

# TELEVISION QUARTERLY



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

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

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

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Mission statement from Volume I, Number 1 issue of *Television Quarterly*, February, 1962

# What's Happening to TV Journalism?

*Washington Week's* long-time moderator says that the relentless pursuit of ratings and profits has led to a decline in standards. **By Paul Duke**

One night in February 1967 four established Washington reporters sat down around a table in a ramshackle Howard University broadcasting studio and began talking about the stories they had been covering. Thus was born *Washington Week in Review*, the granddaddy of television's informal, conversational news discussion programs.

From that inauspicious beginning on local station WETA, *Washington Week* soon took root as one of the capital's preeminent broadcasting institutions. It was the first program to be fed nationwide to the fledgling Public Broadcasting Service in 1969 and remains a mainstay on 334 PBS stations.

While change is the endemic rule of television, *Washington Week* has been a resolute apostle for the status quo. The program's kinder, gentler format has been refined and tweaked a bit over the decades, but it has steadfastly held to its original design of conveying the important news of the week through the eyes of the journalists who have been reporting that news.

Hence, while much of television news has ventured forth in questionable new directions in recent years, *Washington Week* still clings to the old fashioned notion that a journalist's primary responsibility is to truth telling. In other words, those who appear on the Friday night program are expected to tell the audience what they know, not what they think – to talk about what has happened, not what may happen.

This distinction is increasingly a rarity in television news, where the relentless pursuit of ratings and profits has led to a decline in traditional standards. It explains why so many critics condemn what they see as a steady drift downward into tasteless and undistinguished mediocrity.

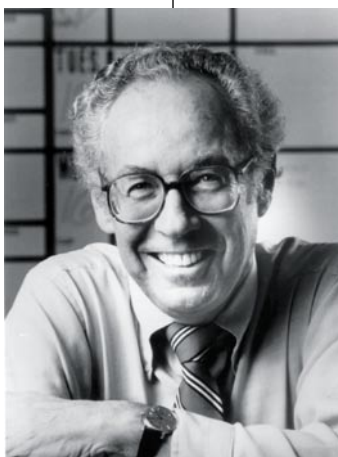
Count me among the critics. As Yogi Berra once famously said (supposedly), you can observe a lot by watching – and much of what I see on the screen these days corresponds to little more than junk journalism. The deterioration is pretty much across the spectrum from local to national broadcasting, but is perhaps most evident in some of the programming on the cable-news channels.

It is here that one finds so much superficial reporting, so much dwelling on inconsequential and frivolous stories, so much instant analysis that is instant baloney and so many quasi-journalists posing as real journalists. It brings to mind the *New Yorker* cartoon showing a man telling a woman at a party that "I'm not really a journalist. I just play one on the evening news."

In this new show-biz realm it is hardly surprising that entertainment values often trump news values. Most memorable, of course, is the maniacal coverage of the celebrated O.J. Simpson murder case, which launched a tidal wave of crime and scandal stories. In this dumbing-down culture, the titillation machines are powered by the sensational and salacious, a reality emphasized by comedian Bill Maher when he irreverently asked: "Why should anyone care about Scott Peterson?"

While Iraq and the war on terrorism have been ongoing headline stories, other significant national and world developments are often dismissed with scant attention, if that.

Talk shows dominate in the cable kingdom where the modus operandi tends less toward information than gossip, speculation and opinion. Politics is trivialized as a contact sport akin to



Paul Duke

wrestling or a Nascar race, the preoccupation primarily on winners and losers, who's up and who's down. Nothing illustrated this more than the vacuous manner in which so much of the 2004 election campaign was covered.

More than ever, the cable landscape is populated with confrontational gabfests, zealous ideologues

oozing with know-it-all righteousness about the latest controversies of the day. These clashes may be an engaging sideshow for political junkies but for those seeking intelligent answers the heat invariably exceeds the light.

Other problems exist at the major commercial networks where serious journalism is sometimes seen as a burden in the never-ending quest for

**At the major commercial networks serious journalism is sometimes seen as a burden in the never-ending quest for bigger audiences. The explosion in corporate mergers has created a new age of media conglomerates more dedicated to the bottom line.**

bigger audiences. The explosion in corporate mergers has created a new age of media conglomerates more dedicated to the bottom line. As Frank Rich wrote in *The New York Times*, "a network news division is just another entertainment profit entry, like theme parks and logo-laden tchotchkes, in a megacorporation."

The hard-hitting documentary

is a vanished species as front-office executives turn more and more to lower-denominator, fluffier features and tabloid-type potboilers. Most of the prime-time news magazines are little more than video versions of the old Hollywood movie magazines or *The Police Gazette*, leaning heavily on celebrity interviews and sob stories. As Bill Moyers put it: “They’re all designed to get people to cry about lost children.”

Furthermore, the network product is cheapened by an endless barrage of promotion and puffery. The December changing of the NBC *Nightly News* anchor guard from Tom Brokaw to Brian Williams was shamelessly milked as a transcendent broadcasting milestone. As Alessandra Stanley lamented in a *New York Times* review: “Mr. Williams’ ascension was festooned with all the hoopla of a White House wedding — or funeral.” The excessive pomp, she asserted, was regrettable because Brokaw and Williams are “much more appealing than the maudlin NBC promos that flooded the airwaves would ever suggest.” But bathos has become the network way. Last spring NBC’s *Dateline* devoted an entire hour to hyping the game show hit *The Apprentice* as that program’s season’s finale approached. As if that were not enough, two nights later *Dateline* profiled *Apprentice* host Donald Trump. Still later it was back shilling for the farewell editions of NBC’s *Frasier* and *Friends*. On their morning news shows, the networks endlessly sing the praises of their evening programming

fare, sometimes doing news stories with a tie-in. The *CBS Early Show* has repeatedly done segments relating to the wildly successful *Survivor* series.

Sad to say, this faddish blurring of fact and fiction seems here to stay amid television’s more competitive atmosphere. Translated, it means that in some very basic ways the medium that Edward R. Murrow once exalted as the world’s biggest classroom is defaulting on its heralded mission to inform and enlighten.

**For all of their shortcomings, the cable systems and the networks usually do a masterful job in mobilizing for the occasional blockbuster story, the recent Indian Ocean tsunami catastrophe being a classic case.**

This is not to say that all the news about television news is bad news. In fact, many professionals in the business deplore the trend away from the best traditions of American journalism. Some prominent anchors and correspondents are speaking out. Barbara Walters, who is stepping down as co-anchor of ABC’s *20/20* recently voiced concern about the growing pressures to attract younger audiences more attuned to the jazzier new styles.

The rising specialization in cable offerings has produced a welcome smorgasbord of niche programming in history, sports, finance, weather and arts programming. BBC’s World Service is now in the game with its extensive global coverage. Three C-Span channels have become a national treasure with their unfiltered spotlight on Congress and federal goings-on. And for all of their shortcomings, the

cable systems and the networks usually do a masterful job in mobilizing for the occasional blockbuster story, the recent Indian Ocean tsunami catastrophe being a classic case. Likewise, the bloody scenes of Iraq combat have shattered any lingering illusions about the savagery of war.

Public broadcasting continues to make a considerable contribution, although it, too, has begun to shade its principles by bowing to political pressure for a more conservative flavoring. *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* still packages the nightly news with a blend of straightforward reporting and incisive commentary. Ken Burns and *Frontline* have commendably stepped into the documentary breach. And *Washington Week* adheres faithfully to its formula of facts first and analysis based on those facts.

It was that formula that quickly earned the program something of a cult following. I discovered this remarkable devotion when I left NBC News for PBS in 1974 and took command of *Washington Week*. On a trip back to my home town of Richmond, Virginia, for a local broadcasting reception, a spunky little gray haired woman greeted me with the disclosure that she had taken a bus 50 miles into town to shake my hand because “y’all tell it like it is.”

That calling card of truth was laid down by the program’s original reporting trio of Peter Lisagor of the *Chicago Daily News*, Charles Corddry of the *Baltimore Sun* and Neil MacNeil of *Time* magazine. The star was Lisagor, a charismatic White House reporter who had an impish eagle eye for getting to the heart of matters. As one critic said, Peter had the knack for telling what was going on inside the presidential

mansion “as if he had the keys to all the rooms.” He loved to pinprick stuffed shirts and his wit was captivatingly pungent. Once, when Gerald Ford was president, I asked him to compare Press Secretary Ron Nessen with Richard Nixon’s spokesman Ron Ziegler. “Two Rons don’t necessarily make a right,” he shot back as we all burst into laughter.

Lisagor’s courageous reporting on the Watergate scandal figured prominently in a 1972 Washington Week crisis. Some of President Nixon’s advisors didn’t take kindly to Peter’s weekly thrusts and began pushing for a cutoff in federal funding for PBS public affairs programming. With the future in doubt, producer Lincoln Furber took to the air to warn viewers that *Washington Week*’s days might be numbered. The response was incredible – 15,000 letters of protest, many enclosing unsolicited donations to keep the program going. The ensuing political storm prompted the White House to quietly back off.

Lisagor’s death from lung cancer in 1976 brought a spontaneous outpouring of tributes from across the country. A woman in Huntington Beach., Calif., wrote: “Except for President Kennedy, I had never wept upon hearing of the death of a public figure, but I did tonight when I heard you say Peter had died.”

The passing of the legendary Lisagor persuaded me to modify the program’s format by building a new and enlarged team of reporters. As it was, some critics were suggesting that we were too stuck in our old three-man ways – that sometimes, as one of them complained, we were just “dull, dull, dull.” So our first team lineup slowly began to include other heavy hitters from the capital’s 5,500-member press corps, among them three Pulitzer

Prize winners – Haynes Johnson of the *Washington Post*, Jack Nelson of the *Los Angeles Times* and Hedrick Smith of *The New York Times*. Other additions followed: Charles McDowell of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Albert Hunt of the *Wall Street Journal*, Georgie Anne Geyer of Universal Press Syndicate, Gloria Borger and Steven Roberts of *U.S. News & World Report* and Howard Fineman of *Newsweek*.

By the early 1980s our audience had reached four million and the program was firmly established as a solid member of the PBS family. The critics were taking greater notice as well. Writing in the *Denver Post*, Barbara Ryan said the show was presented in “an atmosphere of cheerful bluntness that bears about as much resemblance to the decorous quizzing on NBC’s *Meet the Press* and CBS’s *Face the Nation* as *Rolling Stone* to Mozart.” Randall Roe of the *New York Daily News* called it a comforting departure from the customary offerings of “superhype and bionic anchormen.” Awards began piling up, too, including the prestigious duPont-Columbia prize for outstanding journalistic achievement.

A number of factors figured in this success – the chummy camaraderie around the table, the relaxed civility, the intimate glimpses of behind-the-scenes capital life. Many people looked upon us as old friends who dropped in once a week to help them catch up on the big doings. “It is the next best thing to inviting people in for interesting conversation,” observed a Platte, South Dakota, viewer.

But credibility was the essential ingredient, particularly with the politicians and power brokers of Washington who had come to regard

the program as a must-see. Senate Democratic Leader Robert Byrd held up an elegant dinner party because, as he told the hostess, “I can’t afford to miss my favorite news program.” It was a sentiment echoed by thousands of other loyal viewers who described planning their Friday evenings around the program, declining social engagements, taking telephones off the hook, meeting in groups to watch together. A Boston fan delayed her trip to the hospital to give birth until our weekly stint was finished. It was all rather amazing – and humbling.

Much as we reveled in all this glory, the adulation was never unanimous. Some letter writers cited *Washington Week* in agreeing with Vice President Spiro Agnew’s claim that the press was dominated by “nattering nabobs of negativism.” A Kalamazoo, Michigan, man upbraided us as the voices of gloom and doom, wondering “if the suicide rate is higher on Friday nights after your program.”

The most passionate protesters were those who charged that we were politically biased. Democrats and Republicans alike poured on the vitriol if they felt our reporting was skewed against their favorites. A Goldsboro, North Carolina, man, objecting to a report about missteps by Ronald Reagan’s White House, confided: “As I approach my 81st birthday, watching this program could be injurious to my health, especially my blood pressure, but like so many my age I live dangerously these days.” Nor did the newer team sway all of the critics, one writing that it took him three martinis to get through our sober-sided discussions. Another compared our sessions “to appliance dealers trying to figure out



why refrigerators weren't selling." But what really hurt was a study in one California school district that seemed to suggest we were offering little more than comic book wisdom – that the few students who watched the program registered lower reading scores than those who did not.



Gwen Ifill

Then there were the grammarians. The slightest slip of the lip provoked a deluge of corrective mail. Once, after referring to an old cliché, I was chided by a Concord, New Hampshire woman: "Please, Mr. Duke, give us a new cliché sometime." A New Rochelle, New York, man berated Hedrick Smith for excessive use of the phrase "a number of . . ." in his sentences. He argued with unassailable gusto that the Bible did not spell out "a number of" commandments, that Lincoln's Gettysburg address never referred to "a number of" years ago and that Columbus did not sail west in "a number of" ships.

Such fervor reflected the intense personal interest in the program and its participants. Nothing went unnoticed. A Boise, Idaho, man launched a crusade for better studio lighting, saying it was especially unkind to Jack Nelson by making it appear he was "aging fast." After a friendly fly swooped down on a reporter's nose one night, four flyswatters arrived in the next week's mail.

Besides these kind-hearted concerns, we bathed in the ego-boosting byproduct of instant recognition in our travels. A Canadian couple (yes, there were fans

north of the border, too) named a child after Charlie Corddry. We were featured and satirized in cartoons, comic strips and on *Saturday Night Live*. As my 20-year reign at head of the table was drawing to a close in 1994, a Huntington, West Virginia, man sent along a goodbye message that he had

taped every show for 16 consecutive years.

With Gwen Ifill as the current moderator, *Washington Week* still holds forth at the same old Friday night stand. Its third-generation roster of reporters still features the capital's best and brightest, among them Martha Raddatz of ABC News, Doyle McManus of the *Los Angeles Times* and Michael Duffy of *Time*. And, as a senior broadcasting citizen, it still proudly pursues its time-honored mission of countering Mark Twain's contention that ordinary mortals could never understand what's going on in the government. The testament of a Fresno, California, woman may have put it best when she said: "Thank goodness there's something that works in Washington without people yelling at each other."

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Paul Duke is a veteran Washington journalist. He has reported on American politics for the Associated Press, *The Wall Street Journal* and NBC News. Now retired, he was moderator of *Washington Week in Review* for 20 years. He has also produced several prize-winning documentaries and recently received the John Chancellor Award for lifetime journalism achievement.

# TV News in the Corporate Era

A veteran journalist notes a downturn in stories about issues important to readers as citizens to information of interest to consumers. **By Richard Campbell**

In the mid-1950s the three major television networks — ABC, CBS and NBC — moved their entertainment divisions to Los Angeles, in part, because of its close proximity to Hollywood production studios. Network news operations, however, remained in New York. Symbolically, these cities came to represent the two major branches of network TV: entertainment and information. The rules and rituals governing U.S. journalism also began shifting during the 1950s. At the time, former radio reporter John Daly hosted the CBS game show *What's My Line?* When he began moonlighting as the evening TV news anchor on ABC, the fledgling network blurred the so-called entertainment and information border, foreshadowing what by the 1990s had become a central criticism of journalism.

*Tell Me a Story*, the 2001 autobiography of Don Hewitt — the creator and long-time producer of *60 Minutes* (until his recent forced retirement at age 81) — best captures Daly's border transgression. In his account, Hewitt praised the narrative

qualities of news and promoted the onscreen star-reporter-character over the program's lowly backstage field producers, who have always done most of the research and reporting for the program. Drawn to news through his early love of 1930s movie characters, Hewitt writes: "As a child of the movies, I was torn between wanting to be Julian Marsh, the Broadway producer in *42nd Street*, who was up to his ass in showgirls, and Hildy Johnson, the hellbent-for-leather reporter in *The Front Page*, who was up to his ass in news stories. 'Oh my God,' I thought, 'in television, I could be *both* of them.'"

In the early days of TV journalism, the most influential and respected news program was CBS's *See It Now*. Co-produced by Fred Friendly and Edward R. Murrow, *See It Now* served as the conscience of TV news in its formative years. Murrow also worked as the program's anchor and main reporter, introducing the investigative model of journalism to national television — a model that programs like *60 Minutes*, *20/20* and *Dateline* would later imitate. Regarded by TV documentary historian A. William Bluem as "the

first and definitive” news documentary on American television, *See It Now* sought “to report in depth—to tell and show the American audience what was happening in the world using film as a narrative tool.” In the early 1960s, *CBS Reports* carried on the traditions of *See It Now*, and as that decade unfolded, the literary model of reporting played a more significant role in the program. Talking to the *New York Times* in 1959, Friendly hinted at the importance of the narrative tradition to *CBS Reports*: “Though based on truth, the programs still have to have stories of their own, with the basic outline of beginning, middle and end.”

### **TV news chases crime**

By the mid-1970s, the public’s fascination with the Watergate scandal — combined with the improved quality of TV journalism — helped local news departments realize profits for the first time. In an effort to retain high ratings, stations began hiring consultants, who advised news directors to lead their newscasts with crime blocks: a group of stories that recount the worst local crimes of the day. Today, most regional news stations around the country still lead newscasts with local isolated crime stories, even though such stories have very little connection to the vast majority of viewers.

A few stations, however, responded to viewers and critics who complain about overemphasizing crime—especially given that FBI statistics revealed that crime and murder rates fell in most major urban areas during the 1990s. In 1996, for example,

the news director at KVUE-TV in Austin, Texas, concerned about crime coverage, launched a new set of criteria that had to be met for news reports to qualify as responsible crime stories. She asked that her reporters answer the following questions: Do citizens or officials need to take action? Is there an immediate threat to safety? Is there a threat to children? Does the crime have significant community impact? Does the story lend itself to a crime-prevention effort? With KVUE’s new standards, the station eliminated many routine crime stories. Instead, the station provided a context for understanding crime rather than a mechanical running tally of what crimes were being committed each day.

In addition to news consultants pushing crime stories, another strategy they favor — to counter the grimness of crime coverage — has been happy talk: the ad-libbed or scripted banter that goes on among local news anchors, reporters, meteorologists and sports reporters before and after news

### **News doctors have tried to replicate in modern local TV news the ad images of young attractive models that have dominated television advertising since the 1960s.**

reports. During the 1970s, consultants often recommended such chatter to create a more relaxed feeling on the news set and to foster the illusion of conversational intimacy with viewers. Some news doctors also believed at the time that happy talk was indeed an antidote to that era’s “bad news,” which included coverage of urban riots and

the Vietnam War. A strategy still used today, happy talk often appears forced and may create awkward transitions, -especially when anchors must report on events that are sad or tragic. Although the situation has improved slightly at some local news stations, national news consultants, such as Frank Magid Associates, continue to set the agenda for what local reporters should cover—lots of local crime—as well as how they should look—young, attractive, pleasant, with little regional accent. Essentially, news doctors have tried to replicate in modern local TV news the ad images of young attractive models that have dominated television advertising since the 1960s — to create continuity between the look of news and the look of the advertising that the news interrupts.

## Visual language and TV's edge

Officially, print news came under the spell of television with the arrival of the colorful *USA Today* in 1982, radically changing the look of most major U.S. dailies. This new paper incorporated features closely associated with postmodern forms, including an emphasis on visual style over substantive news and the use of brief news items that appealed to readers' short TV-era attention span. *USA Today* represents the only successful launch of a new major U.S. daily newspaper in the last several decades. Showing its marketing savvy, *USA Today* was the first paper to pay grudging tribute to TV's increasing influence on journalism. Marketers at the paper even designed its vending boxes to look like color TV sets.

In addition to TV news' obsessions

with crime stories and superficial packaging, the brevity of a TV report is often compared unfavorably with the length of print news. However, newspaper reviewers and other TV critics seldom discuss the visual language of TV news and the ways in which images may actually capture events more powerfully than words. The complexity of this shift from a print-dominated culture to an electronic-digital culture is often reduced to a two-dimensional debate about information vs. entertainment. Yet over the past 50 years television news has dramatized America's key events and provided a clearinghouse for shared information. Civil-rights activists, for instance, acknowledge that the movement benefited enormously from televised pictures that documented the plight of southern blacks in the 1960s. Other enduring TV images, unfurled as a part of history to each new generation, are embedded in our collective memory: the Kennedy and King assassinations in the 1960s; the turmoil of Watergate in the 1970s; the space shuttle disaster and the Chinese student uprisings in the 1980s; the first war on Iraq, the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, and the Clinton impeachment hearings in the 1990s; and the 9/11 tragedy and second war on Iraq that started in 2003. During these critical events, national TV news has been a cultural reference point.

In contrast, many print critics – not used to the subtle ways visual language operates — missed a disturbing TV news strategy that developed in the mid to late 1980s. In their coverage of crack cocaine, news operations formulated a visual shot in which news photographers (using shaky, handheld cameras)

leaped from the back of police vans and followed gun-wielding authorities as they broke down the doors of various crack houses. At the time, few critics mentioned that in such a shot TV news actually represented the police or state point of view. A profession that prides itself on neutrality and on watching over the police on society's behalf apparently did not question whether it was appropriate for reporters to tell these stories implicitly from the authority's viewpoint.

In assessing the visual power of TV news, images do not stand as some kind of testimony to "reality" that is somehow more authentic than the printed word. Just as there is a selection process in print, images in TV news are chosen, camera angles are selected, and other images and angles are ignored. For example, one shot that means to establish credibility – called a "stand-up" – a TV producer might situate a reporter in front of a courthouse or outside the White House when, in fact, the reporter never entered the courthouse or the White House on that particular day. But the pictures made it look like the reporter was on top of the situation – and physically at a newsworthy location – serving as our eyewitness to the world.

## **Reporter as star and the triumph of individualism**

Although local news rituals have had an impact in changing the face of regional journalism, the most influential journalistic enterprise at the national level has been *60 Minutes*. In the 50-plus year history of television, *60 Minutes* remains the only program rated No. 1 in three different decades.

It is the most popular and profitable TV program in prime-time history, finishing among the Nielsen top ten for 23 consecutive years — another record. From the mid-1970s to the early 2000s, a typical episode of *60 Minutes* reached a bigger audience than any other single news form in U.S. journalism. Most importantly, the program set the standard for investigative TV reporting that few of the many copycat magazine shows have approached.

Over the years, critics have tried to explain *60 Minutes*' standing as America's first popular news program. In 1981, the program's creator, Don Hewitt, told the *Chicago Tribune* that storytelling was the key to the program's appeal: "I'll bet if we made it multi-subject and we made it personal journalism — instead of dealing with issues we told stories; if we packaged reality as well as Hollywood packages fiction, I'll bet we could double the rating." Hewitt rightly predicted that personal journalism, starring reporters in mini-news dramas, would dislodge hour-long news documentaries in which the network point of view — what Hewitt calls "the voice of the corporation" — seemed tedious, institutional and aloof.

Hewitt's program has been able to downplay — until the fateful 1995 spiked tobacco story (the subject of the Hollywood movie "The Insider") — *60 Minutes* as a corporate extension of CBS (and now Viacom) in order to play up the program as champion of the little guy and solid Middle American values. Hewitt notes in his 2001 autobiography, "Every time the ship of state starts to tip left or right, it's the great American middle class that rights it and keeps it from capsizing.... So that's where

I am, in the middle most of the time, which is where you're likely to end up if you play both sides of the street, which I frankly admit I do." Along with the appeal to moderate politics and Middle America, a second secret of *60 Minutes* involves adapting a fictional story form — the detective mystery — to TV journalism. Through this familiar cultural frame, the reporters of *60 Minutes* have performed over the years, not as detached journalists, but as dramatic characters. Their mission: to locate themselves in the middle of an adventure and make sense of the world through their stories. "*60 Minutes* is the adventures of five reporters," Hewitt has said, "more fascinating to the American public being themselves than Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman were playing Woodward and Bernstein [in the 1976 film "All the President's Men"]".

In his own 1984 autobiography, Mike Wallace, the show's long-time star senior reporter, discussed his own perceptions of the detective role he has performed since 1968: "By the late 1970s ... I kept bumping into people who jumped at the chance to alert me to some scandal or outrage.... They would give me vivid accounts of foul deeds and the culprits perpetrating them, and urge me to take appropriate action: 'You really should look into this, Mike.'" Certainly many powerful segments over the years have concluded with *60 Minutes* calling for congressional investigations, redressing government oversights or wrongly accused prisoners, and lauding individual rights in the face of bureaucratic ineptitude. These stories portray reporters as cagey and competent — often heroic — and mark many of the program's finest minutes.

Given the power *60 Minutes* has developed over the years as the premier investigative arm of American journalism, it was a surprise in late 1995 when the show decided not to air an episode on the tobacco industry spiking nicotine levels after legal threats from one cigarette company's lawyers. In fact, this icon of investigative journalism caved into Big Tobacco at a time when CBS was being sold to Westinghouse, and apparently the corporate bosses — and the program's own journalists with investment ties to the transaction — didn't want to hamper the deal. So they waited for *The Wall Street Journal* to break the story and then aired the episode two months later. However, Disney — which owns ABC and the copycat TV newsmagazine *20/20* — then made a movie about the spiked story, called "The Insider," starring Russell Crowe and Al Pacino.

In the end, stories about the inner workings of complex institutions — including CBS/Viacom — are not well suited for *60 Minutes*. And, in fact, this can be said for most journalism — there are very few good story forms out there for explaining how institutions work or don't work. Instead, the detective narratives of *60 Minutes* often transformed experience into melodrama, making the world simpler and more understandable. Detective stories celebrate individual heroes and condemn institutional villains. In this way, journalism in general suffers from this malady that plagues *60 Minutes* (even as good as some of its best investigate pieces have been): Stories centering on the afflictions of individuals make the world seem like a place where problems are personal not social — that require only private

redress or remedy rather than any sort of collective engagement.

**Journalism spent the first part of the 19th century freeing itself from political partisanship only to find itself at the beginning of the 21st century under the strong influences of corporate machinations.**

The *60 Minutes* spiked story incident is probably the key cultural and social marker revealing that contemporary journalism is in its newest incarnation – the corporate era. Journalism, so central to American democracy that it is the only business enterprise the founders protected in the Constitution, spent the first part of the 19th century freeing itself from political partisanship only to find itself at the beginning of the 21st century under the strong influences of corporate machinations. And the very process that American citizens count on to report on this phenomenon has fallen virtually silent because it is not in the interest of national or global corporate powers to have their journalism extensions reporting the details of the their bosses' business. After all, these kinds of complex "Big Money" stories – that American viewers actually are interested in – do not fit neatly into formula stories that tell tales of individuals wronged at the hands of dysfunctional institutions. How do journalists tell this story when many of these powerful institutions are their own corporate parents?

Although corporate control is strong on the newspaper side of the journalism business — Gannett after all operates the largest newspaper chain in the world, controlling more than 90

daily newspapers – the real impact of the current corporate incarnation is in television. Here journalism outlets have become minor subsidiary companies in large entertainment conglomerates that all now own movie studios as well as journalism businesses. Disney, in

addition to its themes parts and film division, owns ABC News; Viacom, which own Paramount studios, controls CBS News; General Electric, which runs NBC News, purchased Universal studios in 2003; News Corp. owns Fox News in addition to Twentieth Century Fox studios; and Time Warner, which now operates CNN, owns Warner Brothers studios among its many other holdings as the world's largest media corporation.

**Rethinking reporting's role**

Even in this corporate era of journalism, many traditional reporters, editors, and even publishers will still fight ferociously for the overt principles that underpin some of the profession's basic tenets—freedom of the press, the public's right to know, and two sides to every story. In general, though, journalists do not acknowledge any moral duty to improve the quality of daily life or question the fundamental economic structures that journalism rests upon. Rather, journalists value their important news-gathering capabilities and the well-honed news story, mostly ignoring the economic implications of the corporate era and leaving the improvement of public

life to political groups, nonprofit organizations, business philanthropists, and individual citizens.

**Good journalism aims to improve our standard representative democracy, in which most of us sit back and watch elected officials and superstar journalists act on our behalf...**

When reporters are unwilling to claim any agency for improving public life or to question the creeping “corporatization” of the profession, democracy suffers. *Washington Post* columnist David Broder, writing in 1992, argued that national journalists—through rising salaries, prestige, and formal education—have distanced themselves “from the people that we are writing for and have become much, much closer to people we are writing about.” In 2004 this view has been echoed by the second Bush administration. Ken Auletta, writing about the press and the president for *The New Yorker* in 2004, pointed out that, according to the administration’s top political advisors, President Bush viewed “the press as ‘elitist’ and thinks that the social and economic backgrounds of most reporters have nothing in common with most Americans.” For his part, Broder maintained that journalists needed to become activists, not for a particular party but for the political process and in the interest of re-energizing public life. For the news media, this might involve spearheading voter-registration drives or setting up pressrooms in public libraries or even in shopping malls, where people converge in large numbers. More radically, leading

national journalists – who command TV time and print space – could rouse and lead a debate on the disruption of the balance between journalism’s business interests under capitalism and its watchdog role for democracy.

By advocating a more activist role for reporters and the news media, journalists at their best

promise to reinvigorate both reporting and politics. Good journalism aims to improve our standard representative democracy, in which most of us sit back and watch elected officials and superstar journalists act on our behalf, by reinvigorating deliberative democracy, in which citizen groups, local government, and the news media together take a more active stand in reshaping social, political, and economic agendas. In a more deliberative democracy, larger segments of the community would discuss public life, social policy, and media ownership before advising or electing officials who represent both individual and community interests.

In 1989, the historian Christopher Lasch argued that “the job of the press is to encourage debate, not to supply the public with information.” Although he overstated his case—journalism does both and more—Lasch made a cogent point about how conventional journalism has lost its bearings. Adrift in data – from the overload of 24-cable news and thousands of Internet sites – mainstream journalism has lost touch with its partisan roots. The early mission of journalism—to advocate opinions and encourage public debate—has been relegated to alternative magazines, the



editorial pages, and cable news channels starring elite East Coast reporters. Ironically, Lasch connected the gradual decline in voter participation, which began in the 1920s, to more responsible conduct on the part of professional journalists. With a modern “objective” press, he contended, the public increasingly began to defer to the “more professional” news media to watch over civic life on its behalf.

In modern America, serious journalism has sought to provide information that enables citizens to make intelligent decisions. Today, this guiding principle has been derailed. First, in a world engulfed in media outlets and computer highways, we may be producing too much information. According to social critic Neil Postman, as a result of developments in media technology, by the mid-1990s society had developed an “information glut,” transforming news and information into “a form of garbage.” Postman believed that scientists, technicians, managers, and journalists have merely piled up mountains of new data, which add to the problems of everyday life. As a result, too much unchecked data and too little thoughtful discussion emanate from too many channels of communication.

A second, related problem suggests that the amount of information the media now provide has made little impact on improving social and political life. In fact, many people feel cut off from our major institutions, including journalism. Many citizens, however, are looking for ways to take part in public conversations and civic debates — to renew a democracy in which many voices participate. In fact, among the benefits of the

contested and unpredictable 2000 and 2004 presidential elections were the ways legal, economic and political complications engaged the citizenry at a much deeper level than the predictable, staged campaigns themselves did. Much of this complexity played out in local grass-roots politics and on the Internet.

Although newspapers remain a strong medium of communication, critics have raised a number of concerns about their future in the face of the new media competition. For instance, some charge that newspapers have become so formulaic in their design and reporting styles that they may actually discourage new approaches to telling stories and reporting news. Another criticism is that many one-newspaper cities cover only issues and events of -interest to middle- and upper-middle-class readers, thereby underreporting the experiences and events that affect poorer and working-class citizens. In addition, given the rise of newspaper chains, the likelihood of including new opinions, ideas, and information in mainstream daily papers may be diminishing. Although wealthy and powerful chains may keep smaller struggling papers solvent, such chains sometimes have little commitment to local communities beyond profits. Chain journalism tends to discourage watchdog journalism and the crusading traditions of newspapers. Like other business managers, many news executives prefer not to offend investors or outrage potential advertisers by running too many investigative reports, especially business probes. Indeed, reporters generally undercover the business and ownership arrangements in their own industry.

Since the 1990s, the social definition and role of a reporter has been in question and in transition. In reporting the latest White House gossip, weekly supermarket tabloids had a readership three and four times larger than that of *The New York Times*, which itself followed up on stories that first appeared in tabloids. Talk-show hosts were also performing news functions by bringing to light controversial issues. Giving third-party candidates like Ross Perot a platform, Larry King's talk show on CNN played a journalistic role in both the 1992 and the 1996 presidential campaigns. By 2000, the 24-hour cable-news prime-time talk shows had become major venues for political discussion and national debate. The 1990s and early 2000s also saw furious competition for younger readers weaned on moving images in a highly visual culture. Because most major newspapers are now available via interactive computer services, the old battle lines between print and electronic culture need to be redrawn and remapped. For better or worse, journalism today encompasses a host of resources that perform news and entertainment functions.

## The future of news

In critiquing the limits of TV news stories four nights a week, Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, "anchored" by Jon Stewart, parodies the narrative conventions of the evening news: the clipped 8-second "sound bite" interview that severely limits meaning or the formulaic shot of the TV news "standup," which depicts a reporter "on location" at the site of the report, apparently establishing credibility by revealing



Jon Stewart, *The Daily Show*

that he or she was really there. On *The Daily Show*, Stewart's cast of reporter-fools (who actually seldom leave the studio) are digitally superimposed in front of exotic foreign locals or shot with the silly graphic "Anytown, USA" appearing over their shoulder. Stewart, as the fake anchor, also spoofs "real" national TV news anchors who report incredible events and canned government pronouncements without a trace of emotion or irony. Stewart, on the other, will interrupt his reports to marvel at the incredible, share irony with the audience, or to rail against official double talk. While national news operations like MSNBC thought nothing of adopting the Pentagon's slogan, "Operation Iraqi Freedom," as its own graphic title, *The Daily Show* offers its satiric graphic counter, "Mess O' Potamia."

When *The Daily Show* used a conventional woman-on-the-street interview (taking footage from one of the national news programs), Stewart stepped out of his fake detached anchor mode to comment on the quality of an interviewee's response: apparent

“shock” that mega-retailer Wal-Mart employs illegal aliens. Stewart shouted at the video clip: “Lady, why do you think that sweatshirt you just bought cost 29 cents?” As news court jester, Stewart exposes the melodrama of TV news that nightly depicts the world in various stages of corruption and disorder while at the same time offering the stalwart presence of celebrity-anchors overseeing it all from their hi-tech command centers. From Walter Cronkite’s soothing “And that’s the way it is ...” to Dan Rather’s brief flirtation with “Courage!” as signature signoffs, the main network news anchors have functioned for more than 40 years as melodramatic heroes restoring a sense of order through the power and reassurance of their individual celebrity: no matter how bad things are, they are there for us and on top of it. As satirist, Stewart isn’t so sure, arguing that the “city” is a mess and badly in need of repair – and with a little more amazement, irony, outrage and emotion.

Much of the limits and unimaginative quality in both our fictional and non-fictional storytelling forms has to do with TV executives and news producers finding it easier to repeat the familiar rather than develop a new variation or generic hybrid that might tell a different tale, challenge a comfortable genre, or even invent a new story form. Although the world has changed (except for splashy new graphic openings), local TV news has virtually gone unaltered for the last 30 years, still limiting reporters’ stories to a minute and a half and relying on canned “Action News” and “Eyewitness News” packaged formats, complete with dramatic theme music, that continue to roundup and

rundown the days random local crimes (“if it bleeds, it leads”) in storytelling that is haphazardly presented and has virtually no impact on the larger community.

Perhaps the biggest lack of narrative imagination, which has the most serious implications for democracy, has to do with our national political life and the ways campaign managers (and their PR “spin doctors”) package our leaders. At one level, of course, most Americans make judgments about who they will vote for based on 30-second TV spots that the candidates produce themselves and spend millions of contributed dollars to buy time on local stations, cable channels and the national networks. Like many 30-second product commercials, political ads are most often limited romantic tales that associate the candidate with wholesome virtues – like decency, patriotism and “family values.” At the local level, and less often nationally, candidates ambush rivals with melodramatic “attack ads,” which impugn the integrity of Candidate B for ruining “the city” (e.g., raising taxes) or shaking the social order (e.g., favoring the rich) and offering Candidate A as heroic counterpoint. But most often political ads portray candidates in some idyllic rural setting as civilized champions of honor, duty and service. Unfortunately, though, we don’t get much information on the candidate’s ideas about key social problems like the U.S. role in policing world affairs or the increasing influence of international business conglomerates, which, by the way, fund many of these spots and in exchange the dark problems of corporate culture are not usually mentioned.

Like many a 30-second commercial,

the slick exterior of the smartly packaged candidate emerges as a winning product line, riding a tractor or romancing a crowd. But in the end we don't learn much about the characters who gave the money for the ad, what their interests are, and what the candidate's obligations are for such financial favors. The basic problem with selling candidates on TV, however, is that a generation of young voters – raised on the TV satire and political cynicism of “Weekend Update” on *Saturday Night Live*, Leno, Letterman, Conan O’Brian, *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *The Daily Show* – are not buying these hollow 30-second romantic and melodramatic tales. Although overall eligible voter turnout increased to 60 percent for the 2004 presidential election (vs. 51 percent in 2000), the 18-to-29-year-old voter turnout was just 52 percent (although this was up from 42 percent in 2000).

News outlets today – whether TV or print or online — are working to compete in a world overloaded with out-of-context information where data has become so fragmented that the traditional mainstream journalism has lost its bearings. The best journalism, however, continues to sustain its democratic traditions: making sense of important events, telling the nation's main stories, watching over our central institutions, and serving as a check on power. And this latter function is crucial at a time when mainstream journalism's power has diminished. As Andrew Card, George W. Bush's chief of staff, warned the press early in 2004: “[The news media] don't represent the public anymore than other people do. In our democracy, the people who represent the public stood for election.

... I don't believe you [the press] have a check and balance function.”

Journalism's current dilemma is twofold. On one hand, “new news” forms have short-circuited mainstream news media's power, drawing off readers and viewers. As Mark McKinnon, a leading Republican strategist in George W. Bush's 2004 campaign, argues, the old news forms and the mainstream press corps “sit in real-time limbo, lost in the dust of the Internet and cable.” On the other hand, the major TV anchors and print journalists, who could make a difference in leading journalism to a new role in this fragmented information age, now find themselves increasing as small cogs in large conglomerates. And in the corporate age, news stories about the economic and democratic implications of the business dealings of large entertainment conglomerates are usually not viewed in the best interest of the corporation. So American journalism has moved through its partisan, penny press and modern TV eras to this current corporate moment. The significance of this shift is the downturn in stories about events or issues important to readers as citizens and as members of communities to information of interest to readers and viewers, now seen primarily as consumers, private individuals and focus groups.

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# Judy Woodruff: “If We Can’t Cover the News Aggressively Our Democracy Isn’t Worth Anything”

In the second part of her interview by Mort Silverstein of *Television in America* the CNN anchor talks about her career in TV journalism and her abiding faith in the medium.

**Mort Silverstein:** What ignited Judy Woodruff to want to be in journalism?

**Judy Woodruff:** There’s no one thing I can put my finger on. I grew up as an army brat; I was born in Oklahoma; my father was an enlisted man in the Army. Neither one of my parents went to college. My mother, in particular, wanted me to go to college, get an education and to have an independence that I think she felt she never had. That clearly was a driving force in my life.

Another influence in my life was the fact that my father was in the Army and we moved a lot. I went to seven different schools between kindergarten and 7th grade. So I was uprooted a lot; didn’t like moving around a lot. But along the way, I learned that there was a big world out there. And there was a lot to know about it. And by golly, I wanted to know a whole lot about it. And staying in one place was not going to be the way to do it. And so, even though I didn’t have somebody whispering over my shoulder, you know, hey, what about journalism, I always had this sense that

there was something out there that, that I didn't know about and I wanted to find out about.

**MS:** On Joan Konner's estimable PBS documentary *She Says: Women in the News*, you describe an early job interview at the ABC affiliate. While you were still a senior at Duke, taking a course in mass communications and politics. Do you know the interview I refer to?

**JW:** I remember it well.

**MS:** ...and how that ended?

**JW:** I do.

**JW:** I wrote the three TV stations in Atlanta. I went down to Atlanta my senior year, spring break. And interviewed with the news directors. The, two of 'em said we don't have any openings. The third one, the ABC affiliate news director, we sat down in the lobby. I remember this as clearly as if it were yesterday. This, this station on the end of Peachtree Street. In Atlanta. Overlooking a big parking lot. And we sat there and talked for 20 or 30 minutes about politics and about journalism and about Duke and about political science majors and all that, and I was interviewing to be his secretary. And as I got up to leave, I said, thank you I appreciate it. He said, you know,



Judy Woodruff

he just said, well, "you're hired." And I was thrilled, and I thanked him, and I got up to walk away, and as I'm walking away, toward the door, I'll never forget it, this voice behind me says, "besides, how could I not hire somebody with legs like yours?"

And here I was, 21 years old, and I just froze in place, and I thought, what do I say? Do I turn around and say, I don't want this job if that's your view. I said, oh. Well,

thanks, uh...I couldn't think of anything to say. I turned around, I looked at him, and...uh...you know...gulped, thanks. And walked out the door. Shaken, but thinking, well, I guess this is the way it is. You know, if you're a woman, there's a different standard. I should have been smart enough to realize that before, but nobody had ever been so blatant.

**MS:** You took the job?

**JW:** I took the job, I went to work right after graduation, two weeks later I went to work as a secretary in the News Department of the ABC affiliate in Atlanta. I made the coffee, I answered the phone, I did a little correspondence for the News Director, I cleaned the film – we were using film, not videotape. I kept the film in files, I organized all the files in the newsroom. And I talked to the reporters a lot about what they were doing.

But then an opening came up at the

CBS station and I went to talk to the news director, and he hired me. And a week later, I was covering the state legislature, the state capitol.

**MS:** Any good conflict of interest stories there? At the legislature?

**JW:** I'm sure there were a million. Did I cover some? Sure, I mean there were bankers who were voting on banking legislation and businesspeople who were voting on tax legislation, there were people who had interests in cement and road material firms who were voting on highway legislation, so sure, there were lots of conflicts. But it was a great training ground for me. It was a good place for me to cut my teeth and to learn about reporting. There's no better place to learn about politics than covering a state legislature.

**MS:** At NBC in 1975, you became a general assignment reporter, based in Atlanta. Was the atmosphere there any less sexist?

**JW:** Well, I started out at NBC pretty isolated in a sense. It was Judy Woodruff and [Kenlie Jones] at NBC, based in Atlanta, covering the entire Southeast. We covered 10 states, all the way to Louisiana, south to Florida, over to Arkansas and the Caribbean. So I even went to the Caribbean once to cover the execution, the hanging, of an American, who was caught in some drug deal down there. I didn't see the hanging, I was made to stand outside the prison, but I did spend a few days there and filed a few reports. I covered blackbird

kills in Kentucky; I covered red ant plagues in south Georgia; I covered alligator farms in Louisiana. For a while I thought of myself as a wildlife reporter. All that experience covering politics really didn't stand for much. But that was alright, because I stayed in touch with a lot of the people I knew, and when Jimmy Carter, who had been the governor – and I had covered him when he was governor started running for president – I had some contacts in his campaign.

**MS:** You're the NBC White House correspondent from 1977 to '82.

**JW:** Right. I wasn't really prepared to cover the White House when I got there. There's no question about it. I wanted it so badly. I wanted so badly to get to Washington. And when they offered me the White House, because Carter had been elected and I had covered him, and it was, in a way, it was a natural. I badly wanted to do it, but I really wasn't ready. I hadn't had the experience covering Washington. And so there was a lot of baptism by fire to what I did at the White House.

### **There were very few people on Carter's team who knew Washington, and that was part of his downfall...They didn't figure out how to work the media.**

I'm sure I made a lot of mistakes. I learned that, that Washington was a much more competitive place than any place I had ever operated. And it was a fabulous learning experience. People like Hodding Carter had been here and worked in the Carter campaign and

of course had been in Mississippi. He was at the State Department as their spokesman.

**JW:** But I had to learn the Hill; I had to learn how people operated on the Hill; that the Hill was a great place for sources. I had to learn how to cultivate sources in the different agencies, how to cultivate, you know, people in, in the White House who never got their face on television but who were willing to talk to me on the telephone, or, you know, over lunch, or breakfast. I became a much better reporter after being there for six years.

**MS:** You interviewed both Carter and Reagan, of course, extensively. Can you give us an anecdote about each which would be emblematic of how they sought to have themselves portrayed, what their particular presidential spin was?

**JW:** Jimmy Carter came to the White House with a giant chip on his shoulder. He felt that he had been elected president... thinking that he had defied the Democratic establishment, that he had really done this on his own. And he brought his own team from Georgia; people like Jody Powell and Hamilton Jordan and Frank [Moore] and some other good ol' boys. Smart good ol' boys. But it was a very Georgia team. There were very few outsiders, very few people who knew Washington. And ultimately that was part of Carter's downfall, because you can't operate in this city, no matter how smart you are, unless you figure out where the levers of power are, who you need to deal with, who you've got to placate and

who you can ignore. And those are the kinds of outreach that they really didn't learn until almost two and a half, three years into their presidency, they finally did start bringing other people in. But they still didn't figure out how to work the media and how to parcel Carter out nearly as well as their successor, Ronald Reagan, did. And therefore, Jimmy Carter got some pretty awful press. People took advantage of that access. They wrote about the warts rather than about the beauty spots. And it was a very painful lesson for Jimmy Carter and the people around him. You know, they didn't understand, I think, until later...

### **When you got an interview with Ronald Reagan you were escorted before the royal presence of...the king!**

He's been a remarkably successful ex-president. He really has set an example, I think.

Ronald Reagan, on the other hand, made his career as an actor, in the media, as somebody who loved being on camera. And yet once he got into the White House, his appearances were very carefully parceled out, calibrated. They only put him out when they knew they wanted to make an impression. He gave very few interviews. And when you did get an interview with him, you were escorted before the royal presence of...the king! I remember the first interview I had with him. They brought in Leslie Stahl with CBS... Sam Donaldson with ABC, the three of us, and I was with NBC. We were escorted into the library over in the first floor of the White House. The residence. And



it was as if we were in the presence of royalty. They said, you've only got 15 minutes and you're going to have to keep your distance, and you've got to be careful about this and that and the other, so we all went in, a little nervous. He immediately disarmed us by telling us funny stories about Hollywood and growing up.

**It was a public-television mandate. It wasn't commercial, and we found that there was a very significant audience for what we did.**

**MS:** Why do you leave NBC?

**JW:** I left to go to what was going to be *The MacNeil/Leher NewsHour*. The first was *The MacNeil/Lehrer Report*, a half-hour show. They were expanding to an hour. They wanted a Washington correspondent. And we started having conversations about it. I was intrigued by the idea of doing something more in depth and meatier on television. And I talked to a lot of people. I sought out the advice of all the people I respect. Most of them told me they thought I was crazy. A few people said it's a good idea. But the vast majority said don't do this. Why, how can you possibly give up a network to go to PBS, to go to this little-known program. But I had so much respect for what Robin MacNeil and Jim Lehrer were doing that I just had to do it. And so I made the great leap in 1983. Went over there, and I never looked back. It was a joyous ten years with *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*, wonderful, two of the greatest journalists I've ever known in my life, Jim and Robin. They set the standard for journalism, as far as I'm

concerned. They're right up there in the pantheon of the greats. And I learned more than I'd ever learned before about what is good journalism and what's the responsibility of a journalist. And what's the role of television news. And clearly, it was a public-television mandate, it wasn't commercial, so the, the mandate was a little different. And we found that there was a very significant audience out there for what we did.

**MS:** But you move, finally, from one of the great joys of your life to

CNN. So how does that come about and why does it come about?

**JW:** Well, I'm at a dinner at the home of the late Katherine Graham, here in Washington, in December 1992. It was a month after the presidential election. And George Bush, the father, had been defeated by the former governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton. And the town was in an upheaval. This dinner was being given for the president-elect and his wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, at Mrs. Graham's house. And I was there at the dinner, had a wonderful time. I was at Mrs. Clinton's table. I was actually with her and with Katherine Graham. We all got up to say thank you and goodbye – my good friend Tom Johnson was moving in my direction, and he caught my eye, and I said hello, and Tom and I had known each other for years, we served together at Stanford on a journalism board. And he pulled me aside, and he said, would you ever consider leaving the *NewsHour*? And I said no, why do you ask? He said, well, I'm looking for, an anchor here in Washington and I think you'd be

great. And I said, well, I'm really not interested in leaving. And he said, well, why don't we talk about it, he said, why don't I give you a call. So we started having conversation, four months later, after a lot of conversations with Tom and talking to Ted Turner and others, I made the very tough decision, to give up the program that I loved and, really the family, at the *NewsHour* to come to CNN. Because Tom really persuaded me that it was an opportunity. He called it a repotting. He said we're taking you from a place where you, had a great run. But he said CNN is international; it's a place where you will have a larger presence. And it's a place where you can do the kind of journalism that you love. You can do breaking news, you can do, political reporting, I'm going to put you in *Inside Politics* and you do an international show called *World View*. And it was too enticing...It was a great professional opportunity. Still a painful move. It was hard for me...

**MS:** Let's talk about family life. You said, "I've always wanted to have a family, I've always wanted a career. I did not believe that in the beginning I had an inkling of how complicated that was going to turn out to be." How complicated was that?

**JW:** Those are the hardest decisions, as a mom or as a father. When are you going to stop working on a story to be with your kids. And be *with* them, because that's what family is, it's being with them, and being there for them. And I made the decision long ago I wasn't going to be there when they came home from school. But I did want to be there in the evenings.

And so I've pretty much drawn a line

around my professional life and I've told whoever I was working with, whether it was NBC or PBS or now CNN, that I don't want to travel extensively. I'll travel, but I can't be on the road all the time; I can't be a foreign correspondent. I can't live on the road. I can't work weekends. And I don't want to work nights. Now having said that, when a September 11th comes along, I've done all those things. But not permanently. And I'm now at a point where my family understands that I am going to work some nights and some weekends. But systematically I'm not going to do that.

**MS:** You said, "I think there are not more women in management for several reasons. Part of it has been that women have not wanted to make the sacrifice that's required. When you're a manager, you're always on call. But...I want to reserve a piece of my life for my family, for my children." What is the definition of a good manager? I think you've said that family is very important to making a better manager, in effect.

**JW:** To be a manager in the news business is about the hardest management job there is. Because you're not only part of the newsmaking decisions and you're part of deciding what is the news that you're going to put in a newspaper or on television, but you're also deciding how much time to devote, how much space to devote, to that story; what stories you're going to leave out.

You're also managing people. And journalists can be prickly characters. They're not always the easiest people to get along with. What is it about herding cats, and they all want to, they all have

egos, you know, that's what makes them great journalists, they should have ego. They all have independent ways. To get to be a great journalist, you've got to be independent.

So to gather these people together, to bring the best out of them, requires a great manager. And, and many times, we've seen managers in journalism come out of having been reporters themselves. Some of them get bumped up and get promoted, and they don't turn out to be such great managers. Others are magical. They do it very, very well.

I think that we're now in an era where family is something that managers are more conscious of. Even at the White House, President George W. Bush has said he wants some of his people to go home earlier in the week. Easier said than done. Same thing in journalism.

**MS:** What do you tell the young women at colleges, as undergraduates or as interns — if you're single, fight for equity? If you want to have a family, be prepared to make some adjustments? But still fight for equity and never compromise?

**JW:** There is no easy answer. I tell young women, just go into it with your eyes open. Try to marry somebody who's very supportive. If you decide to get married. Because you've got to have a supportive spouse, you've got to have somebody who's there, who's going to be with you all the way. Life is hard enough as it is, and if, when you get married, it needs to be somebody who's going to be like a partner, your best friend. Supporting you. Because there are going to be some really tough days.

**MS:** Do you still have the same passion for this business, for this profession, as you did when you were beginning?

**JW:** I have more passion for it. I really do. Much more than I ever dreamed. I am so passionate about how important it is that journalists go out every day and do the best job they can. And cover the story, wherever it is. Whether it's in Beirut or Baghdad or whether it's in New York City or Washington or Houston, Texas. That the American people are not well served unless there are journalists who are prepared to go out every day and work really hard to get as much information as they can. Not to take yes for an answer. Not to take no for an answer. But to keep asking questions and keep probing and keep making phone calls and keep pushing and keep pushing. Because that information, that free flow of information, is the lifeblood of this

### **If we can't cover the news aggressively our democracy isn't worth anything.**

democracy. And we've never seen it the way we see today. We would not be the great country that we are, the democracy that we are, without the free press that we enjoy in the United States of America.

People can make fun of the press; they can deride the press; they can criticize the press; and we deserve all of it. But at the end of the day, if we can't get out and cover the news and cover it aggressively our democracy isn't worth anything.

So I'm more excited about journalism. And yes, we've been

through some rough patches, and yes, we're under siege today, because there's a lot of pressure on the bottom line, to make sure that the audiences are high and the viewers are way up there and they don't change the channel. And I'm aware of that, and that's the real

world that we operate in. But what really matters is that we keep at it, because our work matters. It matters that we report and that we try to get it right and that we try to stay balanced. Because the American people are counting on us.

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# You've Got Video: Welcome to Broadband Internet

A new-media specialist predicts that while online video may not replace television, it will erode the shrinking audience, especially among young viewers. **By John V. Pavlik**

**L**ike many Americans I'm interested in watching my favorite sports teams on television. Like a growing number of Americans, I've also got broadband Internet service in my home. An estimated 182 million persons in the U.S. (two-thirds of the U.S. population) have Internet access, with 18% of U.S. households having broadband Internet access and the percentage is fast growing; it was just ten percent in 2002.

When the 2003 major-league baseball season got in high gear, and I had to work at my computer, I was able to combine business with pleasure: I got my work done on my laptop and I was able to watch live video telecasts of my favorite games via the Internet. But unlike early streaming video, this video

was truly near broadcast quality. The video was smooth and non-pixelated. The frame rate was nearly that of broadcast television, and the image size nearly filled my screen; I have an Apple G4 Powerbook with a 15-inch liquid crystal flat screen display. The audio wasn't bad either, especially when I plugged in my subwoofer and turned up the volume.

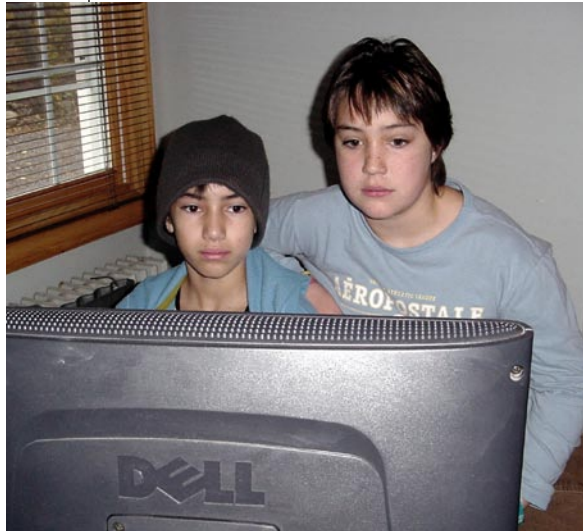
During an initial trial period, the games were available free online. But after that, the subscription price to watch the major-league games online was \$2.95 a game, \$14.95 a month, or \$79.95 for the whole season. This is a steep price for people used to watching games for free on over-the-air television, but not a bad price when compared to MLB Season Pass on DirecTV (about \$139 for the full slate of MLB games for

the 2003 season). Local black-out rules apply, but the online MLB game webcasts are ideal for baseball fanatics whose favorite teams aren't local and otherwise simply wouldn't be available to watch. Also, many viewers don't have DirecTV or cable TV systems that offer premium sports channels, so online viewing may be the only option.

The early results suggest that fans have more than a passing interest in seeing baseball online. During the first month that online video of games was offered, more than 40,000 fans signed up for the pay service. About 1,700 fans paid \$3.95 each to download the entire game video of Roger Clemens's 300th victory from Major League Baseball's Web site with in the first 72 hours of Clemens' performance, according to the company that runs the site. "Fans download individual games, without the commercials, so we're talking about two hours of a game now," says MLB.com CEO Bob Bowman. "[They can] download it to their hard drive on the computer, which takes about 20-30 minutes, and then they can transfer it to a CD or leave it on their hard drive, whatever they want."

### **With Internet access, video can be watched anywhere — at home, in the office or on the road.**

Further, with Internet access, video can be watched from wherever the viewer is—at home, in the office, or on the road, wherever there is Internet service. And with wireless broadband, viewing the games via a laptop can be a



The author's daughters, Orianna, 10 (on left) and Tristan, 11, watching video on demand over the internet — a Japanese "Anime."

completely mobile experience, whether sipping a latte at a Starbucks, catching lunch in New York City's Bryant Park or at any of the many thousands of other free or low-cost Wi-Fi hot spots around the country and the world. Wi-Fi stands for Wireless Fidelity, and is the common vernacular for high-speed wireless Internet access, technically known as 802.11b. Wi-Fi has become so popular that even Zagat's offers a Wi-Fi destination guide. Internet consulting firm Frost & Sullivan estimates that there are at least 10,000 Wi-Fi hot spots around the U.S., up from just 4,000 in last year. They expect the number to top 22,500 by the end of 2004. And with WiMax on the horizon, wireless video promises even bigger things in the years ahead. The experimental

WiMax has a radius of about 30 miles, whereas Wi-Fi is limited to about 100 feet radius. Forecasts are that WiMax will be in the marketplace by 2006.

Thanks to my wife (she's a media and information technology professional),

we've got a Wi-Fi network in our home, and it allows me to go anywhere in the house, patio or yard and get high-speed Internet service on my laptop. Consequently, my laptop and I are untethered and able to be anywhere in or around our home and still online with broadband Internet access, enabling me to watch all the games, do my work and at the moment on a cold November day, sit by a hot roaring fire in our wood-burning stove and still be online.

Of course, I could watch the game on my television set and separately use my laptop, and research by media ethnographer John Carey of Greystone Communications shows this is not an uncommon phenomenon. But there are several problems.

First, my television set isn't nearly as mobile as my laptop (even a small set with rabbit ears). Also, my set may not have all the games that I can get over the Internet. Finally, my laptop is my private machine...I have to share the TV with my kids and my wife.

If Major League Baseball was all the quality video available online then there would be little to get excited about. But baseball is only the tip of the broadband video iceberg. Now, virtually all the major professional sports offer a wide range of online video services, from live game coverage to compressed game video (where software is used to delete all the non-game action, so the game can be watched in much less than the time required on traditional television gamecasts), to highlights, sports shows and much more.

A plethora of other quality video services is also available online and at near broadcast-quality via broadband

Internet connections. On the Web site of *The New York Times* ([www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)), for instance, is Page One, a three-minute video newscast of the front page of the *Times*. It is presented by the Discovery Times Channel every Monday through Friday night. The quality of the video is very good, both in terms of content and production values.

The Starbucks Corporation, which was among the first companies to install wireless Internet access at its stores, is now experimenting with Wi-Fi delivered entertainment video. Among the video programming available is free film footage of blues artists such as Muddy Waters and blues documentaries

### **Viewers increasingly don't care whether they watch their favorite video on television or a computer.**

produced by Martin Scorsese. A variety of other sources of quality online video are also available, including downloadable and streaming video on demand of full-length feature films from MovieLink.com and CinemaNow.com. The downloadable video files are DVD quality and take from about 30 seconds to 10 minutes to start watching, although downloading the entire movie may take 30-90 minutes, depending on one's Internet connection speed. More than 1,000 current releases and older films are available for prices of about \$3 to \$5 a movie. Interestingly, although the movie is downloaded via the Internet, the viewer can store the video film on a variety of formats and can watch the movie on a television set or computer screen, depending on the viewer's preferences. The viewer can also save the movie on a laptop for later

viewing at another location.

Perhaps the premier provider of a wide range of types of video online is RealNetworks ([www.real.com](http://www.real.com)), which through its Real player offers quality video online, including ABC News, CNN, Fox Sports, iFilm (independent films) and the Weather Channel. New RealVideo 9th offers near-DVD quality video over broadband Internet connections, wireline or wireless. The full SuperPass Real video service costs \$9.95 a month, but a reduced video programming package is available for free (a lower-quality software package is also part of the free option). The Seattle, WA-based RealNetworks has had its software downloaded by 300 million users to stream audio, video and other multimedia content ([www.hoovers.com](http://www.hoovers.com)). Another quality competing source of online video is the San Francisco-based Nullsoft's Winamp ([www.winamp.com](http://www.winamp.com)), which has an impressive digital audio and video player, and offers an extensive selection of online video and audio content, specializing in music videos.

One popular type of video content online is adult, sexually-explicit material. It is widely available, increasingly of high production value or at least transmitted online or downloaded at high resolution and frame rate, and has a large audience willing to pay for the content. File sharing networks such as KaZaa, known especially for the distribution of MP3 music files, are also popular havens for the illegal sharing of pornographic video files.

In some ways just as adult video drove the general consumer acceptance of video cassettes in the 1980s, online pornography is facilitating the

development of online video early in the 21st century. One study reported in November, 2003, showed that among men 18-34, 19 million (almost two-thirds of the 32 million U.S. males in that age group, 27 million of whom go online) had visited an adult site in the past month, including viewing of online adult video materials (Media Metrix, <http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?id=361>). This is substantially higher viewership than among females in that age group. "Since 18-34 year-old men aren't engaging with TV broadcast networks to same degree as females, it's not unexpected that this trend would hold true online," said Peter Daboll, president of comScore Media Metrix. "Advertisers and networks alike would be well-advised to reconnect with these consumers through the many online brands to which they are still attracted." Moreover, he added, "The fact that more than 75 percent of 18-34 year-old men in the U.S. are using the Internet seems to take at least some of the mystery out of the decline in TV viewing among this prized demographic." These males are spending an average of 32 hours a month online.

But for young Internet and television viewers, possibly the most popular online video destination is Launch ([www.launch.com](http://www.launch.com)). As of Nov. 3, 2003, Launch had streamed more than one billion music videos since January, more than quadrupling the number of videos streamed from the previous year. Launch is a product of Yahoo (headquartered in Sunnyvale, CA, Yahoo is the largest portal, with 220 million unique visitors a month and \$953 million in sales for 2002), and it specializes in music videos on demand, although other video, audio and



interactive services are also available.

“As teens and young adults increasingly turn to the Internet as their medium of choice, we feel there’s great potential for them to turn to Launch for the music video content that they would normally get on television,” said David Goldberg, vice president and general manager for Music at Yahoo!. “We are dedicated to giving music fans a great user experience on Launch and will continue to provide them with access to the videos they want, when they want them.”

Launch also offers viewers a chance to see music video premieres, with more than 40 music videos having been premiered on the site in 2003. In fall 2003, Launch featured the exclusive online debut of Britney Spears’ latest video “Me Against the Music,” featuring Madonna. Spears’ video was viewed more than two million times in the first five days after its web premiere.

More than 7,000 music videos ranging from hip-hop to pop to jazz are available on demand and for free, generally preceded by a thirty-second commercial message. It’s essentially the same business model MTV has employed successfully for more than twenty years, but now the videos are on demand. The viewer isn’t forced to watch the videos as scheduled. There’s instant gratification (well, near, since

there is a short commercial required before viewing the music video). Today’s on-demand media generation gets just what it wants and the business model works. The video is great, my 10-year old daughter says. “Do you like Launch?” I ask. “I love it,” Tristan responds. “How’s the quality of the video?” I follow up. “It’s excellent,” she answers, “Except when you go full screen; then it gets a little blurry.”

The real question is: how does traditional television adapt to this changing video environment where the viewer is in near total control of the viewing experience? How does television maintain its audience and what is the shape of the business model in a highly competitive digital video universe? Viewers increasingly don’t care whether they watch their favorite video on television or a computer. They want quality content presented in high resolution, with a high frame rate and with excellent quality sound. Perhaps just as importantly, they want their video on demand and only when it is packaged uniquely will they pay for it. Online video won’t likely replace watching television, but it will erode the already shrinking television audience, especially among young viewers.

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Chair of the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, John V. Pavlik, Ph.D, is an authority on new media. He is contributing editor to the *Online Journalism Review*, has written three books on new media and published more than a dozen software applications in journalism and media education.

# Television in Brazil: Citizen Kane Revisited, or as the Globo Turns?

A seasoned expert shows how television dominates daily life in Brazil and is a massive exporter of programs around the world. **By Antonio Brasil**

**E**very evening over 50 million Brazilians tune in their TV sets. Television is embedded in such a way in family life in Brazil that programming tends to regulate people's lives. Television dominates daily life to an extent unrivalled elsewhere in the world, except, perhaps, in the United States. But despite a number of television networks, all eyes in Brazil are mainly glued to one single channel: TV Globo. This is a huge media empire that some believe is capable of everything – at least in Brazil. But the media giant has stumbled over serious financial woes, decisions over utilizing new technologies, and greater competition in the fast-growing Brazilian television market.

There are interesting parallels

between the television industries in the U.S. and Brazil. Brazil has one of the world's largest and most productive commercial television systems, and is one of the largest exporters of television programming in Latin America and around the world, particularly of telenovelas.

Its biggest television network, TV Globo, is the fourth largest commercial network in the world, ranking behind only the three U.S. giants. Like many of the largest global media conglomerates in the U.S. and elsewhere, TV Globo's holdings include papers, weekly magazines, radio stations, a television network, an Internet presence, cable, movies, telecommunications, records and books.

Television became a truly mass

medium in Brazil earlier than in most developing countries. "Because most Brazilians read few newspapers and even fewer books, and 98 per cent of us have ready access to a television, this type of mass media acquires an importance that should not be regarded lightly in our country," said Sao Paulo University Professor Renato Janine Ribeiro.

Given this sort of television penetration of Brazil's continent-sized territory and its 70 percent audience share in a country of 170 million (where a quarter of the population is illiterate and millions more are semi-literate), Ribeiro's assertion has a strong basis in reality. But statistics fail to illustrate the reach of Globo's power in the Brazilian market. It can turn fiction into reality, control Brazilian politics, or even elect presidents.

Brazil is South America's biggest and most influential country. It takes up almost half the continent and it is one of the world's economic giants. Brazil is renowned for its football prowess, coffee production and lively music such as samba and bossa nova. But in a mixture of humor and cynicism, the country is also described by Brazilians as a "sleepy giant." So far, Brazil has been unable to develop its full potential. Social conditions are harsh in the big cities of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, where a third of the population lives in favelas, or slums.

Brazil has a history of economic boom and bust, with its attempts at development hampered in the past by

high inflation and one of the biggest foreign debts in the world. It has had to be bailed out in times of crisis, but economic reforms in the 1990s brought some stability to the country's finances. Reforms included privatization and the opening of its markets.

Last year, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a former shoeshine

boy and metal worker, became Brazil's first left-wing president in four decades. His success story seems out of a TV soap opera. Lula also knows well the scale of poverty and exploitation in Brazil. Like a TV hero, he pledged to tackle corruption and Brazil's economic woes, improve education and create jobs. But Lula cannot make the same mistakes as his predecessors. Brazil's president says he'll attempt the impossible in one of the world's most unequal societies. However, even these moderate goals are likely to strain the unity of Lula's consensus government. He also knows that in order to achieve his political, economic and social goal, he needs media support. And in Brazil, media means Globo.

## Globo Empire

Media ownership is highly concentrated in Brazil. Home-grown conglomerates such as Globo dominate the market and run TV and radio networks, newspapers and pay-TV operations.

"There is an ongoing struggle in Brazil that makes disputes over American-owned Big Media look like a game of Monopoly," said Carlos

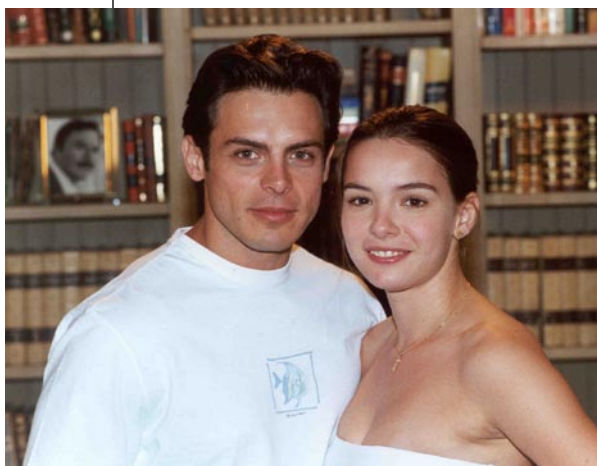
## Media ownership is highly concentrated. An ongoing struggle makes disputes over American-owned Big Media look like a game of Monopoly.

Castilho, former Globo London News bureau chief and current media analyst. TV Globo's power is immense. It has 78 stations and 8,000 employees throughout Brazil. *The Christian Science Monitor* reported recently that its activities generated some 35,000 jobs. The network's programs are shown in 112 countries, including the United States (on Spanish language stations) and China.

According to *Brazil em Dados* (Brazil's Statistics), the TV Globo Network is also one of the 40 largest Brazilian enterprises. The network produces 75 percent of its own programs, has 74 percent of the audience on prime-time, 69 percent at nighttime, 56 percent in the morning, and 59 percent in the afternoon. In dispute with several other TV networks, including SBT, Record, CNT and Bandeirantes, Globo gets 75 percent of all the advertising money spent on TV in Brazil.

### **Brazilian-made dramas and soaps are exported to more than 100 countries around the world.**

Brazil is also one of the largest pay-TV markets in the region, with over 2 million subscribers. Growth is expected to continue (currently only 7 percent of TV households have pay-TV). The total potential market is estimated at 10 million to 12 million TV households by the year 2007. Globo Cabo S.A. is a cable television operator in Brazil, operating under the brand name NET in the major Brazilian cities, including operations in Brazil's three



Luigi Baricelli and Regiane Alves - husband and wife in "Laços de Família".

largest cities, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Belo Horizonte. Globo Cabo also offers broadband Internet services, data communication and multimedia services for corporate networks.

### **Brazilian Telenovelas**

Brazilian-made dramas and soaps are exported to TV markets around the world. The Brazilian telenovelas became good enough, as commercial television entertainment, to be exported throughout Latin America and into Europe, Asia and Africa. According to Prof. Janine Ribeiro, "The Brazilian way of dealing with emotions, especially those that concern relationships, is partially shaped by the most popular genre in Brazilian television: the novella."

Globo's three slick nightly soap operas still account for 30 percent to 35 percent of all television revenues and \$32 million annually in sales to 52 nations, including the United States. In 1995, Globo invested \$120 million to build a state-of-the-art television



**Carolina Dieckmann and Vera Fischer - daughter and mother in "Laços de Família".**

production center just outside Rio that includes four studios with set-building and costume-making factories, a fire department, a bank and a restaurant. Daniel Filho, director of Central Globo de Criação (Globo Central of Creation) believes that to make a novela is less risky than other TV programs. "The long novela can be altered according to the public's preference and this is good television and business," he said. This kind of television production is responsible for the Padrão Globo de Qualidade (Globo pattern of quality), as it is known, and is also responsible for Globo's success.

The rivalries between the big four TV networks in the United States often generate great interest in the U.S. media. But those companies are far more evenly matched than their Brazilian counterparts. In Brazil, Globo is so far ahead of the pack, in terms of both technical standards and audience share, that it makes news if even one rival program manages to clinch the top spot in the ratings. "There is no real competition in the Brazilian television industry, and that's the problem," said

Dines. "Globo's competitors never had the talent, resources and business capacity to create an alternative. They only know to produce television exactly like Globo. Only worse."

## Trouble in TV Land

Nowadays, the Globo empire is facing problems that are more typical to its own soap operas. Financial crises, the death of a media magnate and fierce media war are hot ingredients in this dramatic saga. Roberto Marinho, dubbed the Citizen Kane of Brazil for his news and entertainment empire, died at the age of 98 last year. Marinho had often been criticized for supporting Brazil's former military dictatorship to obtain Globo's monopoly-like reach. But he was praised for his influence in business and in politics. "I'll fight with the army minister, but not with Roberto Marinho," once declared Tancredo Neves, a former Brazilian president.

Headlines in the Brazilian and international press announced that Brazilians mourned the TV mogul. Hundreds of Brazilians, including soap stars, housewives and government leaders attended the funeral. Marinho created the nationwide Globo television network, which turned Rio de Janeiro into a Brazilian Hollywood. He had taken over the small family newspaper, *O Globo*, while in his 20s and quickly expanded what became known as Organizacoes Globo into radio, TV, publishing and Internet businesses. But now, after years of super-sizing its empire with foreign loans, it seems that Globo's golden age is coming to an end.

But according to Carlos Castilho, the death of Roberto Marinho is not a

major setback. “The biggest problem is that Globo does not have a heavy-weight voice in negotiations with the government anymore,” he said. “The three sons share the control of the Globo empire. But none have the same status and imposing respect as their father. And this is particularly important considering that Globo now needs help from the government to renegotiate its debts.”

Single-handedly, Globo accounts for 55 percent of the global debt of all Brazilian media corporations. Most of that money is concentrated in cable investments that haven’t paid off. Brazil’s recession has hit its media sector hard, and Globo is no exception. Since October 2002, the media conglomerate started to delay payments and is anxiously looking to reschedule its debt payments. With the real undervalued relative to the dollar, the company is finding it increasingly difficult to meet loan payments. “If Globo fails to get the cash injection from Brazil’s congress, it will suffer a severe setback,” Castilho said.

## Media War

Globo is not the only Brazilian media company facing financial problems. The joint debt of all major Brazilian media groups is \$3.2 billion. Eighty percent of that amount is dollar-denominated debt; short-term debts make up 83.5 percent of the total.

But other television companies are split on what the desirable outcome of the government’s Globo decision should be. There is a threat of a media war in Brazil. Four networks have resigned from the Brazilian Association of Television and Radio Broadcasters after

the organization began to negotiate with the state-controlled National Bank for Social and Economic Development for help in tiding over Globo. Three of these networks (SBT, Rede TV and Record Television) are in favor of the loan being used only for new investments and not for debt payments. On the other hand, Rede Bandeirantes (based in the city of Sao Paulo) labels the possible government assistance “immoral.”

But, so far, despite Globo’s political muscle, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and the Brazilian Congress have proved reluctant to play along. Not wishing to press his luck with voters hard hit by economic recession, Lula has placed the burden for a final decision on Brazil’s congress.

The new public financing program for the media has divided the industry, leading to the recent departure of two national stations from the Radio and TV Association, and calls by the National Association of Newspapers (ANJ) for a transparent lending process, *O Globo* reported.

According to *O Globo*, the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES) seeks to finance the media on a case-by-case basis. But for some media analysts and mainly for Globo’s competitors, the BNDES lending process must be “transparent,” and that the media industry should not receive privileged treatment in relation to other branches of the economy.

There are several short-term effects of the current financial problems in Brazilian media in general and for Globo, in particular. For Castilho, Globo’s big debt does not represent a concrete threat to its survival as the leading television network in Brazil. But

it will have to make strategic changes. And this will surely mean conceding more space for its competitors. The real problem involves the future. The current crisis is compromising Globo's capacity to invest in new technologies like digital television and prepare for media convergence. This is the big problem and the major challenge regarding the future of Brazilian television.

## The Empire Strikes Back

Globo is still fighting for its vision of the future of media in Brazil. The Marinho brothers, heirs of a troubled empire, are still concerned about their role regarding the future of Brazilian television. Despite their financial problems, they are seeking to extend their media empire in other new technology areas. They are working together with other broadcasters, the industry and the Brazilian government to define a digital TV standard.

The intention is to adopt one of the two digital standards available: the American ATSC or the European DVB. Both standards will be carefully tested to determine which one best fits Brazilian needs. The ATSC standard was developed for channels of the same bandwidth as Brazil's and with high definition as a goal. But the DVB standard has the potential of providing a better usage of the spectrum, which may be very important for Brazil. These are important and urgent decisions that will determine the future of Brazilian television.

In terms of programming, Globo also opened a new production center. PROJAC is equipped with the latest technology available for television production, including digital HDTV

and stereo audio recording. Initially, the high-definition programming will be composed of film and sports events. The production of high-definition programming will be increased as the base of digital receivers becomes significant and Globo solves its current financial problems.

Globo executives continue jetting around the world, looking for places a Brazilian production company might find an appreciative market. Like Brazilian steel and sugar, the Globo telenovelas are a product that is also king at home. Globo is leader in the home market but it needs to grow outside Brazilian borders.

In an era of greater competition and choice, Globo is thriving by forging alliances with foreign and domestic corporations rather than by political muscle and going it alone. While Globo used to control a limited number of areas such as television and radio, it now has a presence in many more businesses—albeit without full control.

"The Brazilian [media] market is huge and needs a lot of capital. There is room for many players," Dines said. "This is the beginning of the age of diversity."

Globo is looking for international partners. Globocabo, for example, has 2 million subscribers of high-speed Internet service and online video images. Globo wants to develop the technology for e-commerce and interactive television, the latter allowing viewers to vote on how to end TV Globo's popular soap operas or receive the latest statistics on a favorite soccer player while watching a game. Before the current financial crisis, *Forbes* magazine described Globocabo as one of the world's 20 smallest companies

with the most growth potential in the 21st century. Globo still has one of the largest installed networks of fiber-optic cable in Brazil that was designed for telephone service. But the future depends on solving the short-term financial problems.

## Future Threats

But for Alberto Dines, the main threat for the future of Brazilian television comes from another source of competition: the fast growing and greatly enriched evangelical networks. "They have a political agenda and they want control the country. They are not concerned with quality and innovation. They want to communicate with the masses and for that, they would do anything," he said.

According to Dines, the current problems of the Brazilian media are mainly related to the current economic problems in the country. "The media industry only develops or expands when the economy also develops and grows. One or two years of significant economic growth can change everything," he said.

Despite the typical Brazilian optimistic view of the future, Castilho reminds us about some problems ahead. "In terms of media convergence and new technologies, it seems that most Brazilian TV producers and executives think that nothing is going to change radically in the near future," he said. "This kind of attitude might have serious and unexpected consequences for the future of the Brazilian television industry."

And he may be right. The new technologies also seem to threaten to bring in a new wave of largely U.S.

programming. The audience studies so far do not indicate a strong audience response to them, except perhaps among a globalized elite and upper middle class. The dominant characteristic of Brazilian television still seems to be that of a strong national system with a distinct set of genres very popular with its own audience and in export. But for Professor Joseph Straubhaar, author of several books on Brazilian media, he said the dominant characteristic of Brazilian television still seems to be that of a strong national system with a distinct set of genres very popular with its own audience and in export.

One thing is certain, Brazil may seem like a puzzling and contradictory country to the outsider or uninitiated. But regardless of their occasional excesses and recurrent financial problems, Brazilians are proud of their television culture. There's no doubt that they do know how to produce some of the most popular and creative television programs in the world.

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Dr. Antonio Brasil, a veteran TV journalist and professor at Rio de Janeiro State University, is currently a visiting scholar at the Rutgers University School of Communication, where he is conducting postdoctoral research in new media.



# Television Terrorists!

In the wake of wardrobe malfunctions and foul language, a veteran producer calls for a new agency to set standards for all TV, cable as well as broadcast. **By Jack Kuney**

**T**he obscenity hullabaloo which went on during the winter of 2003-2004 is still raging, and, from where I sit, does not seem likely to cease or desist. The characters in this drama are now familiar to us all: Janet Jackson, a company called Clear Channel Communications, (which owns more than a thousand broadcast licenses), Howard Stern, "Bubba, the Love Sponge," and many more, not particularly in the limelight at the present moment, but who will be included in these nefarious credits before I'm through.

My main concern is television, although radio has been a particularly odoriferous participant in the story I am telling. Quick cut to Faye Emerson, who became a television star as a talk-show hostess in the early days of TV. Emerson's career began in October, 1949, just as television was coming of age, and went national on the CBS Network the following March. Gathering high ratings, she soon began a second talk show, this time on NBC, becoming one of the first people in the media to

have two shows simultaneously on two networks.

Emerson was a great beauty, but a marginally successful film and stage actress before she turned to television, which became her *métier*. A woman with a very ample bosom, she lit up the screen. The Standards and Practices



Faye Emerson

Division of NBC, in their infinite wisdom, decided Emerson was showing a bit too much cleavage for their viewers, and insisted on the placement of some scrim covering the curvature of her breasts. The press and the public responded negatively, considering it a ridiculous action on the part of NBC. The hue and cry gave way to some loss of advertising revenue, and the network backed off, bringing the conflict to an end.

Another quick cut, spanning 50-plus years of television: you are seeing the half-time show at the Super Bowl, along with 90,000,000 other viewers, and you note Janet Jackson's calculated exposure of one bosom, assisted by rock singer Justin Timberlake. Although the peep show didn't last but a moment, Faye Emerson and Janet Jackson bear comparison: how far we have come in our media maturation, even worse, how far we have fallen.

In that same winter of discontent, another event of note took place. New York's Governor, George Pataki, officially pardoned Lenny Bruce, the comedian, from his conviction on obscenity charges. This posthumous pardon, the first in New York's history, took place 39 years after his sentencing, and seems ridiculous in light of what has gone on in the decades since Bruce was arrested and tried.

I am sure most of the young people who read of Governor Pataki's actions on the front page of *The New York Times* haven't the vaguest idea of who Lenny Bruce was. After all, you would have to be at least 60 years old today to have seen or heard Bruce perform. But as the Congress and the Federal Communications Commission were seeking ways to stanch the

increasingly prevalent abuses of the media, Pataki was being petitioned by a group of First-Amendment advocates, among them the co-authors of a book about Bruce titled: "The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon," by Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover (Sourcebooks, 2002). It's a splendid, definitive book.



Lenny Bruce

I quote from an article they wrote: "The First Amendment is premised on the notion, as Justice Louis Brandeis long ago opined, that more speech is better than censorship. If the Lenny Bruces of the world offend us, then refute them, but don't silence them."

Lenny Bruce's legacy is that "People" (comics, singers, writers, entertainers) can appear on stage and in the media, and do whatever they please. I know that's a difficult pill to swallow for many people, but bear with me as I make my case.

Bruce was arrested nine times in four years on obscenity charges. His

sin was in the use of language, he didn't show any body parts. Most of Bruce's "no-holds-barred" comedy predated television. I found that researching for some actual broadcasting experiences was frustrating and conflicting. He supposedly appeared on the Arthur Godfrey Show in 1948, when TV was still an infant, but nothing has been archived from that era. He also had one abortive experience with an early Steve Allen Show, but was censored before he got on the air. But he always wanted to videotape his night-club act, for when he went to court, he was always getting versions of what he did, usually told by an arresting officer, and he felt what he did was not offensive, if seen in context. In most of his court cases, the Constitution became the centerpiece of his defense. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech ..."

Strangely, I got a chance to meet Lenny Bruce. It was 1949 and I was producing a CBS Public Affairs religious program called *Look Up and Live*. We were on the air every Sunday morning at 10:30 for a half hour. In trying to define just who our audience was, I conjectured it was unlikely that "churched" people were our viewers – they were, after all, in church. Who, then, were we programming to? We felt our target audience should be the "un-churched," a word we created that was "open sesame" for all of our programming aspirations, and we filled our Sundays with a rich menu of singers, dancers,

actors, instrumentalists, artists and writers, all using the arts to delve into new dimensions of religious text and verse, using the arts. We were highly successful.

So it wasn't unusual when I was contacted by Lenny Bruce's manager, Jack Sobel.

As I was to discover, Lenny was not the kind of comic who got his laughs with "one-liners." He was more of a storyteller, doing "riffs" on subjects he felt warranted exposure: attitudes towards Blacks, Jews, the Irish, all politicians, the South, the drug scene – and most of all, in one routine he called "Religions, Inc.," where he took on the Church establishment and their over-commercialization. Everything was fair game to Lenny, so in the same breath he "riffed" on The Pope and the Papacy, Oral Roberts, Billy Graham, Cardinal Spellman, Bishop Fulton Sheehan, Moses, Christ, Eddie Cantor, Rabbi Stephen Wise and General Sarnoff, to name a few.

**While television was morally frozen in place, the rest of society was in turmoil. Profanity became commonplace...It didn't take long for television to catch up, reaching its advanced state of sexual immaturity by the time the millennium rolled around.**

It was outrageous, as I discovered when I went to the Duane Hotel in New York City where he was performing at the time. We had a brief meeting in his dressing room prior to his performance and then I joined the audience and watched while he "riffed" on religion. It

was wild stuff; the audience loved it.

However cynical and imaginative his act was, Bruce used very few four-letter words and I felt with some judicious editing we could sanitize "Religions, Inc." enough so that it could be acceptable to a television audience. But the shows were done "live" on the CBS Network, and Bruce didn't look favorably to any prior censorship, so eventually the project faded and died. I don't think he ever reached the hallowed halls of television, except in news stories chronicling his many court battles on obscenity charges.

But Bruce did open the door for other young comics like George Carlin and Richard Pryor. Carlin's "seven dirty words" routine led to action by the Federal Communications Commission against the Pacifica Foundation. It was the '60s and neither radio nor television audiences responded to any encroachments on their personal standards of morality. Society was preoccupied with the social and cultural revolutions of the time. Television remained a constant, following most of precepts of the Code set up by the film industry.

While television was morally frozen in place, the rest of society was in turmoil. Profanity became commonplace. In certain circles, nudity became the rule rather than the exception. "Oh, Calcutta!" with its cast of totally nude players ran on Broadway, as did "Hair," which was a little less bare, but had a long run. The Living Theater with its nude psycho-dramatic amateurs was everywhere, even on-stage at the Hunter College Auditorium in New York. One trip to San Francisco in the late '60s for Westinghouse Broadcasting crystallized the whole era for me: the

shoe-shine lady on the street in North Beach was nude from the waist up.

It didn't take long for television to catch up, reaching its advanced state of sexual immaturity by the time the millennium rolled around. In one broadcast of the Oscars with David Niven acting as M.C., a nude male galloped across the stage, startling Niven, the audience and viewers alike. Once cameras were in place, there were "streakers" everywhere: football fields, baseball diamonds, rock concerts, "Spring Break." (There was no need to streak at Spring Break!)

Bill Carter of *The New York Times* reminds us it was just four years ago when Matt Lauer and the *Today Show* were covering the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, a young woman opened her blouse and revealed herself on camera. Dressed or undressed, her presence seemed to have little impact on the viewing audience.

I could go on and on. Late-night series like *NYPD Blue* (ABC) routinely think it necessary to show the bare bottoms of their police officers. (Have they ever shown Sipowitz's?) Even Public Television is not without sin: *Masterpiece Theater* keeps its own standard of morality with occasional shots of T and A. And let's not forget one of commercial television's biggest success stories with its team of high-priced talent. Bill Carter of the *Times* tells us: "NBC's *Friends* has continually pushed the limits of double-entendre and outright sexual references." *USA Today* added that "one of the characters on the show, Rachel, played by Jennifer Aniston, has had 20 different sexual partners in the ten years of its run."

With the extraordinary growth and audience acceptance of cable TV, the list

of sexual terrorists grows longer and longer. The multi-channelled system seems to welcome any and all, without question about the moral impact of their product. Standards don't exist, and if the audiences keep tuning in, and the cable systems and advertisers keep buying air time, there seems to be little hope for sane programs we can all watch without cringing. It can only get worse, our programming days and nights will be filled with bare bosoms, profanity, soul kisses and crotch grabbing. Thank you, Madonna!

**It might be time for the creation of a new agency that would defend everyone's rights, even those with community standards different from our own, by establishing criteria, not act as a censor.**

Yes, there is a First Amendment, and yes, there is a Federal Communications Commission, and yes, there is a Congress that can enact repressive legislation, but I'm not sure if the combination of all three can do anything but sanitize the medium a bit. I suppose we can always tune out, change channels, boycott advertisers who sponsor programs whose thrust we mistrust. Whatever, I'm not sure the public can be trusted. The old network hue and cry used to be "we give the public what they want." Frank Rich echoed that in a recent *Times* piece titled "Après Janet, a Deluge." "Entertainment built on violence and sex," he wrote, "isn't going to go away as long as Americans lap it up." I agree.

Most of the foregoing was written almost a year ago, in April of 2004, and many of the charges and indictments I made now have to be viewed in a different perspective. My original

premise was to equate media abuse with the anti-social action of political and religious dissidents. In the light of the recent past, when one political party defined and re-defined the term for us, by applying a fear factor, never meant to apply in the case of media abuse.

I will, however, continue to make my case. Do we press more peoples' buttons by crying "wolf" as a means to their attention (votes) or is the constant manipulation and downsizing of our media a greater social menace? If a poll were taken on the issue, I think most

people in this country would say I have my priorities out of whack.

Still, I offer a few items to show that the

"world is a-changing," however slowly. Clear Channel Communications has agreed to pay a fine of more than \$1.7 million to settle some of its indecency problems, including those involving Howard Stern. Stern still protests, raging at the wind. He has moved off the public airwaves, signing with Sirius Satellite Radio.

"Bubba, the Love Sponge," another shock jock like Stern, was fired from a Tampa radio station, WXTB-FM, after being sanctioned by the FCC for his on-the-air bawdiness. Bubba felt it was a good time for him to run for sheriff in Florida's Pinellas County and was roundly defeated.

*Friends* came to the end of its run. I don't miss it. I never watched it in the first place.

And, of course, there were "terrorists" all over the place during the Bush campaign, as the Republicans

successfully influenced voters by scaring the hell out of them. In the middle of the campaign, as no one took notice, the FCC lambasted the FOX network with a bigger fine than they gave Clear Channel, for airing a seamy show called *Married by America*. It didn't slow FOX down one bit, they laughed all the way to the bank.

But these are all small straws in the wind. The atmosphere for change exists, and it might be time for the creation of a Universal Television/Radio/Cable Code applicable to all who use the public's air, regardless of how their signal reaches the listener or the viewer. The Federal Communications Commission is severely limited in doling out fines for obscenity, especially now that cable has become such a showplace for foul language and graven images. Regulated radio and television, the "public's air," is free to anyone and everyone who has a radio or television set. If a consumer chooses to watch cable, he pays for that privilege, and because he does, cable

systems and the networks are often ignored by the FCC, and receive a freer rein in content. As a result, the "free" stations feel the hot breath of cable on their necks, and have become replicates of their cable brethren.

It would take action by Congress, and members of such an agency would be difficult to assemble, but once in place, they could set new standards for all of broadcasting. (The National Association of Broadcasters is now trying to address the obscenity problem, but their main thrust would always be their membership, who are primarily owners and operators of stations.)

The goal of this new agency would be to defend everyone's rights, even those with community standards different from our own. It would establish criteria for broadcasters, not act as a censor. It would be a well-publicized effort, administered by distinguished individuals with no political or personal axe to grind. It could offer a true test of everyone's conscience. It's worth a try.

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Jack Kuney lives in Bradenton, Florida, where he writes and maintains a critical interest in media.

# Radio Finds Its Eyes

The story of Charles Francis Jenkins,  
the forgotten pioneer of mechanical television.

By Donald G. Godfrey

**I**n the world of creative dreamers the work of Charles Francis Jenkins (1867-1934) has been too long forgotten. He was an American original. He was an inventor – without apology. In 1922, he was the only American working on a new innovation called radio-vision – television. He produced the first American television pictures in December 1923 and had the only fully operating system of the time. According to the *Washington Sunday Star*, it was on a warm Washington D.C., Saturday afternoon, June 13, 1925, when television as a “long fantastic dream of science became an accomplished fact.” It was a private demonstration focused on television as a defense tool and demonstrated for a few dignitaries including Secretary of the Navy Curtis D. Wilbur. Just a few years later Jenkins filed with the Federal Radio Commission for an experimental television station license. W3XK went on the air. It was the pinnacle of Jenkins’ career. Hugo Gernsback declared “television has actually arrived,” and defined it as “instantaneous sight at a distance.” Jenkins himself described it as “radio finds its eyes.” Descriptions

of his early programming found in the National Archives sound a little like what we have on the air today, “jugglers, magicians, a one-man band... and a series of talks on reception and reproduction [of television pictures].”

Jenkins was more than just a television pioneer: he held hundreds of patents for a variety of inventions. Inventing was his natural talent. According to his autobiography, *The Boyhood of an Inventor*, even from his youth he was constantly fixing and inventing new tools around his family’s Indiana farm. In 1894, he built a Phantascope, which was a modified kinoscope or peep-show apparatus. A year later he had produced a motion picture projector. His interest in the new motion picture industry led him to form the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, 1916. He was the founder and first president of the organization we know today as the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers. He had more than three hundred patents to his name and only a few of these were related to television and the movies. Others included airplane brakes; Jenkins loved to fly, and he made most of his income from

a cylindrical milk container something akin to our ice-cream containers of today. If you've ever attended a movie, watched television, flown in an airplane, used waxed paper or purchased a carton of milk, you've used something from an invention of C. Francis Jenkins.

### **"They said it couldn't be done, but some darn fool went and did it."**

A good deal of controversy surrounds Jenkins and his work. He was involved in legal battles for patents, but so was every other inventor of the day. His genius involved mechanical television and mechanics were at the foundation of all his efforts. In the 1930s, Zworykin and Farnsworth's electronic television ideas passed Jenkins by, and his name faded from our history. The story might have been different if those electronic ideas had proven unworkable. Nevertheless his work in mechanical television helped to establish those foundations for today. In a world permeated by television, Jenkins was a pioneer of vision, determined and energetic. The motto on the desk of his working laboratory read, "They said it couldn't be done, but some darn fool went and did it." But we are getting ahead of the story.

Little is known of Jenkins' youth. He was a Quaker farm boy, born near Dayton, Ohio, August 1867, but he did not live long in Ohio. Two years after his birth his parents moved to Richmond, Indiana, where Francis grew up. The farm was 141 acres, just a few miles north of Richmond near Fountain City, Indiana. The house where he spent his youth still stands. It was a twelve-room, two story brick structure, picturesque even today. Tall pines,

maple, fir and linden trees line a long lane from the main road down to the home. In one corner of the yard there is a circle of cedar trees the children used as an imaginative playhouse during the warm summer months. The nursery was on the first floor in the northeast corner of the house. Green lawns, shrubbery, and flowing fields of beans surrounded the

home. The foundations of a childhood farm life and Jenkins' Quaker origins undoubtedly influenced his life. On the farm, mechanics was a part of life. If something was broken, it was fixed – you didn't run to the store. Add to this natural work ethic, the Quaker belief in Christianity, and that God was a personal being, who encouraged works over financial gain, and you begin to understand Jenkins' roots.

Jenkins' ingenious aptitude was exhibited at an early age. One day his mother dressed him to play in the yard. He must not have liked the outfit, it was a short dress and a sunbonnet. The sunbonnet was to keep him from getting burned. The yard was surrounded by a large board fence, so the children couldn't go far and mother could keep an eye on them from her work around the house. On this particular day, when she checked the grounds, little Francis was nowhere to be found. The evidence of his ingenuity lay beside the fence – the sunbonnet and a saw. He had apparently taken a wood saw from the tool shed and cut a hole in the fence. He was found shortly, down by the barnyard playing with the new baby piglets.

C. Francis Jenkins came from a long line of inventors. His uncle Robert Jenkins invented the rolling cookie



cutter, and family members say that inventiveness is in Jenkins' blood. His cousin Russell L. Jenkins was a technical advisor to the President of Monsanto Research and several family members have filed patents over the years.

Jenkins' earliest inventions were for the farm. His first was a bean husker. This device removed the seed of the bean from the outer shell. His father was not too appreciative of the machine and Francis's attention was diverted to the challenges of greasing the axles of the wagons. He designed a jack that raised the wagons so that the grease might be easily applied. This invention caught the attention of his neighbors, so Francis and his brother made several jacks and sold them in town. Here he learned his first lesson in marketing – the painted jacks sold quickly, while those unpainted, yet just as workable, were not as marketable. The farm was a haven for invention for a growing young mind, but it could not hold him. As he grew he was constantly on the move. He longed to see the country.

It was after he graduated from high school that Jenkins made his first trip to the Pacific Coast. He worked in the saw mills of Washington State, riding the logs in the mill pond, where they were cut and loaded aboard the trains. Here again his mechanical genius was exhibited one day when the trains collided. It was a proposal from Francis that untangled the cars and had them back running within a few hours. He didn't stay long in any place. He worked the Washington timber industry, the Sierra Nevada mines of Arizona and New Mexico, and each year he would return to his family in Indiana for a brief visit. On one of these visits back home he was encouraged to take the



Charles Francis Jenkins, 1924

civil service exam.

In 1890, he gave up his western ventures for a job with the U.S. Life Saving Service – today the U.S. Coast Guard. This was a turning point in his career as it relocated him from the West Coast to Washington, D.C. He was appointed as a secretary to the founder of the Coast Guard, Sumner I. Kimball. From Kimball, Jenkins gained a broad humanitarian vision. He learned and wrote the stories of those in the service as he compiled, by hand, the annual reports of the Life Saving Service. It was at this time that Jenkins took up the hobby of photography.

## Early Motion Picture Contributions

In 1895, Jenkins gave up full-time employment, declaring to everyone he wanted to be an inventor. This was a decision that didn't receive much support from family or friends. "Inventor" wasn't in any of the Washington, D.C.,

job descriptions and motion pictures were so new that, according to even the *Scientific American*, they were not attracting any attention.

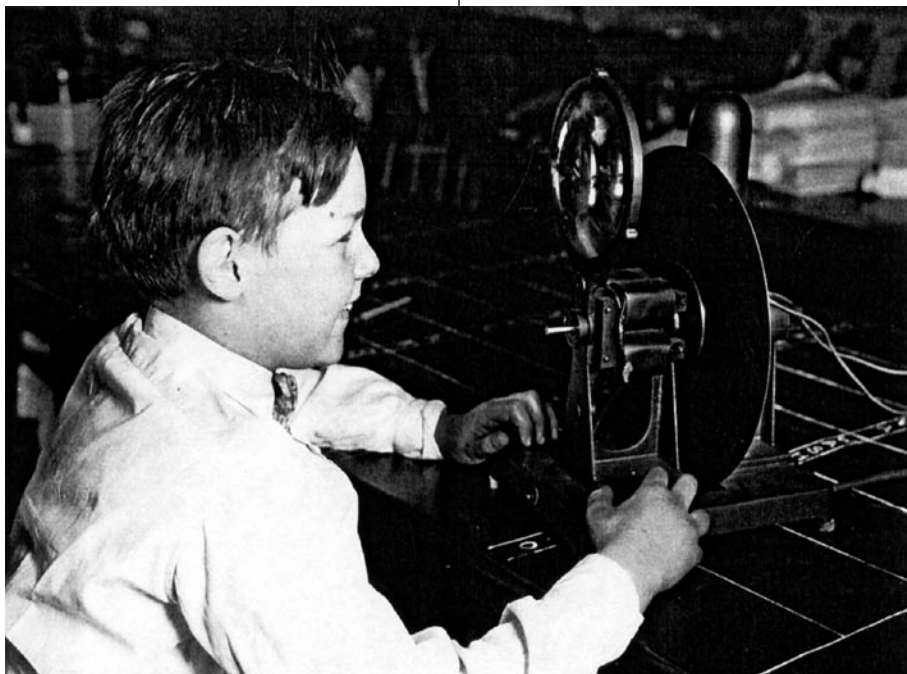
In the pioneering of motion pictures, it was Thomas A. Edison and his assistant W. K. L. Dickson who were working primarily on the film systems of the time. Edison's work revolved around the "Edison Vitascope." Dickson was working on a camera called the kinetograph and a viewing display apparatus called the kinoscope. These allowed the viewer to crank an endless film loop through the peep-show device. The problem with the kinoscope, according to historian Albert Abramson, was that it did not allow for screen projection. The two people working on projection systems were Jenkins and Thomas J. Armat. In 1894, Jenkins modified the Kinoscope substantially and called it the Phantascope. By 1895, Jenkins and Armat had formed a partnership producing the first practical motion-picture projector. The fundamental principles they originated, according to Gene G. Kelkres, "are still in use today." This partnership might have produced today's motion picture foundations, but it was a partnership filled with litigation, accusation and innuendo. Kelkres comments that when the despondent Jenkins sold his interests to Armat for just a few thousand dollars he "made a historic mistake... thereby virtually eliminating his [the Jenkins] name from its rightful identification with the eccentric cam projector." Armat's rights were soon sold to Edison, "thus history books... practically never [mention] a reference to the name which expresses the true origin of the apparatus: The Armat-Jenkins' Phantascope."

It was June 6, 1894, when Jenkins premiered his invention on the walls of the Jenkins & Company Jewelry (a store owned by his cousin Charles Milton Jenkins), in Richmond, Indiana.

## **The women left but the men stayed on to see the show.**

The picture showed a vaudeville dancer moving across the screen in jerky movements. The group at first watched Francis working with the equipment, but their attention was quickly diverted to the performance as the young dancer imitated a butterfly. As the performer slowly lifted her skirt to reveal her ankle, several of the ladies in the audience, including Francis's mother, got up and stormed out. The *New York Herald Tribune*, reported that "[the] women left, but the men stayed on to see the show."

The challenges of motion-picture projection soon led Jenkins to his next most significant contribution to our industry – the establishment of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers. The issue was standardization. Basically, the equipment of the time was all different as designed by the individual manufacturers and thus a focal standard was nonexistent. The first attempts to provide common standards had failed, so on July 14, 1916, Jenkins invited a few engineers to the first meeting to discuss motion picture engineering. The group elected Jenkins as Chair and at a later meeting he was acknowledged as founder of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, where he served as President for the first two years and remained an active participant throughout his life. Although the original purpose of the



**The Radio Visor, a commercial receiver, was sold to members of the viewing audience who assembled the receiver and then could view programming on the Jenkins stations in Washington, D.C. , or in New Jersey.**

SMPE organization was engineering standards, it rapidly grew into an important forum where engineers presented their futuristic ideas. Among those early presenters are historical names of significance, Lee deForest, Herbert E. Ives, and Terry Ramsaye.

## **Jenkins Television**

Jenkins' work in television was mechanical. He utilized his film experience and what Albert Abramson described as a "unique class prism." Jenkins called it the Prismatic Ring. In 1922, Jenkins was the only American inventor working on television; his first television patent was filed March 13, 1922. It was described as a process for transmitting pictures by wireless. That first transmission took place in Washington, D.C., May 19, 1922. At

this point in television history Philo T. Farnsworth was just 16 years old. Vladimir K. Zworykin had just immigrated to the United States and it would be a year before he began his important work at Westinghouse. The first of use Jenkins' system was in the transmission of still photographs, what we'd see today as facsimiles. There were demonstrations of ship-to-shore images, weather reports, and newspaper application of the visual technology. However, as "radio found its eyes," Jenkins founded the Jenkins Laboratories, and there was tremendous publicity. The idea for the new corporation, according to Jenkins, was "to develop radio movies to be broadcast for entertainment in the home," as those stationary pictures now began to move.

In March 1925, a British competitor,

John Logie Baird, demonstrated the first successful transmission of a crude television image. Four months later Jenkins produced the first American transmissions. G.L. Bidwell, reporting for the American Radio Relay League, wrote, “motion pictures by radio are here, I saw them with my own eyes.” These first images were filmed silhouettes; audiences largely radio amateurs and those experimenting with the new technology. It would have been these experiments and their resulting publicity that inspired the youthful Farnsworth. The challenge in Jenkins’ and Baird’s mechanical scanning devices was picture resolution. Yes, a crude image could clearly be seen, but film was producing much better pictures.

Jenkins continued working on improving the picture quality and in June 1926, just before the establishment of the Federal Radio Commission (later the Federal Communications Commission), the Department of Commerce granted Jenkins a six-month television station license for W3XK (it started as 3XK). It was on the air with a regular program schedule by July 1928 and Jenkins was selling receivers for \$2.50 (\$26.90 in 2003 dollars), which the audience participants could assemble themselves and thus see his programming. These receivers he called “Radiovisor Kits” were aggressively marketed in the Eastern States.

The years 1926 through 1929 were pinnacle years for Jenkins Television. He had all of the essentials for success. He had a station on the air in Washington D.C., and a proposal for Jersey City; programming to attract an audience; a commodity for sale in the kits, voluminous publicity for

his technological and programming experiments, and aggressive plans for future growth. Unfortunately, competition too was on the rise. A new technology called electronic television was being tested successfully by Farnsworth in San Francisco, lawsuits were hovering, and the stock market was about to crash. By the end of the DeForest Radio Company controlled the interests in Jenkins corporations and shortly thereafter the Jenkins television corporations were completely absorbed. Both Jenkins and DeForest companies went bankrupt during the Depression, and when the DeForest Company sold to RCA, all of Jenkins patent rights went with the sale. Jenkins was in ill health throughout the early 1930s. Although he continued to work in the lab until the end, he clearly saw electronic television as the future. On June 6, 1934, he suffered a heart attack and died.

At the 2003 Prime Time Emmy Engineering Awards the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences bestowed the Charles F. Jenkins Lifetime Achievement Award on Frank Dolby. Otherwise this television pioneer — described by one of his contemporaries as “a man of great vision [with] the courage of his convictions, an indomitable will and boundless energy” — is virtually unknown.

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# The Half-Hour Blues

A veteran comedy writer bemoans the decline of the half-hour sitcom. **By Earl Pomerantz**

**T**hey talked about *The Jack Benny Show* and *Sergeant Bilko*. They talked about *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Andy Griffith Show*. They talked about *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *All in the Family*. They talked about *The Cosby Show*, *Cheers* and, more recently, *Seinfeld*. And then, on the issue of half-hour television comedies, they stopped talking.

Today, they talk about *American Idol*, *The Apprentice* and those two rich girls slumming in the country. In the current season, the number of half-hour comedies dropped by a third, and judging by ratings, there's little enthusiasm for the ones currently on the air, especially the newer ones. All of which raises this question. To quote the Fred Willard character from *A Mighty Wind*:

"Wha' hoppin'?"

Format extinction is nothing new for television. It comes with the territory. Half-hour dramas are long gone, as are the 90-minute versions. The western bit the dust. So did the Prime Time soap. Variety shows once ruled the airwaves – Ed Sullivan ran for two decades, *Laugh-in* dazzled for years. Not anymore. The thought then

arises, if these once-popular formats can be banished to videonic oblivion, why not the half-hour comedy? It's just another format, isn't it?

Maybe the sitcom should be banished. Maybe it ran out of steam. Maybe hotter formats left it looking irrelevant and old. Or maybe, as one executive was quoted as saying, today's writers just aren't funny. (How that happened, I have no idea.)

Once before, in the Eighties, the sitcom lay on its deathbed. Then *The Cosby Show* came along and it jumped up and danced around. Sitcom lovers rejoiced. But would the recovery be permanent? Or was it merely a temporary aberration, a comic genius forcing air into a punctured tire?

I know a little about *The Cosby Show* phenomenon. I was its first Executive Producer and experienced things from the inside. I heard the mighty Cos say, "I want people to watch our show and say, 'How did they get into our house?'" Cosby wanted his sitcom to be a mirror, where viewers could laugh – as the family gathered around the toilet for the funeral of pet goldfish – not merely at the Huxtables, but at themselves.

New life for the sitcom was provided by applying a strategy that Cosby, and

all great comedians, regularly employ in their stand-up routines. The essence of this strategy: observed reality. “Did you ever notice...?” Noticing is their starting point. The comedian then recounts what he’s noticed, and, identifying with its illuminating truth, the audience laughs, often explosively, in a communal response to situation’s absurdity. Call it the “I never thought of that but now that you mention it, you’re right!” response. As a result of focusing his well-honed powers of observation onto the reality of the middle class American family, *Cosby* delivered a hilarious “must-see” situation comedy. And saved the genre.

### **All successful comedy has an underlying unifier: it touches the audience on a human level.**

Is there only one way to be funny? Of course, not. There are many. Joke comedy, physical comedy, farce comedy, sex comedy, satirical comedy, silly comedy, race comedy (delivered, of course, by the race in question) and probably others. But all successful comedy has an underlying unifier: it touches the audience on a human level.

Okay. Give the audience situations it can identify with and the sitcom will revitalize and prosper. Fine. But what if you stop doing that? What happens when you abandon the “Did you ever notice...?” starting point in favor of a sitcomical starting point, where situations, behavior and dialogue mirror not reality but conventions found exclusively in sitcoms? In short, what if the reference point for your comedy becomes television instead of life?

How can this happen? Some writers

may follow this path out of habit, or because it’s easier – to write and to sell. Then there’s the Youth Factor. Young writers can deliver a show populated by characters their own age featuring age-specific situations, but when they venture beyond that, they have nothing from their experience on which to draw. It’s a dilemma. Old writers have at some point in their lives been young, but young writers have never been old. What’re ya gonna do?

One answer is to replace the gaps in your life experience with information gleaned from watching television. This strategy leads to the show’s characters behaving not as they would in everyday life but as the writer has observed them behaving in earlier half hours. From this, there develops a “sitcom reality,” where characters speak and behave as they would in sitcoms, but nowhere else.

A character viciously insults another character; the insulted character continues on without reacting. That’s sitcom reality. In life, the insulter is likely to receive a punch in the nose. There are dozens of examples of “sitcom reality” – the “setup, joke, setup, joke” writing construction, the obligatory punchline when a character leaves a room, the misunderstanding only someone truly troubled in the brain would ever misunderstand. Ultimately, the endless repetition of these counterfeit rhythms turns the genre into comedy Kabuki – the viewer, aware of these ritual maneuvers, sits there waiting for them to happen.

Some writers prefer a more truthful rendering, but since manufactured reality dominates the airwaves, efforts at “writing from life” are reacted to

as stilted and, somehow, wrong. This reaction is reminiscent of a scene from Steve Martin's *L.A. Story*. Steve's messing around in bed with Sarah Jessica Parker and he says to her, "Your breasts feel funny." To which Sarah Jessica Parker replies, "That's because they're real."

For these reasons and at least one other, half-hour comedy has developed hardening of the arteries. Freshness and surprises have surrendered to ritualized monotony. Understandably, the audience has turned away, choosing cable, where the mandate is "something different," and reality shows where resolutions are ostensibly less foreseeable. Even the network's hour shows offer more surprises, not to mention adult storytelling and challenging content. It's almost as if networks think that hour shows are for adults and comedies are for children.

Speaking of networks – and here comes my other reason – ever since they were legally allowed ownership of the shows they run, their "hands-on" participation in their development has been greater and more wide-ranging. It's not an exaggeration – since I was there and I counted them – that 17 executives – production company, studio and network – can be found participating in a "notes sessions" on a comedy pilot run-through. In these "notes sessions", the creator of the show submits to a gathering where these however-many-there-are executives offer hurriedly devised suggestions – often contradictory – for fixing the perceived problems in the script, only these people own the

show, so they're not really suggestions.

Not being writers, and not having given the script nearly the time and consideration the creator of the show has accorded it, executives' suggestions are often rudimentary and "by-the-book." They usually involve making characters more likable, the protagonist more proactive, and the clarification of the "story arc." The latter inevitably results in a story arc so clarifyingly familiar that any uniqueness the project may have once had – the quality that may have generated the network's enthusiasm in the first place – has been thoroughly eradicated.

There's no question that television executives are smart people. But it seems to me they're applying a not-so-smart strategy when facing the precipitous decline in half-hour viewership.



Bill Cosby and Phylicia Rashad, as his wife Clair, in *The Cosby Show*

Somewhere in their research, they must have discovered that an important reason audiences are abandoning half hours is because of their predictability; yet the bulk of their suggestions result in the shows they're developing becoming more predictable. Why would they do that? Why would they think that's helpful? And why would they overrule the show's creator when the most successful shows – *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, *Everyone Loves Raymond* – have been successful primarily because of that creator's unique and single-minded vision? I'd be surprised to discover that any successful situation comedy was ever created by a committee. Especially a committee of non-writers. Smart people should be sensitive to that fact. Yet their actions suggest otherwise.

As a consequence of writer limitations – in many cases self-imposed – and questionable network direction, television has developed a conspiracy of worseness. Comedies

get worse by staying the same, and audiences, sensing “business as usual,” abandon them in droves. It doesn't have to be that way. Passionate writers with fresh ideas or fresh ways of presenting familiar ideas can regenerate the format and rescue it before it succumbs.

People like to laugh, just not at stuff they've already laughed at a few hundred times. Cable, with its relaxed parameters, offers comedy alternatives. But half hours are expensive, and networks remain the only venue that can afford to produce them. And they'll continue to try, visions of syndication windfalls will see to that. My hope is that, somehow, the collaborators in the process — creative and executive — will find a way to respect each other's contributions, honor the boundaries and work together, each at the top of his/her ability, to deliver what, in the final analysis, all of them so passionately desire:

A comedy worth talking about.

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In addition to having served as executive producer of *The Cosby Show*, Earl Pomerantz is a television comedy writer whose credits include *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Cheers*. He has won two Emmy awards, a Writers' Guild award, a Humanitas Prize and a Cable Ace award.



# Commercials Spoil Movies on AMC

Once-great cable channel frustrates viewers with advertising. **By Richard G. Carter**

**T**here was a time when a pair of basic cable television channels were an oasis for millions of movie fans who yearned for commercial-free films — many in crisp black-and-white — from Hollywood's golden age. Indeed, we grooved on the splendid vintage fare offered by American Movie Classics and Turner Classic Movies.

But that was then and this is now.

TCM continues to reign supreme and is delightful. But AMC — which I discovered in the Midwest in 1983 shortly after going gaga over cable's many viewing options — is dead as a dodo. This onetime champion of unfettered flicks began its decline three years ago by ignominiously prostituting itself via interminable commercial breaks, wholesale butchering of content and silly self-promotion which make its fare utterly unwatchable.

Unfortunately, this kind of thing seems par for the course these days. As is so often true in today's society, our entertainment choices are over-

hyped, badly marketed and steadily going downhill. Quality and good taste have given way to crass commercialism and bad taste. And you and I are the victims.

Before proceeding, be assured that this is about cable television — the only kind worth watching if quality movies are your cup of tea. I'm not dealing with the loony-tunes manner in which big-screen films always have been shown on broadcast TV. The main networks — ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox — remain dinosaurs in this regard.

Of course, premium cable is the only place to go for movies that are uncut regardless of content, as well as devoid of advertising. As a lover of golden oldies, I've found that Cinemax and Showtime lead the way — albeit in a limited fashion compared to pre-2001 AMC and always and forever grand TCM. But the premiums cost viewers extra money.

From a cultural standpoint, AMC, on basic cable, was especially important to generations of young people. By virtue

of the dumbing-down of commercial TV, many never had an opportunity to see unexpurgated versions of hundreds of truly wonderful movies from Hollywood's gone, but not forgotten, golden age. Make no mistake about it, what passes for most of today's film fare is a bad joke on a nation of moviegoers. And the chopped-up slop showing up on most basic cable and broadcast outlets looks even worse.

To millions of mature Americans, AMC was extra special. As a three- and four-times-a-week neighborhood moviegoer in my youth, I longed for a return to those thrilling days of yesteryear. For example, as knowledgeable, fellow film aficionados will attest, more good movies were released in 1949 alone than the entire decade of the 1990s!

Thus, we jumped for joy when cable emerged. AMC offered us uninterrupted versions of 1949 films such as "Alias Nick Beal," "All the King's Men," "Battleground," "Champion," "Cross Cross," "D.O.A.," "Edward, My Son," "The Fountainhead," "The Heiress," "Home of the Brave," "Knock on Any Door," "A Letter to Three Wives," "On the Town," "Pinky," "Samson and Delilah," "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon," "Task Force," "The Third Man," "Twelve O'Clock High," "White Heat" and many others. But no more.

Around mid-2001, AMC pulled the plug on its integrity by introducing seemingly interminable three-and-one-half-minute breaks — touted as "intermissions" — midway through its movies. I couldn't believe my eyes. Cringing as fine vintage films were turned into gobbledygook, I was reminded of what Karl Malden told Slim Pickens in 1961's haunting

revenge Western "One-Eyed Jacks." Said he: "Looks like you're a day late and a dollar short."

That's exactly what AMC was telling countless film lovers who prefer the good old stuff — and our numbers are legion. The free-flowing movie experience that has long entertained and transfixed us, and made us laugh and cry, was gone with the wind. But the worst was yet to come as the single, mid-film break was replaced by annoying product commercials that kept coming and coming and coming.

Watching a movie on AMC had become indistinguishable from the so-called vast wasteland of commercial broadcast television. This was not why I'd welcomed cable TV with open arms. It's not what I had been paying my ever increasing cable bill to see. I was incredulous. I was disgusted. I was appalled. I tuned out AMC.

Yet, eternal optimist that I am, I'd go back occasionally to see if sanity had returned and AMC's national audience of some 69-million households were seeing commercial-free films. But as we like to say in New York, fuhgedaboutit!

What's behind AMC's sellout of its core viewing audience? Simple. Its young, bottom-line, number-crunching bean-counters put advertising revenue head-and-shoulders above the concept that made the channel great back in the day: Commercial-free movies. These same wet-behind-the-ears suits also ruled the roost at then co-owned Bravo — which already had fouled its air by introducing ads to the many fine foreign and "art" films it once presented without interruption. Ugh!

Equally egregious, AMC didn't confine its intelligence-insulting

advertising to feature films. Uh-uh. This former bastion of the silver screen further thumbed its nose at viewers by inserting commercials into the fabled 20-minute “Little Rascals” short subjects of the good old days. You remember “The Little Rascals” — featuring the white Alfalfa and the black Buckwheat. What could be next, I wondered. Ruining legendary Three Stooges shorts with commercials? Ugh, again!

The old movies shown on AMC — long and short — were not lovingly created to accommodate breaks. That’s the tack of mostly mindless made-for-TV movies. Thus, the channel creates disruptions where none belong, which is a violation of the trust serious film fans expect. By becoming just like TV’s tired old broadcast outlets — local and national — AMC has outlived its usefulness.

Furthermore, while claiming to be advertiser-supported, AMC also is subscriber-supported. This means selling commercial time is like whipped-cream topping for a cable network already raking in the dough through monthly subscription payments of viewers like you and me. Perhaps it doesn’t care that basic cable’s TCM, which remains true to its commercial-free calling, skunks AMC six ways from Sunday.

And commercial pollution isn’t this channel’s only sin, albeit the most serious. Owing to its orbit in the basic cable firmament, AMC always shied away from films with suggestive sex, off-color language and ultra-violence. That was OK with me and countless others, because this wasn’t a staple of films we grew up on and loved. I was always more interested in a believable,

compelling story than gratuitous flesh and over-the-top flash.

Yet, in recent years, AMC and Bravo made a big show of touting repeated airings of “The Godfather” (1972) and “The Godfather Part II” (1974). However, meat-ax cuts insulted the millions who recall the original versions. For example, remember James Caan’s comment in “The Godfather” as he described what Al Pacino would have in his hands when emerging from a restaurant men’s room prior to shooting a crooked cop? What he said on AMC and Bravo is not the word you heard in the theatrical movie.

So how can AMC — an outfit which touts itself as a leader in film preservation — hypocritically desecrate old movies by riddling them with commercials and artless cuts? And why should mature Americans who dote on the great films of 1945-60 — arguably Hollywood’s best era — put up with this sacrilege?

Bottom line: Thinking of AMC these days, I think of Humphrey Bogart’s words in “The Caine Mutiny” (1954): “Your best is nothing more than a maximum of inefficiency.”

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Richard G. Carter, a New York freelance writer, was a columnist and editorial writer with *The New York Daily News*. He has appeared on *Larry King Live* and *The Phil Donahue Show* and co-hosted *Showdown* on CNBC with the late Morton Downey Jr. He was Vice President-Public Affairs with Group W Cable and in 1986 received the Marquette University By-Line Award for distinguished achievement in journalism.

## REVIEW AND COMMENT

### **Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News**

By David T.Z. Mindich

*Oxford University Press, New York*  
(192 pages, \$25)

### **Not So Prime Time: Chasing the Trivial on American Television**

By Howard Rosenberg

*Ivan R. Dee, Chicago*  
(288 pages, \$26)

**By Bernard S. Redmont**

**N**ews illiteracy is spreading rapidly among a whole generation of young Americans. What an important subject for a book! So important that it affects the future of all of us. David Mindich is convinced that “our democracy is in big, big trouble.” When we absorb the facts and sober conclusions he marshals, we are convinced, too.

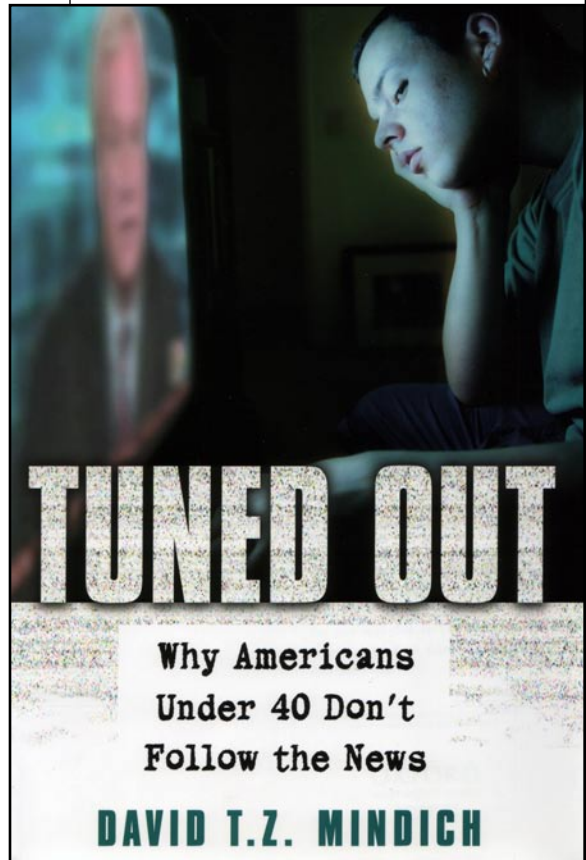
Remember that obsession of television executives and Madison Avenue “experts” — all that goes into the word “demographics.” The theory, open to some question, is that young people buy more than older people; hence, they must be

the targets.

But young people’s inattention to news, as journalist-scholar Geneva Overholser puts it, is not just a commercial problem for media owners, it’s a civic problem for all of us.

Young people have pretty much abandoned traditional news. They have “tuned out.”

Mindich found when teaching, as I did, that even bright students could not answer some basic questions about politics, law and public affairs. They couldn’t name a single member of the Supreme Court, and confused former General Colin Powell and the Attorney General. In the 1950s and 1960s, at the height of the Cold War, a poll revealed



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that only 55 percent of Americans knew that East Germany was a communist country. More recently, only 33 of 58 students questioned could give the three places where the planes crashed on Sept. 11, 2001 (New York City, the Pentagon and rural Pennsylvania). Half didn't know what is *Roe v. Wade* (the 1973 Supreme Court ruling on abortion); and only 8 out of 58 knew what is McCain-Feingold (campaign finance reform bill).

This lack of basic knowledge, and even interest in current events, is clearly a disaster for our democracy. Mindich considers this the greatest decline in informed citizenship in our history. Traveling around the country, Mindich interviewed young Americans about how they kept up with news, or didn't.

He found that the group under 40 "knows less, cares less, votes less and follows the news less than their elders do and less than their elders did." Mindich concludes that "the decline in news consumption, which has taken place over the past four decades, has produced two generations of young adults who, for the most part, have barely an outline of what they need to make an informed decision in the voting booth."

The tide may have begun to turn, however. In the 2004 presidential elections, with the help of get-out-the-vote campaigns, more young people cast ballots than in the previous two contests.

The situation would be less troubling

if the 80 percent of young people who don't read newspapers every day watched TV news or logged on to a news Web site. But most don't.

Mindich made two discoveries: First, young people were not using television so much for news (the average viewer age at CNN and network broadcast news is about 60). Second, only 11 percent of young people cite the Internet as a major source of news.

The crux of the problem, of course, is the powerful lure of entertainment. The author's argument is that the glut of entertainment options is leading young people to "tune out" the news.

Students, for example, say "news is not as much fun as entertainment." Even with the growth of "infotainment," young people are consuming more *Jackass* and *Real World* than Jennings and Rather. Nakednews.com, with Victoria Sinclair, didn't do much to heighten the interest in news.

The young people would rather talk about what they saw on *Simpsons*, or *Survivor*, than on *Nightline*. Many don't even know what a journalist is or does. They think David Letterman and Jay Leno are journalists. Mindich says young people don't understand the special role of journalists in a democracy— that they are charged with investigating wrongdoing, observing ethical standards of fairness, nonpartisanship and balance, and serving as a check on governmental power.

As for local TV, dumbing down

**This lack of basic knowledge, and even interest in current events, is clearly a disaster for our democracy.**

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doesn't seem to drive away the customers. Sex, celebrities and especially violence, sell. Mindich warns that "because local news avoids a lot of important items, including city council meetings, policy decisions and local initiatives— in short, the blue-points of local democracy — we are civically poorer.... Young people are not given stories that would allow them to understand the process of government; instead they are merely frightened by gore or pandered to with celebrities. No wonder many young people turn away from local news."

A common theme Mindich heard from young people was that the news is bought and paid for by big corporations, that "too many news outlets, particularly at the local level, are infusing their news with advertising and other business considerations. Young people take a dim view of local news, calling it "frivolous, violent and depressing."

We know what has to be done, but it isn't done. Good journalism is expensive. For every news story on CNN, where Mindich worked, there are more than a dozen staffers working behind the scenes: camera and sound operators, field producers, futures editors, assignment editors, writers, editors, font operators, directors, producers, production assistants, tape deck operators, service technicians and countless others— a big payroll.

Mindich has the credentials for his analyses. He now chairs the journalism and mass communications department at Saint Michael's College in Vermont. At CNN, he was an assignment editor. He has also written for *The Wall Street*

*Journal*, *New York Magazine*, and the *Baltimore Sun*.

What's to be done? To tune back in, Mindich offers these solutions: 1) Take back the airwaves — getting the FCC to return to its "public trust" requirements and scrutinize broadcasters more assiduously. This means giving attention to news coverage for children as well. 2) Change our expectations and require more civics education and civics knowledge for students. 3) Make politics more meaningful again; make televised debates more mandatory; provide free air time for all accredited candidates; 4) Create, consume and teach quality journalism: "Despite conventional wisdom, quality sells." Cater to young people's interest with programs like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *Real Time with Bill Maher*, as well as *Now with Bill Moyers* on PBS and *Countdown with Keith Olbermann* on MSNBC.

Mindich challenges news organizations "to create a society in which young people feel that quality journalism is worthwhile." He believes the principal factor for making people want to tune in on the news is that they feel it's necessary for work, school, conversation, or citizenship.

Despite their disengagement with news, says Mindich, "young people are as thoughtful and passionate and self-reflective as they have ever been, ready to interact with news if we just provide the right conditions for them to do so."

Edward R. Murrow said it best: "Television can teach. It can illuminate. Yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends.

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Otherwise, it is merely wires and lights in a box.”

Television can product successes and even masterpieces. Alas, it also turns out the trivial and the tawdry. And more often than not.

We remember with admiration news coverage of the downfall of the Berlin Wall, the loss of the space shuttle *Challenger*, and on occasion, the realities of wars. We recall the intelligent and sensitive commentaries and news magazine features of Bill Moyers, Charles Kuralt, Eric Sevareid and John Leonard.

But we also shudder at the coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial, the trashy daytime talk shows and soap operas, and the *National Enquirer* tabloid type “news” stories.

Howard Rosenberg, a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for criticism, admires and respects the medium. But he spends more time skewering its excesses and failings. In his brilliant and biting book, *Not So Prime Time*, he says his aim is simply to encourage “critical awareness.” And he succeeds. Even as he is acerbic, scorching, and cynical.

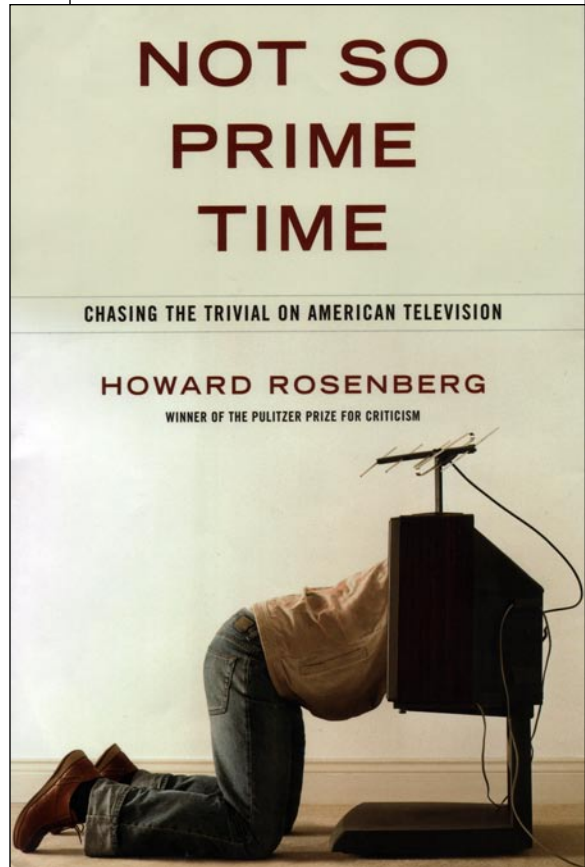
“We all know that television can be a source of joy, illumination, and flat-out fun,” Rosenberg writes. “We know also that its creative triumphs are a slender portfolio measured against its bulging archive of thudding clunkers, many of which are described in this book. Yet that is true of everything else on an arts and media landscape where the talented are few and the mediocre

number in the multitudes.”

Rosenberg charges that “television news has failed dismally in its self-proclaimed role as a Bethlehem Star of enlightenment.” TV values tabloid over truth, he argues. In the end, he finds it hard to say whether there’s more “reality” on CBS’s *Survivor* than in a typical newscast on CNN, the Fox News channel or MSNBC.

His bill of indictment: News and entertainment blend on TV. Personalities rule the system. Mainstream media increasingly merge their news interests with those of tabloids, Dumbing down America is the aim.

He is not the first critic to lament the state of local newscasts. He is both



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provocative and pessimistic, as who wouldn't be if he had to watch TV for a living.

Some “newscasters with satellite dishes for brains,” as Rosenberg puts it, boast about their speed and technology. But “live” can be dangerous and irresponsible — “often the equivalent of a newspaper printing a reporter’s raw notes under a misleading banner headline.” Technology drives the news: “You habitually go live, not because it necessarily makes journalistic sense, but because you have the right toys at your command.”

Rosenberg rightly scolds U.S. TV for neglecting foreign coverage. The networks (except for CNN) decimated their foreign bureaus in the 80s for budgetary reasons. The ludicrously labeled “fair and balanced” Fox News comes in for scathing criticism for opinionated coverage, “story slanting and bombast.” Bill O’Reilly of *The O’Reilly Factor* is dubbed a “self-inflating gasbag.”

Most of the essays in the book appear as they did in the *Los Angeles Times* from 1986 to 2003. A few have been revised. Some suffer the defaults of such collections and are dated. But Rosenberg’s keen and trenchant comments hold up remarkably well, aided by his lively, witty, staccato style.

Right up to the minute is his conclusion that political conventions aren’t really conventions, and the debates not really debates. No one would care much if they were greatly curtailed. He braved an angry flood of e-mails for saying that George W. Bush

was “flat and tenuous on TV, appearing a few pints short of filling a ten-gallon hat.” And for arguing, re the Iraq war, that slaughtering civilians is terrorism, even when U.S. forces are the attackers.

And what about that incestuous process known as “synergy”? As just one example, CNN did a highly advertised segment speculating on who would be named *Time Magazine*’s “Person of the Year.” A few nights later, CNN did an entire news special on it. Wasn’t this a bogus news event cloaking free advertising? Was it because— he wonders— both CNN and *Time* were owned by Time-Warner?

**TV producer Linda Ellerbee put it well when she said, “Anything Howard Rosenberg writes about television is superior to almost anything that’s on television.”**

Rosenberg cites another example: A Los Angeles news anchor added on the air after a weightless story on recreation, “It’s a nice day to go to Disneyland.” Just happy talk? Or was this a calculated plug because the station, KABC-TV was owned by Disney?

Sometimes, TV shows us really unbelievable stuff. Richard Nixon’s No. 2 aide, John Ehrlichman, spent 18 months in prison for conspiracy, obstruction of justice and perjury for his role in the Watergate scandal. He then became a pitchman for Dreyer’s Grand Light ice cream— “exploiting—and joking about— his lack of credibility.” He was one of Dreyer’s six “unbelievable spokespeople for an unbelievable product.” Rosenberg asks,



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“Would you buy ice cream from this man?”

Rosenberg favors televising executions— “the ultimate reality”— as he opposes capital punishment.

“These are not happy times for old guards in television,” he notes. “The faces are ever younger, the resumes ever shorter, and, correspondingly, the payrolls on regular newscasts ever smaller, give or take a few multimillion-dollar superstars. Age and experience are unfashionable.”

Rosenberg has paid his dues. A veteran reporter on papers from White Bear Lake, Minnesota, to Moline and Louisville, he has won two National Headliner awards. He now teaches news ethics in the Annenberg school and criticism in the film/television school at the University of Southern California.

TV producer Linda Ellerbee put it well when she said, “Anything Howard Rosenberg writes about television is superior to almost anything that’s on television.”

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Bernard S. Redmont, a frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, was a correspondent for CBS News, Westinghouse Broadcasting Company and other media. He is Dean Emeritus of Boston University College of Communication and the author of *Risks Worth Taking: The Odyssey of a Foreign Correspondent*.

### **Anchoring America: The Changing Face of Network News**

By Jeff Alan with James M. Lane

*Bonus Books, Chicago*  
(426 pages, \$24.95)

### **Attack Poodles and Other Media Mutants: The Looting of the News in a Time of Terror**

By James Wolcott

*Miramax Books, New York*  
(313 pages, \$22.95)

### **By Ron Simon**

**D**uring the Paleozoic era the anchor was the top dog of the industry, a regal breed that defined the identity and mission of the networks. A new canine has subsequently emerged during this Murdozoic age, according to James Wolcott, the attack poodle, responsible for wreaking verbal havoc on the entire animal kingdom. The transformation of what is regarded as news during these eras has been startling, and two news books, *Anchoring America* by Jeff Alan and Wolcott’s *Attack Poodles*, illuminate the evolution of broadcast journalism. Mutations that have taken thousands of years in Darwin’s jungle

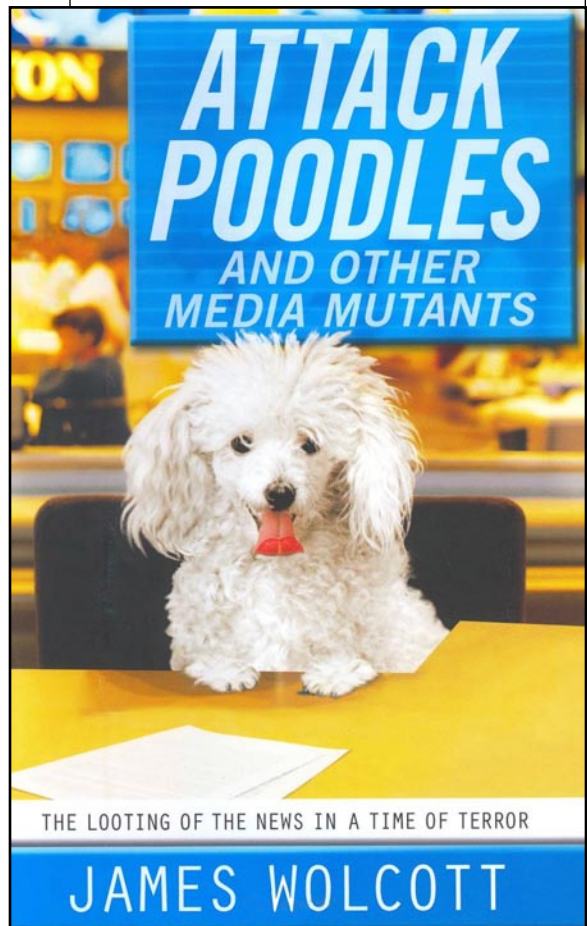
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have proceeded much more rapidly over the course of 55 years of television news.

Jeff Alan is an award-winning news director and local talk show host, as well as a professor of a popular journalism course at the University of Pittsburgh. With assistance by author James Lane, he has written straightforward, lucid profiles of the 19 anchors who have served as the signature faces of network news. With solid research (his bibliography is forthright on primary and secondary sources) and an engaging sense of narrative, Lane is especially good at limning the rise to power of the anchors-to-be. He gives flesh and bone to such early newsmen as Douglas Edwards, John Cameron Swayze and John Charles Daly, who are now mainly footnotes in media history.

*Anchoring America* almost makes a fatal misstep in the first mini-biography. Lane relates the very familiar story of Edward R. Murrow, one of broadcasting's legendary correspondents, but someone who was never an anchor. Lane justifies his premier selection because it is impossible "to understand the culture of news" without referring the journalistic standards he established in radio. True enough, but Lane does little dissect how the ghost of Murrow has haunted the anchor business ever since. He does pick up the theme a bit in the Walter Cronkite chapter, but only in the cursory bifurcation that Cronkite was essentially a "front page" editor and Murrow an "op-ed" editor.

Lane adds little new information to the traditions of CBS and NBC News; the through lines of Cronkite to Rather and Huntley/Brinkley to Chancellor to Brokaw have been examined thoroughly in other volumes. *Anchoring America* is very useful in delineating the inchoate ABC tradition, the disparate mix of news personalities that eventually led to Peter Jennings. The motley crew of Frank Reynolds, Howard K. Smith, Harry Reasoner, Barbara Walters, and Max Robinson are not remembered for their anchoring abilities, but certainly make for good copy. The bizarre pairing of Smith and Reynolds brought



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together two supposedly dispassionate anchors who had radically divergent views on everything. When Vice President Agnew lambasted the press for being biased, Smith and Reynolds took opposing sides. Reynolds's exit line following his dismissal to make way for the ambitious Reasoner was more memorable than most of ABC's sixties newscasts: "Due to circumstances beyond my control, the unemployment statistics rose yesterday." Maybe that ABC team didn't summon up the Murrow legacy, but they were the harbinger of Fox News.

Surveying the journalistic landscape in wake of Rupert Murdoch, James Wolcott's savagely biting *Attack Poodles* portrays the 21st-century newsman as a bully blowhard. Unlike Lane, Wolcott has done no research, there is no bibliography or index; the author has simply glued himself to such cable news stations as Fox News and MSNBC to survey the damage. Cultural critic for *Vanity Fair*, Wolcott is part intellectual hit man, part Swiftian (Jonathan that is, not a John Kerry band of brothers) moralist; neither an advocate of right or left, Wolcott is an equal opportunity deflator of pomposity.

Wolcott writes in short lacerating sound bites, chock full of pop-culture allusions. Many of his journalistic subjects are dismissed in a sadistic paragraph, no need for context or perspective here. Peggy Noonan is captured as "the dashboard saint of Republican piety, giving off a phosphorescent

glow," while Thomas Friedman "has emerged and emulsified as the media's answer man on the Mideast, its shadow secretary of state." For a regular viewer of cable news, these characterizations are sparkling gems, helping to answer the question in the news junkie's mind: why are these so-called experts always yapping on TV?

Wolcott describes the attack poodle as "right-wing hacks and liberalish enablers with obedience-school diplomas." Entertaining as his witticisms are, he writes with a dagger for a deeper purpose. Wolcott argues that this canine punditry has hijacked intellectual debate in the media. He blames these talking but

# ANCHORING



# AMERICA

*The Changing Face of Network News*

JEFF ALAN  
with James M. Lane

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not thinking heads for serving as the Bush administration's defenders and apologists, misleading the public on the major issues of the day, especially the Iraq War. In fact, Wolcott calls the buildup to the war as "a propaganda coup."

Both *Anchoring America* and *Attack Poodles* stylistically reflect the type of news they cover. Jeff Alan writes in *Dragnet* prose, just the facts ma'am, short and to the point as a nightly news broadcast. Alan's book is personality driven with little attempt to perform critical analysis of news content. We never learn how a Cronkite newscast differs from a Rather one; in Alan's world personality is the key. Wolcott is a linguistic zapper, constantly changing thoughts and references as if his mental remote control is totally haywire. His paragraph on stolidly dependable Helen Thomas contains allusions to Casey Stengel, Elia Kazan, and Anthony Perkins in *Psycho*. Such amphetamine rush of metaphors begins to blur the insights and we are left with verbal pyrotechnics, but little light.

Television news is most definitively in transition. The old guard of Brokaw and Rather are disappearing and the best of the coming journalistic generation, to quote Yeats, "lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." Should we be hopeful? Alan puts his faith in the narrative abilities of the anchors: "Their study and mastery of storytelling devices, cadence, tone, and personal style will allow them to survive." Wolcott places his optimism in the audience's ability to unleash its own inner dog of a different breed: "We must be our own wolfhounds. We must

summon with our own combination of power, swiftness, and keen insights." In the continuing tango of anchor and audience that has evolved over many decades, to allude to Yeats again, can the dancer and dance be one?

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Curator of television at the Museum of Television and Radio in New York, Ron Simon is also an associate professor at Columbia University and NYU and a member of the Board of Judges for the George F. Peabody Award.

## REVIEW AND COMMENT

## The Forgotten Network: DuMont and the Birth of American Television

By David Weinstein

*Temple University Press, Philadelphia*  
(228 pages, \$24.50)

By Mary Ann Watson

**W**ith *The Forgotten Network* David Weinstein evokes monochrome memories of the heady days when television's potential still belonged to an exhilarating future. Fortunately, the romance of nostalgia and enlightenment of history are not mutually exclusive. This author delivers both.

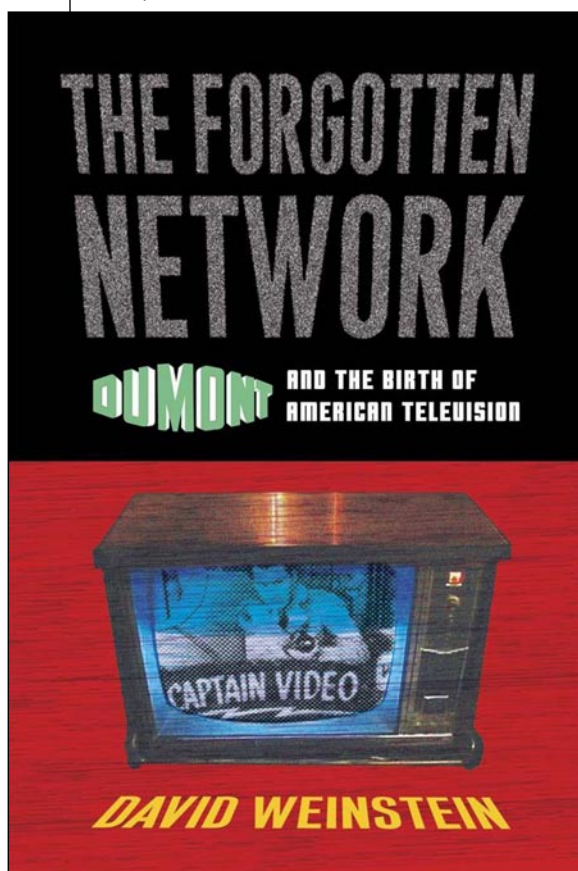
The first three of the ten chapters deal with the life and career of Allen B. Du Mont, who, the reader is told at the outset, always spelled his last name with a space between the syllables—while the practice of the contemporaneous press was to eliminate it. Weinstein respects the family tradition when referring to Du Mont the man and follows popular tradition when referring to the DuMont Laboratories and the DuMont Television Network, as will this reviewer.

The severe limp that afflicted Du Mont throughout his life was the result of a childhood polio attack that he believed might just have been a blessing

in disguise. The 11-year-old Brooklyn boy's father bought a radio kit to keep his son occupied while confined to his bedroom during a long recuperation.

Still a novelty in 1912, radio was on its way to captivating the country. Du Mont's course was set. By age 15, he had already earned his government wireless license and was able to assemble, operate, and repair radio equipment. He spent his summers as a radio expert on merchant ships that took him around the world. Du Mont's life was devoted to electronic engineering and boating. They were consuming passions that never faded.

After his graduation from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1924, Allen Du



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Mont went to work for Westinghouse. It was a boom time in the demand for radio receivers. The young man redesigned the plant and boosted production of radio tubes from 500 to 50,000 per day.

In 1928, Du Mont took employment with the legendary radio pioneer Lee De Forest. As chief engineer of De Forest Radio, Du Mont conducted experimental research in mechanical television. But when the company faltered financially in the early years of the Great Depression, he was out of a job. It was time, he decided, to become the captain of his own destiny.

With one thousand dollars and a three-person staff, DuMont Laboratories was launched in the basement of the family home in Upper Montclair, New Jersey. DuMont Labs became the leader in the growing cathode-ray tube industry. In the pre-television era, the tubes were used primarily for oscillographs, devices that tested various electronic equipment.

By the late 1930s, though, the cathode-ray tube had a new application. Paramount Pictures, mapping a future in the nascent television industry, invested heavily in DuMont Laboratories to secure its supply of needed tubes. The 1939 deal, which helped the smaller company recover from recent losses, also gave Paramount considerable control in decision making. Du Mont long rued the partnership.

Military contracts during WWII, especially those for cathode-ray tubes used in radar equipment, dramatically increased the fortunes of DuMont. Flush with profit in 1945, the company was able to convert its wartime plants

to the production of television tubes for consumers. The next step was to build a network to supply programming to fill the screens of DuMont TV sets.

Lacking the clout of the radio networks that were moving into TV, the DuMont Network had difficulty attracting affiliate stations. Du Mont hoped to persuade the FCC and President Eisenhower to adopt a station allocation system that would allow more competition and better service. But the staid engineer as lobbyist was no match for his colorful competitors, NBC's David Sarnoff and Frank Stanton of CBS.

Paramount also put obstacles in the path by dabbling with experimental ventures, such as large-screen television for movie theaters, instead of focusing on expanding the network. By the end of 1952, the DuMont Network had only nine primary affiliates reaching approximately 40 percent of American homes with television.

In its short history, though, from 1946-1955, the network's influence on the evolution of television programming was profound. Chapter Four, "The DuMont Daytime Experiment," examines the economical production of shows geared primarily toward women at home. *Your Television Shopper*, for instance, demonstrated products in a casual blend of guest interviews and straight pitches. Hostess Kathi Norris invited the ladies in the audience to join her in a "second cup of Aborn Coffee" and consider the purchase of myriad items ranging from Jane Parker Bread to the Jiffy-Stitcher hand-held sewing machine. More than five decades later, QVC employs the same technique.

The producer of *DuMont*

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*Kindergarten*, Hall Cooper, recalls “We did a lot of alphabet stuff that Sesame Street later did, but I didn’t have the electronics and the budget that they have.” The principle, though, was the same. “The concept was to make learning and reading fun.”

The *Today* show also borrowed and refined several DuMont ideas for a morning program to help get people off to work. The C-W-T segment (clock-weather-temperature) ran a dozen times over the course of the morning on WABD, DuMont’s station in New York. Showing people on the street outside the studio was also a tradition that NBC developed into a signature style.

In the remaining five chapters of *The Forgotten Network*, Weinstein wonderfully chronicles the innovations of DuMont prime-time series and explores the contributions of the on-air personalities. In the chapter titled “Law and Order, DuMont Style,” for example, he focuses on two shows that developed standard conventions used in later TV police dramas. *The Plainclothes Man* was about big-city officers and the way they worked to solve crimes. This program, the author explains, “set the stage for later police procedurals like *Dragnet*.” The title character of *Rocky King* wore the expected rumpled trench coat, but he was “older, shorter, and less intimidating than his gumshoe counterparts.” The quirky, self-deprecating Columbo was a direct descendant.

The *Forgotten Network* offers more than just case studies on the creation and production of programming, however. The history of the children’s

science-fiction hero *Captain Video*, for instance, provides a rich cultural perspective on Cold War fears and the meaning of American patriotism. Likewise, embedded in the chapter on *Life is Worth Living* with Bishop Fulton J. Sheen is a better understanding of religiosity in the postwar era.

Three of television’s greatest comedians starred on the DuMont network during its brief existence. The set of *The Morey Amsterdam Show* was designed to look like a swanky nightclub. He brought fast women, hip jazz, and his fast-talking style of urban Jewish humor to the small screen. Show biz maverick Ernie Kovacs developed the famous (some might say infamous) Nairobi Trio act for his program on DuMont. His bizarre sketches and experimentation with TV technology, that would later be considered a sign of genius, were an acquired taste at the time. His audience was loyal, but small. The Great One, Jackie Gleason, came to DuMont in 1950 as a virtual unknown and was catapulted into celebrity of gigantic proportions.

The recurring characters in the skits Gleason crafted for the *Cavalcade of Stars*, such as playboy Reggie Van Gleason III, Joe the Bartender, and the Poor Soul became part of the comedian’s permanent repertoire. But Gleason’s creation, Ralph Kramden, in his first season on DuMont became a beloved part of American heritage. *The Honeymooners* has met the test of time, a classic in the truest sense of the word.

Weinstein’s research makes a convincing case that relegating the DuMont network to a footnote in



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broadcast history is an impoverishing oversight. The advent of television in the United States is a story that informs our understanding of the evolution of our democracy. *The Forgotten Network* contributes greatly to an enriched context in which to consider the rise of a medium that transformed life in the 20th century.

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Mary Ann Watson is on the Telecommunication & Film faculty at Eastern Michigan University, where she teaches broadcast history. Her recent research is on television and politics in the Eisenhower years.

### **Demon in the Box: Jews, Arabs, Politics, and Culture in the Making of Israeli Television**

by Tasha G. Oren

*Rutgers University Press,  
Piscataway, NJ*  
(240 pages, \$21.95)

#### **By David Marc**

**T**he lead-up period and early history of Israeli television are so rich with fascinating anecdotes that a simple recounting of these would make for an interesting enough book. We could begin with General Sarnoff's 1952 offer to President David Ben-Gurion to put together a national TV service for Israel (presumably with RCA parts and NBC reruns) as a kind of gift from an overseas admirer. The logic underpinning Ben-Gurion's curt "thanks, but no thanks," may seem bizarre today to both cable viewers and cabalists. "Ben-Gurion's reply was terse and unequivocal," writes Tasha G. Oren. "Israelis were people of the book... They had no use for television." Sarnoff, who had studied to be a rabbi before making a crafty career move to secular communications, was said to be baffled.

Oren, a professor of media studies in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, has given us much more than a recounting of high operatic moments in the history of the



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information age. She maps and explains the cultural politics of the battles over the birth of Israeli TV service with a dutiful clarity that is a blessing for the non-Israeli reader—no small task.

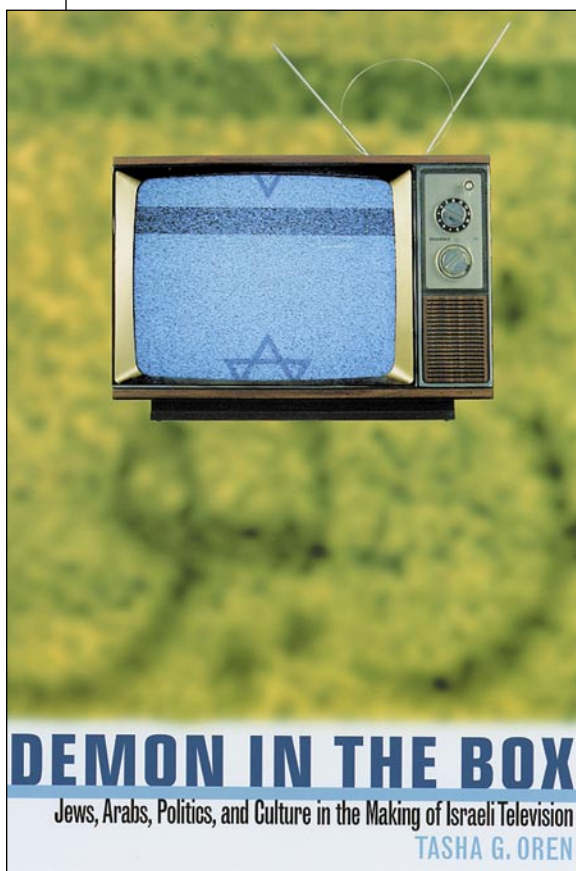
The pitched battle over TV in the Promised Land was fought on many fronts, often making for strange bedfellows among left and right politicians, secularists and religious fundamentalists, and Hebrew-Arab bilingualists and Jewish cultural nationalists. There was a particular lively argument between advocates who wanted Israel to have television so it could be a nation like any other and those fighting the tube because they feared it would make Israel a nation like any other.

All of this breast beating over national identity served to stall the Israel Broadcasting Authority from launching regular television service until 1967, making it one of the last national start-ups in the industrialized world. In the end, it was the geopolitics of television broadcasting that silenced the opposition. Television signals were freely crossing borders into Israel from hostile Arab capitals in every direction. What effect would this have on Israel's Arab citizens? Could Israel afford to decline an opportunity to reach them--and the rest of the Middle East and the world--with a national picture of things? The debate turned after the Six-Day War from "Should we have television?" to "What sort of television should we have?"

There is a fascinating, if faint, echo in the story of what was once

lively (though now utterly moribund) American debate over the desirability and character of broadcasting. It took place during the birth of radio and reasserted itself briefly during the spread of television after World War II. In 1924, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, otherwise remembered as a virtual poster boy for the laissez-faire economy, speculated that allowing a commercial broadcasting system in the U.S. might turn a speech by the President into "the meat in a sandwich of two patent medicine advertisements."

When Oren quotes a TV-refusenik member of the Knesset as saying, "Television is an expression of a consuming, passive man, a man who



### DEMON IN THE BOX

Jews, Arabs, Politics, and Culture in the Making of Israeli Television

TASHA G. OREN

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buys his life...who needs only to receive," it sounds very much like what leftwing philosopher Herbert Marcuse was telling his fellow-Americans in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). By the late 1960s, technological determinism—the belief that an available technology will insinuate itself into our daily lives regardless of collective will—had become the default position of most American intellectuals. So too for those Israeli thinkers who had rejected TV as antithetical to the national character. Oren's examination of how television was introduced to the Israeli public, complete with a look at advertisements for TV sets, is among the book's many instructive highlights.

With television a fact on the ground in Israel, Oren explores larger questions concerning the medium by way of the Israeli example: How can television be used for educational as well as entertainment purposes? Can television serve as a conduit for national communion and reflection? Is American culture overwhelming Israeli culture?

Oren has much to say about how the determining the character of a national broadcasting service became tantamount to the choice of a national identity during the mid-twentieth century. A chapter is devoted to a case study of *Hirbat Hizaa*, a 1977 made-for-Israeli-television movie concerning events that occurred during the conquest and destruction of a Palestinian village in the 1948 war for independence. The power of broadcast television to spur a reexamination of national character is demonstrated in a way that will remind Americans of David Wolper's *Roots*,

which aired that same year. Oren's position on this use of television can be found in her title for the chapter: "Good for the Jews."

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David Marc is a writer and editor living in Syracuse, New York. He recently saw publication of his fifth book, *Television in the Antenna Age*, co-written with Robert J. Thompson. Marc teaches courses at Syracuse University and Le Moyne College.

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## Science Fiction Television

By M. Keith Booker.

Prager Publishers, Westport, CT  
(224 pages, \$39.95)

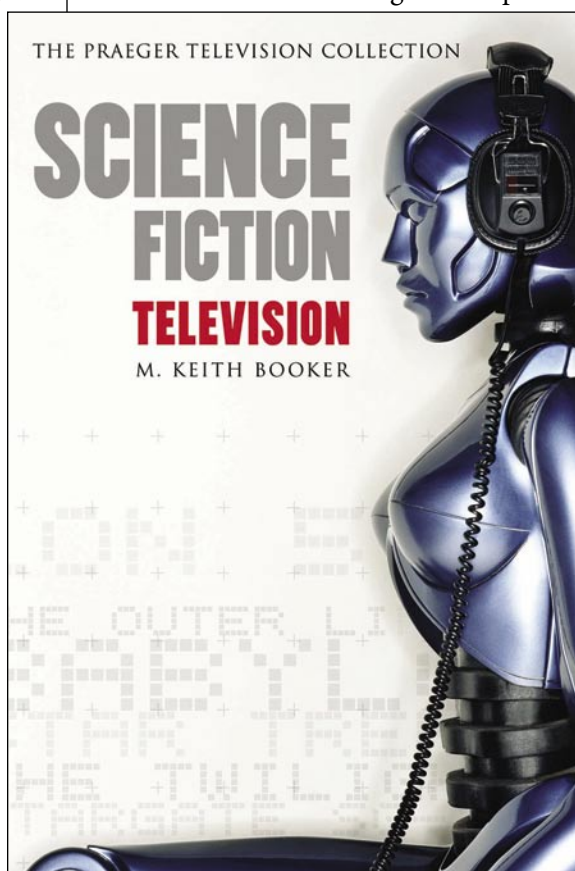
By John Cooper

**T**he genre of science fiction has enjoyed a rich literary heritage as a form that not only reflects but *reflects upon* the world in which we live. M. Keith Booker acknowledges this and examines science fiction's manifestation as a type of television programming in his very satisfying, *Science Fiction Television*. The book is organized into five chapters, each of which focuses on an "era" of science fiction programming. Some could argue that such a system is too arbitrary, i.e., who can say where one "era" ends and another begins. But Booker's analysis of a half-century of science-fiction programming sorts itself out in a logical progression from pre-*Twilight Zone* to recent original productions by the SciFi Channel. It does so by detailing how SF artifacts are commentaries about the times in which they were produced.

In his introductory chapter, Booker, through careful plot descriptions of selected artifacts, explains how 1950s themes like blacklisting, McCarthyism, and racial and social discrimination implicitly informed much of

science fiction programming. Booker begins to draw the first of many parallels between the evolution of the sci-fi genre and evolution of American culture. *The Twilight Zone* was no stranger to the aforementioned themes and Booker uses it as the linchpin series for the era of the 1950s to the 1960s. In fact, that is a technique which serves Booker, and the reader, well. His organization by era is bookended nicely by shows which begin and close each era.

The titular shows of *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek* serve to strongly underscore his running thesis of genre and cultural evolution being roughly contemporaneous. He spends a good amount of time detailing salient plots



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from each show. There is also significant attention paid to important entries like *The Outer Limits*, *The Avengers*, and *The Prisoner*. Special deference and space are given to *Star Trek: TOS* because, as Booker points out, the original Roddenberry creation is the starting point of a far-reaching entertainment phenomenon that transcends the films and television shows. It is perhaps for this reason that *Star Trek: TOS* is used as a point of comparison for many of the sci-fi series that followed it and are discussed by Booker. One truly valuable aspect of the sci-fi series that Booker highlights is the abundance of British television he studies along with the American series. There have been too many compartmentalized books on sci-fi television which might analyze either American or British shows. Booker deftly moves between the two to not only provide useful information but to underscore his thesis about the link between genre and cultural change.

The next section of the book examines how the 1970s and 1980s were “lean years” in terms of American sci-fi, while British productions (continuing with *Dr. Who*) were better genre representatives. To be certain, American sci-fi television tended toward the puerile and/or cartoonish but Booker makes the apt observation that the cynicism that informed sci-fi feature films during this was not at home with a televised product. As a result, American sci-fi television was almost dormant until the entire genre was revived by *Star Wars* in 1977. Syndication, Booker points out, had made *Star Trek: TOS* ubiquitous, thus affirming its status as the most

influential sci-fi series of the era. And that influence paved the way for *Star Trek: The Next Generation* —another Roddenberry series which Booker credits with reviving the genre of sci-fi television. *Star Trek: TNG* benefitted not only from improved production technologies but from a corps of writers and producers who had grown up with Roddenberry’s pluralistic, humanistic universe. Booker’s incisive analysis of the narrative structures in *Star Trek: TNG* as well as its exalted position in the sci-fi television pantheon sets the stage for his penultimate chapter on what he terms “the Golden Nineties.”

Indeed, the concluding decade of the 20th century saw the production of several genre programs with complex story arcs, diverse characters, and episodes informed by current social and political realities. Much of the chapter is devoted to examinations of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and J. Michael Straczynski’s *Babylon 5*. But this was also the era of *The X Files*. While it was not a purely genre show, it had enough common elements with traditional sci-fi television to warrant inclusion (like *The Twilight Zone*). It was also during this period that syndication proved a comfortable home for genre programming. A new version of *The Outer Limits* along with *Andromeda* and *Earth: Final Conflict* all enjoyed relative degrees of success outside the traditional network broadcast schedule. But, Booker suggests it was cable’s SciFi channel that provided the greatest outlet for innovation in genre shows coming into the new millennium.

Booker’s concluding chapter deals mostly with wildly innovative SciFi

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channel entries like *Lexx* and *Farscape* which generated enough grassroots fandom to result in a wrap-up miniseries after the show had been canceled. *Stargate: SG1*, a series based on the feature film, is also a staple of the SciFi channel. It recently over production of new episodes from Showtime and are producing a number of original films as well as a “revival” of the 1970s genre series, *Battlestar Galactica*. Booker concludes by pointing out that we have arrived at the 21st century—once the stuff of sci-fi television dreams—and it doesn’t look much we thought it would. As a result, current genre programming usually resides at the outer edge of narrative innovation, or turns to the past to reflect on it’s roots. Booker’s analysis of the genre thus comes full circle to most satisfying conclusion resulting in his strongest book yet dealing with television studies.

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John Cooper is a professor of Electronic Media and Film Studies at Eastern Michigan University. Science fiction in literature and mass media has been an avocation of his for the last 40 years.

### Mixed Nuts

By Lawrence J. Epstein

*Public Affairs, New York*  
(320 pages, \$26.00)

### By Earl Pomerantz

I’m just imagining, of course, but I’m guessing that if the classic comedy teams chronicled in Lawrence J. Epstein’s *Mixed Nuts* were confronted with Mr. Epstein’s explanations for their success not a few of them might reply, “We wouldn’t know about that. We just wanted to make people laugh.”

Mr. Epstein’s informative book has the feel of a college textbook for a survey course called Comedy Teams 101. It serves usefully as an introduction, charting the rise and fall of the comedy team genre from minstrel days to *Saturday Night Live*. If you wanted to explore further, you would proceed to more narrowly focused books, zeroing in on a specific team, or perhaps the comedy team heyday. The book is a fine starting point, but offers few surprises to those familiar with the terrain.

*Mixed Nuts* is composed of four elements: biographies of the major comedy teams, excerpts from their acts, little known factoids, and Mr. Epstein’s speculations on the reasons for each teams’ and the genre’s success. Epstein also describes how the comedy team phenomenon was affected by technological advances, from stage to screen to radio to television, explaining how teams who were unable to adjust fell by the wayside.

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The minstrel show gave comedy teams its essential formulation: two people arguing. It could be the ostensible leader who deludedly believes himself to be smarter than his assistant (Laurel and Hardy), the con man and the innocent dupe (Abbott and Costello), the sensible adult and the demanding child (Martin and Lewis), the husband and wife (Burns and Allen) or two brothers (The Smothers Brothers) each trying to convince the other that their point of view is correct. In all cases, the laughter erupts from the frustration in the persuasion, and our identification with the situation. The formula seems to work to this day (think *Seinfeld* and *Kramer*, or *Joey* and any of his *Friends*.)

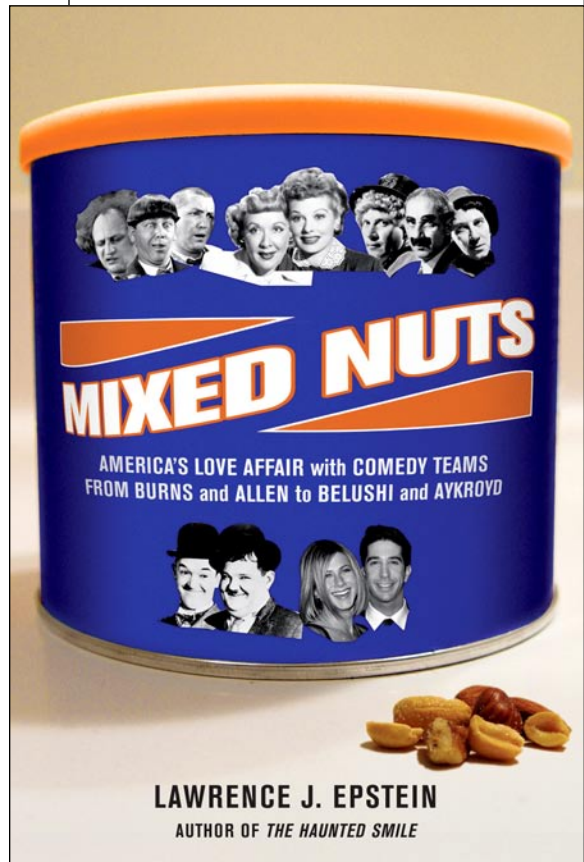
Many excerpted jokes and routines, boffo in their time, now seem dated and unfunny. The shining exception is Abbott and Costello's still side-splitting "Who's On First?" Maybe its the era-neutral names given to the players, but the routine's maddening irrationality, its breakneck pace and intensifying build to the finish leave its laugh-getting ability immune to changes in fashion, taste or history. (The first time I heard "Who's On First?" as a teenager, I became so breathlessly hysterical, my mother feared I might require resuscitation.)

Teams were not limited to two people. The Marx Brothers were an electrifying comedy team, each brother hilarious in his own right. But in playing many scenes, they often contracted

into mini-teams, Groucho playing the "straight man" for Chico, and Chico for Harpo. The outsider, the Margaret Dumont character, played "straight" for Groucho.

There were gang teams like *The Bowery Boys*, but even they centered on a primary relationship, exemplified by *Huntz Hall* and *Leo Gorcey*. An exception, *The Stooges* needed a threesome to enable the "double slap." Later, with situation comedies, the comedy team concept would continue to appear in the pivotal interplay between *Kramden* and *Norton*, *Lucy* and *Ethel* and *Laverne* and *Shirley*.

In films, teams arrived as temporary arrangements rather than career-long



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commitments. Hope and Crosby were the prototypes, a team in “road” pictures but nowhere else. The teaming of movie funnymen continued through Lemmon and Matthau to Aykroyd and Belushi in the “Blues Brothers” movies, to the “Wayne’s World” duo to Chris Farley and David Spade. Though the traditional comedy teams were long gone, the team arrangement never disappeared, because comedically, no matter the era, it worked like a charm.

For me, at least, it’s fun to know, as Epstein tells us, how Nat Birnbaum became George Burns, how Stan Jefferson evolved into Stan Laurel, and why Zasu Pitts decided to call herself Zasu Pitts. It’s also interesting to find out that many performers changed their names not to mask their ethnicity, or at least not only to mask their ethnicity, but to protect their families from the shame of having an entertainer for a relative.

I also enjoyed learning that the last act in a vaudeville show, called the “chaser,” was meant to be deliberately boring to encourage the audience to leave so a new audience could take its place. Epstein further reveals why Gracie Allen always wore long sleeves and that one of the Stooges, as a child, accidentally shot himself in the ankle, resulting in a lifelong limp. And then there’s the TV superstar who was exposed as a registered Communist. These and other illuminating tidbits add spice to the already interesting team-telling tale.

Which brings us to the theories. And here I sigh. I’m not as uncomfortable with Epstein’s pronouncements on the comedy-team dynamic; they seems

to hold water. But asserting that for immigrant audiences, the sophistication of the straight man against the naivete of the comic was a “metaphor for the immigrant’s relationship with their new American home” – I don’t know about that. Explaining that Amos ‘n’ Andy was successful because it provided “an alternate world...in which blacks became the emotional equivalent of whites...but with a different color and a different dialect” – maybe it was just funny. “Comedy teams were a symbol of a cooperative society [and] fit seamlessly into American culture through the first half of the century but not so seamlessly into the second half where personal desires and ambitions became more acceptable “– where does he get this stuff? Is it true? Who knows? Maybe audiences got tired of comedy teams and wanted something different. But still the theories come.

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The author of *The Half-Hour Blues* in this issue of *Television Quarterly*, Earl Pomerantz is an award-winning television comedy writer.

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