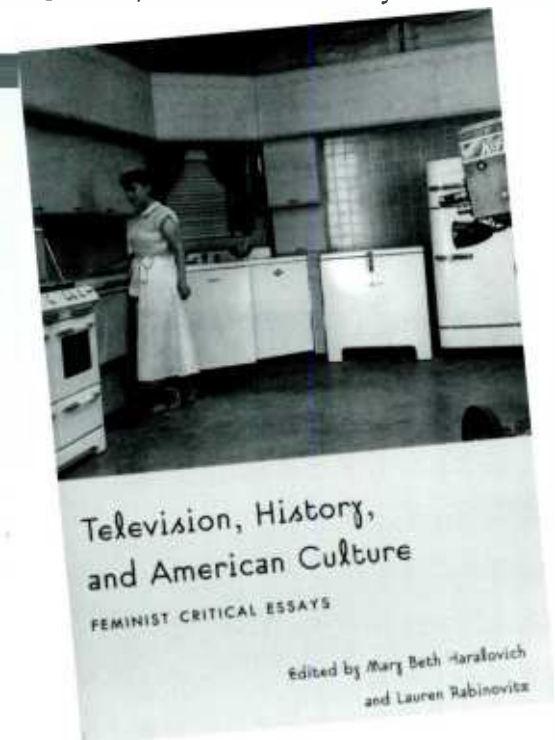
Television, History, and American Culture

Edited by Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz.
Duke University Press, Durham and London

By Marlene Sanders

Whenever I am confronted with a book about the early days of television news, I admit to checking the index under my name. I was there from the 50's on, and am always interested to see how authors or reporters view events that I had something do with. In this case, various feminist academics have examined radio, 50's TV drama, talk shows and documentaries, among other areas from the 20's to the present.

My obvious focus was on the chapter done by Associate Professor of Communications and Women's Studies, Julia D'Acci, at the University of Wisconsin. It was also just my luck, or misfortune, to have an ongoing relationship with that university's Historical Society, which collects the papers, videos, films and notes of journalists like me. I did not recall that I had given them my production files on an hour-long documentary called *Population: Boom or Doom*, which I produced and reported in 1973. It turns out that some of my notes, long forgotten, are quoted.



The chapter studied dealt with reporting done on abortion and reproductive rights in TV documentaries in the early 70's. The gist of the complaints are that, well intentioned and on the "right" side of the issue that most of us cited were, we did not interview well-known feminists; rather, we selected more establishment types, for our pro-choice spokespeople. It is somewhat difficult to look back 26 years and remember why we made the choices we did. I have dug out my script, reread it, and remain steadfast in my belief that we were fair to the opposition, and fairly presented the views of the proponents of choice.

My view has always been, in my long TV career, that our mission was to lay out the issues honestly and clearly. In those days, certain feminist spokespeople provoked immediate hostility and would have done the cause no good. I felt it was better to deliberately choose people who could make the same points and be listened to without prejudice. As for the network interference that the author believes we had to endure, at that time there was very little, and I believe our documentaries were strong, and often brave. Today, documentaries have largely been replaced by magazine shows. My old network, ABC, has given some of its precious hours to John Stoessel and free rein to what I consider his anti-feminist views. Our stance of the 70's looks judicious and fair by comparison.

For students and other young people who did not live through the exciting days

of the second wave of feminism, this book will be of historical interest. It outlines what many of us knew first hand: that radio was hostile to women's supposedly unacceptable voices; that Luci & Desi represented the last gasp of the happy nuclear family; that *Peyton Place* was a new view of the sexually emancipated woman; that Bill Cosby's TV show came about as part of the fall-out of the civil rights movement; and, as time passed, that the feminist sit-com progressed from *Designing Women* to *Murphy Brown.*

The editors express their goals as attempting "to demonstrate that a feminist politics of critical engagement in television history is crucial for understanding television's role in modern culture. Its purpose is to examine the social and industrial conditions affecting the struggle for representation on television—from the very presence of women on TV to the way television mediates civil rights, sexual liberation, and questions of individual identity".

Readers used to dealing with academic feminism will find the book informative and without too much jargon. Mere journalists may find it a bit hard going. Feminist journalists like me who were lucky enough to report on the movement, along with the regular menu of news coverage, look back with pleasure at the mostly unsullied freedom we had.

Our voices, however imperfect, were more knowing than those of our male counterparts who were clueless about what was going on. Media still matter, but the world has changed so much that even its current deficiencies cannot, and will not, turn back the clock. ■

Marlene Sanders is Professional in Residence at the Freedom Forum's Media Studies Program. She was formerly a correspondent for ABC and CBS News. She was also a documentary producer, and later, Vice-President and Director of Documentaries for ABC News.

Talking Radio: An Oral History of American Radio in the Television Age

By Michael C. Keith
M. E. Sharpe, London/Armonk

By Ron Simon

The career and achievements of radio dramatist Norman Corwin haunt this new media book. Corwin, the author of such radio plays as *On a Note of Triumph* and *Ballad for Americans*, was the premier artist of so-called "golden age of radio." Despite being the Shakespeare of his medium (as one witness notes "words and radio are synonymous with Norman Corwin"), his work is now largely forgotten while his type of aural drama has not been produced in years. Keith, who dedicated the book to Corwin ("poet of air and waves") interviewed over 100 professionals and scholars to understand how such a vital new art form underwent such a radical change after World War II when television was launched to the American public.

Keith, a lecturer of communication at Boston College and author of a dozen books on broadcasting, has created a mosaic of many voices, juxtaposing the anecdotal reminiscences of such radio practitioners as Paul Harvey and Stan Freberg with the historical perspectives of historians Christopher Sterling and Douglas Gomery. Each chapter deals with a different form of postwar radio, from Top 40 to all news, NPR to Howard Stern.

What sustains the narrative is that the old school of radio advocates—Larry Gelbart, Himan Brown, and Erik Barnouw among others—make appearances throughout the book, challenging and questioning the latest trends of radio commercialization. For example, summing up the influence of Stern and other shock jocks, Gelbart hopes that "these guys are preaching only to the perverted."

These oral exchanges can make for informative reading if the first-hand, sometimes superficial, accounts are put into a larger industry context. A running thread in several chapters is an attempt to understand what passes for political opinion on radio. Several voices lament the passing of such commentators as H. V. Kaltenborn and Edward R. Murrow. Even with the lifting of the FCC ban on editorials in 1950, former news producer Ed Bliss notes that stations and individuals champion few causes. In fact, most opinion today is given by non-journalists, spouting out prejudices with little informed judgement—the heart and soul of talk radio. But is this really the "single most important format development in commercial radio's history," as performer Dick Fatherly alleges?

Why did talk radio sweep the airwaves since the eighties? Two theories are offered: host Michael Harrison asserts that it was the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine that allowed stations to tackle controversial issues and personalities while foundation executive Gordon Hastings states that first local and then national radio responded to the average American's detachment from the electoral process. Much discussion is given over to the significance of this "chatter that matters." Opinions range from talk radio as a new form of drama, where callers adlib their lines, to an exploitative asylum for ranting fanatics. Whatever its effect, editor Keith frames the debate by stating that t[illegible]dio rescued the AM band and returned [illegible]ve word back to the medium where r[illegible]corded music had taken over.

The witnesses agree that the major change caused by the dominance of television was that radio did not have to be a mass medium any longer. The airwaves could now serve smaller and smaller demographic groups, appealing to the most limited cultural interests. One gets the sense that most of these so-called experts of radio listen only to programs that conform to their tastes and generation. Syndicated host Joe Cortese states that disc jockeys "helped form my worldview and kept me tuned into what was hip, cool, and necessary." On the other hand, Studs Terkel, who grew up in another age of radio, thinks that most deejays are "pretty devoid of any identifiable talent." Even with all the witnesses there are some notable omissions. The compelling monologues of Jean Shepherd are not cited, as is not the transformation of Don Imus from radio clown to political kingmaker.

There seems to be only basic principle of postwar radio: it is never static. Underground, free-form radio of the sixties seems as distant as Fred Allen and *Inner Sanctum*. But the even these 100 voices are not enough to encompass all the changes of contemporary radio. You would have no idea that of the approximately 10,400 stations in America, the most popular format by far is country, heard over 2,400 channels. Although one chapter deals mainly with the advances of African-Americans and women in radio, there is not enough about the significance of ethnic radio, especially Hispanic programming. Hispanic radio is a leader in many markets, especially Los Angeles, and in this new century there are now more Spanish/ethnic stations than Top Forty ones. The inventor of all-hits radio, Todd Storz, is saluted in one chapter, but who is his equivalent in minority programming?

Talking Radio concludes with an updated version of Norman Corwin's 1939 play, "Seems Radio Is Here to Stay." In Whitmanesque fashion, Corwin celebrates the mystery of the aural medium: "The microphone is not an ordinary instrument, for it looks out on vistas wide indeed." As Michael Keith's book reiterates over and over, the vistas of radio in the last fifty years have shrunk. It is no longer a unifying cultural necessity for most Americans. With the introduction of the new technologies, especially the Internet, several voices predict that television will undergo the same transformation as radio. Will a similar book in 50 years ask: "Is television here to stay?" ■

Ron Simon is television curator at the Museum of Television and Radio in New York and an adjunct associate professor at Columbia University.

Live from the Trenches: The Changing Role of the Television News Correspondent

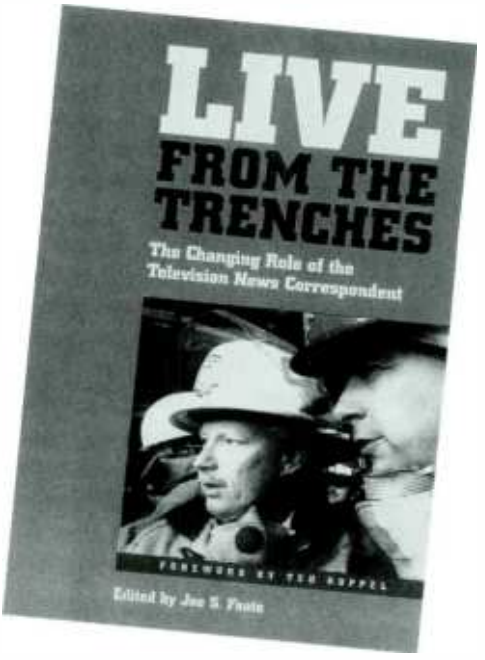
Edited by Joe S. Foote
Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale
By Bernard S. Redmont

We all sense a growing awareness that something is seriously wrong in the state of our profession. For a decade or two, many of us who have labored as correspondents in the vineyards of television journalism have wondered if we are endangered species. We have seen vast changes in our role, importance and numbers. And not always for the better.

Except for CNN, the TV networks in the United States have given up trying to cover international news on a regular basis, unless and until bombs begin falling. A war injects a blood transfusion into this decimated profession—and more than a thousand reporters rush abroad to flood Kosovo, Bosnia, Serbia or the Persian Gulf—areas until then virtually ignored. And what happens when the hostilities fade? Tents are folded. The drill is business as usual—no foreigners need apply. Entertainment reigns supreme again. Domestic version preferred.

We revert to the tabloid takeover of journalism standards, the diet of trash TV, infotainment, the ever more competitive and fragmented media marketplace, the chaos of the Internet with its "anyone can be a reporter" and "don't-bother-to-check-it-out" mentality.

Look backward and summon up the glamorous image of the trench-coated reporter played by Joel McCrea, mytholo-



gized by the movie, *Foreign Correspondent*. See him rushing out the door to a crisis abroad, shouting, "Cancel my rumba lessons!" Was it ever true?

Still, many of us felt the profession to be a vocation, a calling. Once upon a time, the correspondent personified prestige. He—and too often it was he and not she—embodied the much envied figure of an independent, well-educated and even idealistic—if sometimes cynical—reporter. She or he hobnobbed with the world's great, traveled first class, and called the journalistic shots. Danger often lurked. But a good deal of the time, it was fun.

Live from the Trenches gives us a dose of this nostalgia about "the good old days," along with a measure of realism, and reflection about where it's at now. This modest book offers a compendium of sensible ruminations by some excellent correspondents, war stories, and round-table talk about their changing role, shrinking numbers, dazzling new technology and implications for the future.

Ted Koppel, who writes the foreword, comments: "In what may be one of the more tragic convergences in American history, public trust in reporters has reached an all-time low at precisely the time that the country is about to be inundated in information chaos. And to make matters even worse, the chaos is being peddled as a form of electronic democracy."" He says the country has never had a greater need for serious, no-nonsense reporting. And this book enables us to meet some old fashioned reporters, read their stories and hear their message. Koppel signs off: "You'll miss them when they're gone."

We do indeed. The book assembles the reflections of nine top correspondents about their own role, how it was when hey began, how it is now, and how it may be evolving. Change is the only constant in our lives. The changes are "driven by the economics of the industry, the technological changes, and the people who come and go," as Provost John S. Jackson III says in a preface. It's a world driven by satellites, cell phones, mini-cameras, and the laptop computer. It involves "movement toward corporate mergers, greater concentration of corporate power in fewer hands, and the expectation that the news divisions will be profit centers for he mostly entertainment-centered corporations that involve them.

The contributors to the book include veterans like our Paris colleague Jim Bitterman of NBC, later ABC and still later CNN; Chris Bury, who covered presidential campaigns and major Clinton White House stories for ABC's *Nightline;* Roger O'Neil, lead reporter for NBC's coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing and the Timothy McVeigh trial; and Walter Rodgers, whom we knew in Moscow for ABC before he went to CNN Berlin and Jerusalem.

All four happen to be graduates of Southern Illinois University, which assembled this book. But others were also invited to contribute: George Straight of ABC, who discusses how race has played a significant part in his career; Marlene Sanders, formerly of ABC and CBS, who describes brilliantly what it was like to be a woman correspondent in the early years and what it's like now; and Garrick Utley of CNN and formerly NBC and ABC, explaining the demise of the foreign correspondent on network news. Ed Turner of CNN winds it up with a round-table discussion called "Dialogue from the Trenches."

The riches found in these trenches demonstrate that good correspondents are not travel-weary cynics, but deeply idealistic and often intellectual people, with a keen sense of history and broad knowledge of politics, economics, science, technology and other important disciplines. Indeed the best of them are true historians and

teachers.

As editor of the collection, Joe Foote, dean of the College of Mass Communication and Media Arts at Southern Illinois, who had been a radio journalist before entering academia, deserves kudos for understanding well and telling what it's like in the trenches without having served as a TV correspondent himself.

During the "glory days" of the correspondent, from the fifties to the eighties, money was no object in coverage. But before long, the management consultants and the bean counters began closing overseas bureaus and parachuting clueless reporters into hot spots in times of need.

Producer meddling, a frequent complaint among correspondents, often mangled story lines (CNN was more immune to this disease). Foote notes that producers who commissioned a story often prescribed the content. Correspondents chafed at the numerous, often contradictory, rewrites demanded by producers, known as "the butchers in New York." More and more stories now are assembled by correspondents but not actually reported by them. Any story, domestic or international, could be told from New York or Washington. Anyone out in the trenches who argues with a producer runs the risk of being demoted from the A-list to B-list, or simply earning the reputation of a malcontent. What's particularly grating, Foote demonstrates, is that the producer corps, who have become the autocratic bosses, have little or no experience as journalists, but represent the show-business ingredient of the show.

Corporate downsizing, centralized administrative control and resource cutbacks have dulled the correspondents luster, as Foote sees it, and "most alarming, news gathering has taken a back seat to news processing at most networks, marginalizing the role of the field correspondent."

At one all-news channel, recent j-school graduates package news from third-party sources around the clock, with no correspondents and no original news gathering. Limited signs of renewal do show in a few areas: At CNN, BBC and other global networks, news gathering is on the increase and new bureaus are opening.

Marlene Sanders, a three-time Emmy award winner, makes one of the best contributions to the book. Sanders pioneered at ABC in covering the real hard-news stories of the sixties, at a time when women mainly covered soft issues and stories like candidate's wives— "relegated to the equivalent of a newspaper's woman's page."

She recalls that it was a great time to be in news, particularly "because of the autonomy and confidence the network placed in its correspondents. The constant editing, rewriting and second guessing by evening news brass that torments today's reporters was minimal."

Sanders was the first TV newswoman to cover the Vietnam war; she covered the Eugene McCarthy campaign and the Bobby Kennedy death watch. She did the first documentary on the burgeoning women's movement— and helped us to understand the story, which was then widely misinterpreted by men. She formed the Women's Action Committee at ABC in 1972, and similar groups began at NBC and CBS. Some executive producers made her life miserable with discriminatory assignments. She has written most perceptively of the problem of long hours and travel and the juggling of child raising. She notes that many women have opted out of network jobs and gone to local stations where travel, at least, is not an issue. She notes that "Most women at the networks are B-list correspondents anyway, relegated to early morning broadcasts, and

weekends, and assigned peripheral stories. Stardom for the few women who achieve it is now on the magazine shows, not on the nightly news."

Marlene says, "I, for one, wanted it all and pretty much had it. Not everyone has been so lucky." It was more than luck, for Marlene was a real pro.

Jim Bitterman makes the point that, "faced with declining network interest in international events and declining air time overall, network foreign correspondents are not a very happy bunch these days." The video news agencies, such as AP-TV and Reuters-TV have become more competent and there's an inclination on many stories to "let the agencies handle it." When they do go to a hot spot, correspondents often sleep in the field, under hardship conditions. Wherever the dish (satellite dish) goes is where you spend the night. Use of non-Americans and local stringers and fixers is up. Several of the contributors note sadly that job security and quality of life have gone downhill. The command-and-control from New York is tighter than ever.

BBC reporters are astonished at the script control that American TV network correspondents undergo, often by four or five people in the home office, many of whom have never been in the field but insist on second-guessing. It would have been useful for these good American reporters to give some more attention to how Europe's TV news correspondents function and see how they do things better. Incidentally, Bitterman quit ABC to join CNN, "a correspondent-driven network with an enormous amount of freedom, a young and energetic staff, a lean and enlightened management."

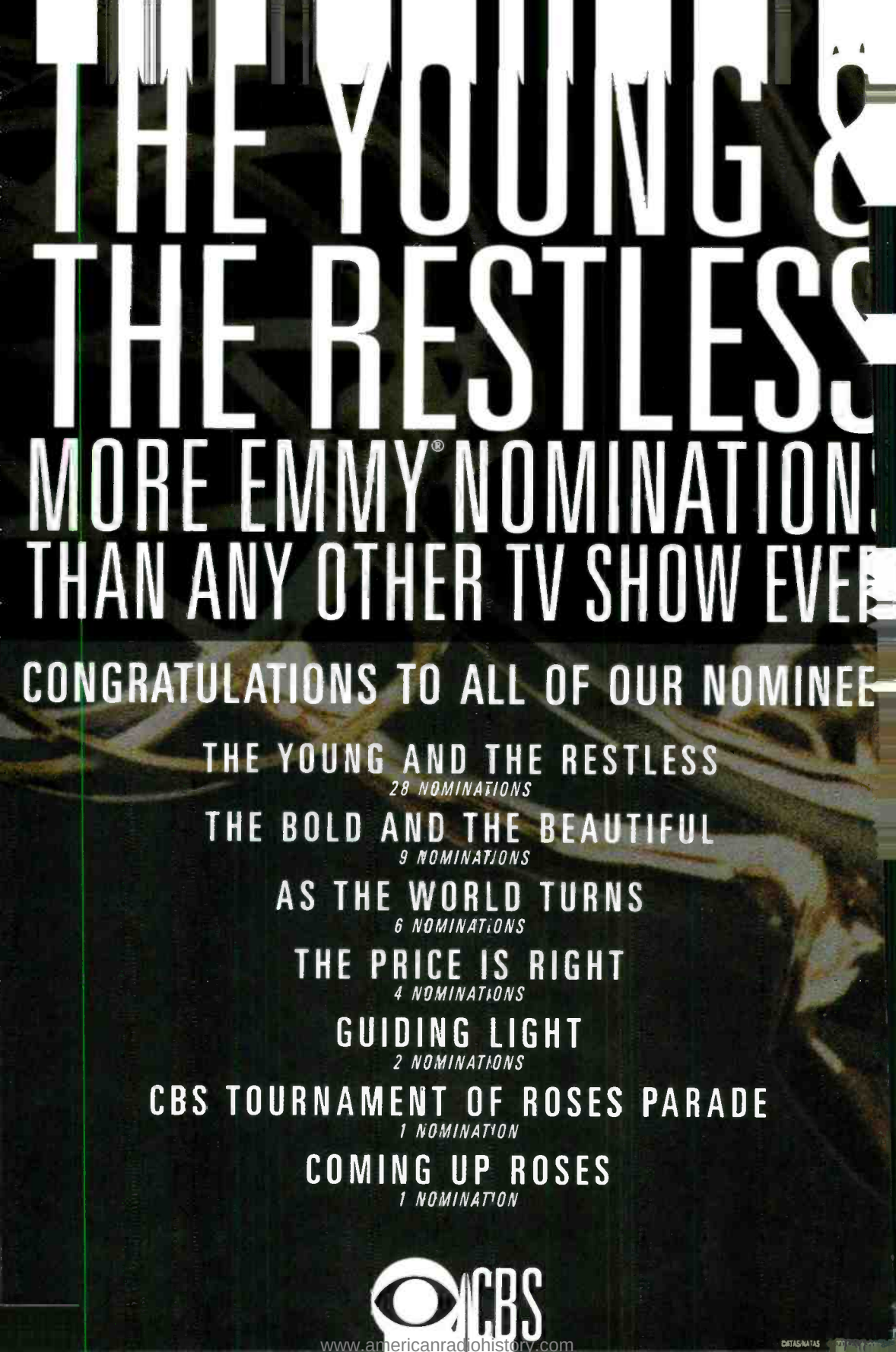
Garrick Utley echoes many of the other contributors in deploring the shrinking of foreign news and viewing the network foreign correspondent as an endangered species. He cites many examples of how correspondents have become "firemen," flying from one international conflagration to another. Utley once had to do three stories in three countries on two continents in five days—and that was not unusual. Paradoxically, he says, "broad viewer interest in world affairs is declining from it's modest Cold War heights just as U.S. global influence is reaching new levels as the results of several administrations' efforts to expand trade, businesses' need to expand overseas, and the global dominance of American pop culture, all driven by American leadership in the development and exploitation of new technologies. Today, more Americans than ever before are working and traveling abroad, from CEOs to sales reps, students and tourists. International trade is equal to about one quarter of GDP."

Utley warns: "The network news programs, and indeed, news programs in general ought to consider not only whether their response to market forces can sustain good journalism but whether it is a sound long-term business decision."

With all the major news divisions now owned by transnational corporations, commercial pressures are having a chilling effect on the independence of reporters, he says, and the growing tension between journalistic and commercial priorities may never be fully resolved.

All in all, it's a valuable book that needs to be studied in the command centers of broadcasting, and pondered deeply. ■

Bernard Redmont served CBS news as a TV foreign correspondent in Moscow and Paris. He is Dean Emeritus of Boston University College of Communication and author of *Risks Worth Taking: The Odyssey of a Foreign Correspondent.*



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