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VOLUME XXIX

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He talks about anchors, magazine shows, integrity and sixty years in broadcasting

by Arthur Unger

A Sitcom conference

by Mary Ann Watson

Visit to the Newseum

by Jim Snyder

Nothing Sacred Closeup

by Sister Camille D'Arienzo

TV Cops: USA and the UK

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VOLUME XXIX NUMBER 2

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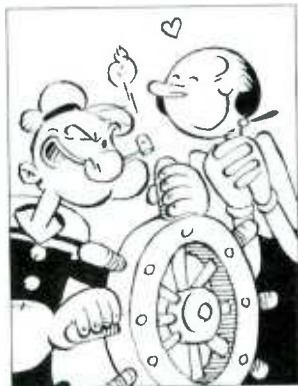


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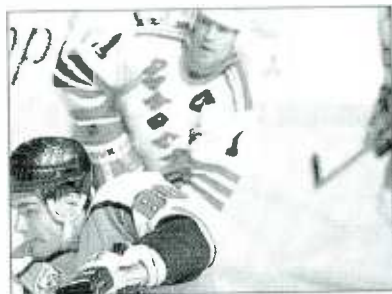
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All News All the Time— it's a Museum

*Closeby to a city with so many wonderful sights, there's a remarkable new attraction for visitors to the nation's capital. Dedicated to free speech and free press, it's the world's first interactive museum of news—the **Newseum**, organized and built by the Freedom Forum, a nonpartisan international foundation. To explore what goes on there, Television Quarterly assigned a correspondent who has spent many years reporting, producing and managing radio and TV news.*

By Jim Snyder



Video News Wall at the Newseum

I made my first visit to the Newseum with my 16-year-old grandson, Patrick Martin, he of the computer smarts and impressive test scores. We were among the 100,000 visitors who came in the first 45 days of the Newseum's existence. Since then there have been many days when the visitor count has been around 2,000. By October the total visitor count was more than 220,000.

The people who built and manage the Newseum have been happily amazed by the favorable public reaction. A survey in August found 87% of the visitors rated

their overall experience an 8, 9 or 10 (extremely interesting). Fifty-four percent said the Newseum exceeded their expectations. Sixty-one percent said it should be on the "must see" list. One third of the visitors brought kids.

Apparently everyone went home happy. Staffers are surprised at the absence of any complaints about any part of the Newseum operation. All this does not change the fact that the public still puts journalists down near the bottom in their approval ratings, down there with members of Congress and other politicians and campaign fund raisers. However,



CHRIS MICELLI / NEWSEUM

in any case, Newseum is a hit.

The acceptance and cooperation from professional journalists across the nation is also impressive. The Newseum's daily live broadcast in its studio, "Journalist of the Day," is attracting some top American journalists, including the best of the Washington news corps, who gladly appear and answer questions from the audience about their work. These sessions are unrehearsed and encourage discussion of all the issues confronting American journalism today, from concentration of media power among a handful of companies, the fragmentation of the audience (for all media), to the effect of the Internet, creeping tabloidism and the ever-growing insecurity of working journalists.

Pat and I began our tour sitting together in the main theater to watch a 10-minute documentary, *What is News?*, narrated by Charles Osgood of CBS News, which reviews most of the events that have demanded the world's attention this century. In among the news pictures and the narration are woven quotations from Tom Paine, Thomas Jefferson and Winston Churchill on democracy, freedom and the value of a free press.

Gray-haired tourist May Jackson of Baltimore told us as we filed out, "that was wonderful, I felt I was viewing my whole life."

Mary Kaufman, a former TV reporter and producer, now a teacher at the Northwestern University's Graduate School of Journalism program in Washington, found the news documentary reassuring and therapeutic. "It is a celebration of journalism" she said. "It's more than welcome after all these years of media bashing we have had to endure. It helps me to

continue to feel I am spending my time well."

After the News documentary, Pat and I split up. I did not want him to be influenced by my grizzled news veteran's view. I wondered how much the Newseum exhibits could reach Pat, a child of the television and computer age who had not yet contemplated the Newseum's message—freedom of the press, a blessing to be counted and cherished, is vital to our

democratic society. Or as Newseum President Peter S. Prichard explains it, "The press is in trouble. Many people, sometimes a majority, don't believe us, often with good cause. Most people outside the profession don't really understand who we are and what we do and how and why we do it. We hope

our visitors will come away with a better feel for the business and a deeper appreciation of the First Amendment." A recent Newseum/Roper survey found only 25% of Americans know freedom of the press is guaranteed in the Constitution. Sixty-five percent believe there are times when the press's freedom should be curbed.

The Newseum is 72,000 square feet, three levels plus an adjoining Freedom Park, tucked into the side of one of a canyon of office buildings in Rosslyn, Virginia. You can see the White House across the Potomac to the East just a few miles away, but there is no feeling the Newseum is a Washington monument. Using Washington's efficient Metro system and lots of parking space nearby, visitors are reaching it easily. The Newseum lobby is big and uncluttered, dominated by a hanging geodesic metal



The exterior of the Newseum located in Rosslyn, Va.

CHRIS MICELLI / NEWSEUM

globe containing the names of hundreds of newspapers and a band encircling it which displays headlines from Associated Press. The lobby and the two levels of exhibits above were designed by Robert Applebaum, who also designed the moving and successful Holocaust Museum in Washington.

Below all this elegance is a reception desk with college-age staffers, plus unpaid volunteers, many of them elderly, including some retirees with journalism backgrounds. One day, I was helped by volunteer Lloyd Schwartz, who for many years was the Washington Bureau Chief for Fairchild Publications. His co-volunteer on that shift was Katie Couric's father, John, who lives in nearby Arlington.

The Newseum took five years and fifty million dollars to plan and build. Its annual operating budget is 13 million dollars. Because admission is free to all, only one million dollars can be recovered each year through income from a souvenir shop and

two restaurants. No expense was spared buying and collecting the materials for the exhibits as well as the high-tech equipment the Newseum uses to deliver its message as well as to fascinate visitors.

Planners modeled their interactive equipment after video games American youngsters become addicted to. Instead of pushing buttons to slay a monster or defeat a bad guy, when the kids push buttons at the Newseum they learn how a reporter gets a story or how a newspaper front page is produced or how a local station TV news staff does its work or what news was made the day they were born.

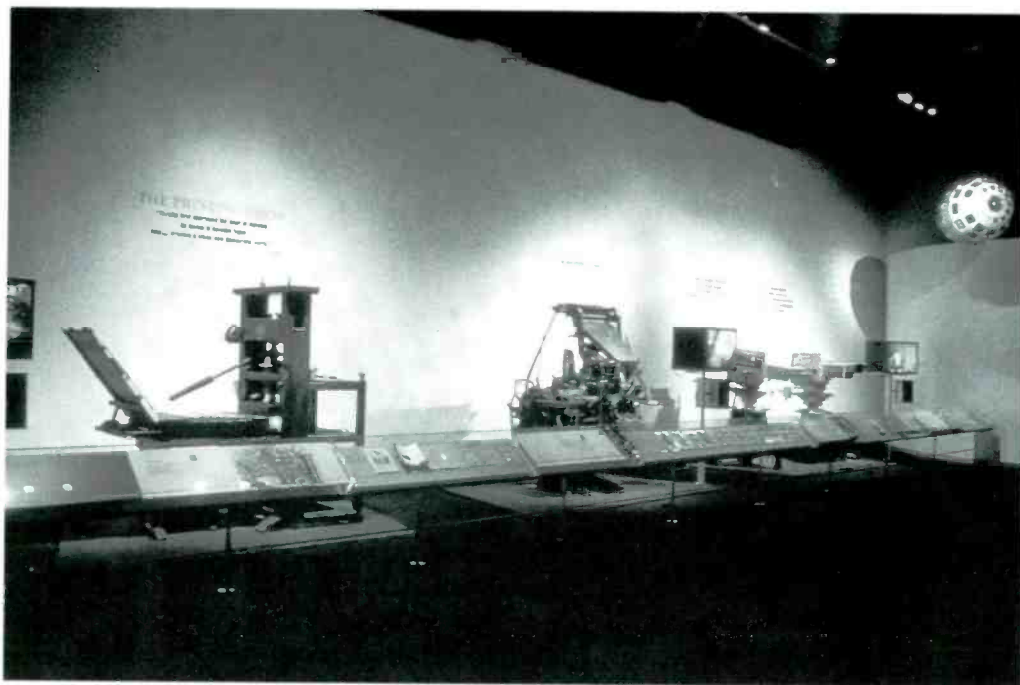
Visitors can push other buttons and tune in an interview with Ben Bradlee, Peter Arnett and other media stars on how they view their work. Off in a corner, there are monitors that raise questions about ethics in journalism. Nearby, at a small kiosk you can cast your vote in the poll of the day.

Also on this second level is, for instance,



News History Gallery

CHRIS MICELLI / NEWSEUM



Large artifacts in the News History Gallery

one of the museum's major attractions—the be-a-broadcaster area, which always has a crowd around it. For ten dollars you get a videotape of your on-camera delivery of thirty seconds of news headlines. Or you can stand before a weather map and give a brief weather report. Television fans of all ages love this place. Others delight in watching the folks who go on camera, the good, the bad and the terrified. One day I watched two grandparents beam as their ten-year-old grandson, a handsome blond boy, delivered the weather forecast. The boy was dressed in a shirt and tie and blue blazer and he was serious. I had the feeling I was watching an audition for some weather job somewhere.

As the boy did his bit, a few feet away a sixtyish man and wife sat at an anchor desk and did their amateurish best to be an effective anchor team. They, too, were serious—no happy talk. For all I know, they have already been turned down for TV jobs in their hometown, despite their tape from the Newseum.

If you don't want to risk embarrassment at the taping place, a few feet away you can enter a clear plexiglass booth and push a few buttons which take your picture and place it on the cover of a magazine. I chose to put myself on a *LIFE* cover. Later, Pat chose a *Sports Illustrated* cover for his picture.

The 125-foot-wide video news wall dominates the inside of the Newseum. Nine giant screens (14 feet wide and 10-and-a-half feet tall) display live news programming from all over the world. It makes you feel the impact of the wonders of satellite technology.

The block-long news wall and the many interactive kiosks, a fully equipped studio where live TV programs can be produced before an audience, plus two movie theaters and two mini-theaters create a high-tech-this-is-happening-now atmosphere. They reflect the management's desire to have the

public see the Newseum as an ever-changing entity, directly affected by and responding to events that change the world and our journalism.

Every day at least five top managers have a morning meeting. News people by training and experience, they discuss the daily news flow and how, if necessary, they should react to it. This meeting can bring change that day to what is displayed on the News Wall or the News History exhibits. When Walter Cronkite was hospitalized for treatment of a heart ailment in early 1997, regular reports on this condition were posted as part of a special exhibit. The deaths of Charles Kuralt, Mike Royko and Herb Caen during the year also brought instant exhibits on the men and their careers. The attention to the daily news and instant change, said one manager, "could make this a different place every year."

Smaller screens along a wall on the second level present historic excerpts from TV archives we have all seen before: the Kennedy assassination coverage, the Watergate hearings, and the Challenger space ship disaster. Many visitors stand for long periods intensely watching these tapes even though they saw them when they happened and probably have seen excerpts many times since.

Visitors also like displays of historic still pictures. The various exhibits of the work of big-name still photographers like Henry Bennet and his collection of pictures of American presidents and their wives (from the Kennedys through the Clintons) draw

clusters of visitors who linger to enjoy each picture. One of the most popular of the programs shown in one of the mini-theaters is an 8-minute documentary narrated by Walter Cronkite which honors the adventures and achievements of still photographers in American journalism.

All the interactivity and powerful pictures however, do not overshadow the News History exhibits. The Early News History exhibits start at the beginning with an exploration of the idea that news is ancient and universal, and illustrates news and communication before the introduction of the printing press in Europe.

Artifacts in the Early News gallery include examples of writing and record keeping in Sumeria (now Iraq) from 2176 to 562 B.C., an ancient Egyptian statue of Thoth, the god of scribes circa

660 B.C., and a Gutenberg Bible circa 1455. The exhibit includes the information that Gutenberg went broke halfway through the production of the Bible and his banker then took over and finished the project. The News History Wall provides many reasons for making more than one visit to the Newseum.

Along a wall on the second level, divided into 12 segments, the story of the development of news in America from 1500 to the present day is

Margaret Bourke-White's Camera; below: *The Daily Mirror*, December 6, 1933.



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“Be a newscaster” interactive newsroom

documented. All of it is well done, using a variety of techniques to present a mountain of information about the people who shaped American journalism. I have not absorbed it all yet, but my mind is full of nuggets of information I picked up.

For example, in 1882 a Chicago newspaper editor said to a cub reporter named Theodore Dreiser, “The first paragraph must reveal ‘Who or What, How, When and Where.’ With Dreiser’s help, that dictum began a long life as a guide to millions of news writers.

Then there is the story of James Gordon Bennett, who founded the *New York Herald* in 1835. Bennett made a major contribution to American newspaper publishing. He was the one who started question-and-answer interviews of news makers. He also established regular crime, court and Wall Street coverage, and reported news of sports, society and religion. In many ways, he was ahead of his

time. He was ahead of his competitors when he assigned 63 reporters to cover the Civil War. No other American newspaper came close to that.

Sprinkled among all the journalism history and interactivity, there are interesting museum odds and ends. You can see Paul Revere’s eyeglasses, a corncob pipe of Mark Twain’s, a Charles Dickens pen, and the bulky studio microphone Edward R. Murrow used to make his historic broadcasts from London during World War II. Also FDR’s “fireside chat” mike.

The wall behind the Newseum reception desk is covered with the word “news” written in 50 different languages. Nearby is a collection of plaques bearing the names of American newspapers and their slogans, as in “The *New York Times*, All The News That’s Fit to Print.” My favorites in the

display are: “*The Whiteburg Kentucky Eagle. It Screams,*” “*The Atlanta Journal, It Covers Dixie Like the Mountain Dew*” and “*The Aspen Daily News, If You Don’t Want It Printed, Don’t Let It Happen.*”

Two other exhibits that draw visitors are the daily display of the very latest front pages of 70 different American newspapers and a collection of old press passes which the Museum calls “Passports to History.”

The front-page display provides a wonderful daily opportunity to second guess the news judgment of all those editors who decided what would be printed on all those front pages. The press pass wall is an inside thing, I suspect, appealing most to aging news veterans who probably have a few old press passes of their own stuck in the back of a drawer at home. However, sometimes there are poignant ones like the White House-issued

pass the late CBS News correspondent Nelson Benton wore as he covered the trip of President Kennedy to Fort Worth and Dallas, November 21 and 22, 1963.

Nelson’s son Joe found it among his father’s papers and gave it to the Newseum. I have several 35- and 40- year-old press passes stuck in a drawer at my house too, but I have not yet made the Newseum aware of them.

Exhibit designer Robert Applebaum likes to cover available wall space with appropriate things like the words of the First Amendment and quotations from famous people about the strengths of American journalism. However, I wondered about his taste when I discovered the walls and stalls of the men’s room on the first floor are plastered with headline bloopers from newspapers. Visitors to the men’s room are expected to contemplate things like, “He found God at end of



ANNE POPOVICH / NEWSEUM

Jim Snyder at the Freedom Forum Journalists Memorial in Freedom Park, adjacent to the Newseum

his rope" (*Fort Worth Tribune* 1978) and "LBJ Giving Bull to Mexican People" (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, 1968). It is a fact, depressing to some, welcome to others, that the supply of bloopers will be endless as long as there are headline writers.

Then in the History Gallery there is the gruesome 1924 picture of Ruth Snyder, a convicted murderer who was the first American woman to die in the electric chair. The picture of Snyder sitting in the Sing Sing chair, just seconds before her execution, was taken with a camera hidden on the ankle of a *New York Daily News* photographer. The paper put it on the front page under a one-word-headline, "Dead."

Back to 1997 and an unfortunate advertising idea about promoting attendance at the Newseum. . . I saw the large ad displayed in Metro Stations. Over a blowup of the Snyder picture, ran this copy: "Think A Museum about News is a Bore? You're in for a shock. See electrifying exhibits and go behind the scenes at the Newseum—the new interactive museum of news." As grandson Pat and his friends would say, "Yuck!"

Outside the second level of the Newseum, there is Freedom Park, which displays icons of freedom such as a replica of the bars of the Birmingham cell door that once confined Martin Luther King; sections of the Berlin Wall; a headless status of Lenin, knocked down by rebellious Russians; and replicas of banners used in the USA during the fight for women's suffrage. "Women are too pure for the dirty pool of politics," reads a 1915 banner.

Near the center of the park, there is the

Freedom Forum Journalists Memorial, which honors journalists who were killed while reporting the news. Their names—more than 1,000 of them—are listed by year of death on tinted panes of glass. It struck me as cold and stark until I came to 1970 and the name George Syvertson, CBS News.

I knew George; we shared an office in the Washington Bureau of CBS News in 1967 and 1968. He had been an AP correspondent in Moscow and Warsaw before joining CBS.

He volunteered to serve in Vietnam for CBS News as a producer in 1968. We corresponded during his early days in Vietnam. But I had not heard from him in

months when the news came that he was killed in Cambodia on a Sunday morning in May, 1970, 50 miles from Phnom Penh.

George went to Cambodia from Saigon to report the story of American troops fighting in Cambodia for the first time because the North Vietnamese were using it as a base for their forces in Vietnam. On that Sunday morning, George, producer Gerald Miller (who had been Rome Bureau Chief before volunteering for Vietnam duty) and an Indian cameraman from New Delhi rode in a jeep down a road they thought would lead them to scenes of recent action. They didn't know that road was lined on both sides with hidden Vietcong.

The Vietcong troops killed George and the other two men with one rocket-propelled grenade. George was 38.

Most of that story is recounted in a kiosk near the Memorial. The data base does not include the dramatic story of what CBS News Vice President Manning had to do to recover the bodies of the three men from a shallow grave behind a farmhouse.



FDR's microphone

Manning, then in his fifties, flew to Cambodia, was denied entry to the men's graves for two weeks because of the danger in the area. Finally, in the third week after battling through a Cambodian bureaucratic maze, he managed somehow to get a truck and a car and an armed guard of 12 young Cambodian soldiers. Then, with two aides, he rode down that same road which had been so dangerous that fateful day George and his comrades drove down it.

Manning and company retrieved the bodies and returned them to Saigon where Syvertson's and Miller's widows were waiting. He arranged a memorial service at the airport in Saigon before the dead were shipped home.

Now retired and living in New York, Manning has total recall about the deaths and the personalities and talents of the three men. Most news executives based in comfortable offices would find it difficult to do what Manning did.

Standing in front of the glass pane at the journalists' memorial, I was saddened by thoughts of George and his violent death.

Another of my thoughts was: this memorial is a good thing, and I am glad I can stand here and in my own way memorialize George Syvertson, a courageous and dedicated journalist.

After our first visit, I asked grandson Pat what he thought of the Newseum. He responded, "it's cool." Translation, "it's good and I like it." The next day he visited it again, this time with his three best highschool friends. They, too, found the Newseum "cool." I told Pat I found the Newseum much more than I had expected, and I said I planned to visit it many more times and would recommend it to anyone. Of course, I also said "It's cool."

A few days later, Pat went beyond a brief comment, and at my request elaborated on

his impressions.

"The Newseum's main selling point is its interactive aspects," he reported. "I must admit the chance to be an anchor is appealing (not that I've tried it) but the best part of the Newseum is not the Interactive Newsroom. The history of news is the real point of the Newseum. It was amazing to see newspaper articles from 500 years ago.

"There is an article about the execution of King Charles the First during the English Reformation. Elsewhere in the gallery there is a copy of Emile Zola's 'I Accuse' in French. Emile Zola wrote this in defense of army officer Alfred Dreyfuss who had been falsely accused by the French government of spying for Germany in 1894. This was the greatest court trial of the time and there in the Newseum is the document that helped save the man's life.

"The Newseum uses flashy interactive exhibits to attract visitors. The thing that I think captures them is the history presented. When you go again, I suggest you pull out every one of the drawers in the History Gallery. You may be amazed by what you find there."

Obviously, Pat was able to tear himself away from the Interactive Newsroom. Not many can. He thinks it's cool, you understand, but believes it is possible to find happiness without the wonders of so much interactivity.

He also thinks freedom of the press and the Newseum are here to stay.

There truly is something for every American at the Newseum. Much of the history of news has rarely been put in perspective as it is in the Newseum. It's all here as a wonderful reminder of the American good fortune to have had the world's freest press for more than 300 years. The museum directors have said they want to

present the American media “warts and all,” and they do. One official told me, “However, we do want to celebrate American journalism . . . we are not here to bash it.” And they don’t.

I have made five long visits to the Newseum so far. I have watched the grade- and high-school kids, who sometimes have trouble absorbing it all . . . the college students and young government workers who fill their notebooks as they move through—and the “average American tourists” of all ages who sometimes stare in wonder at the technology.

Mary Kaufman, the teacher at the Northwestern Graduate program in Washington, who was inspired by the Newseum, told me later her students had the same reaction as she had. They got needed encouragement that they are doing the right thing in choosing to make a career in journalism.

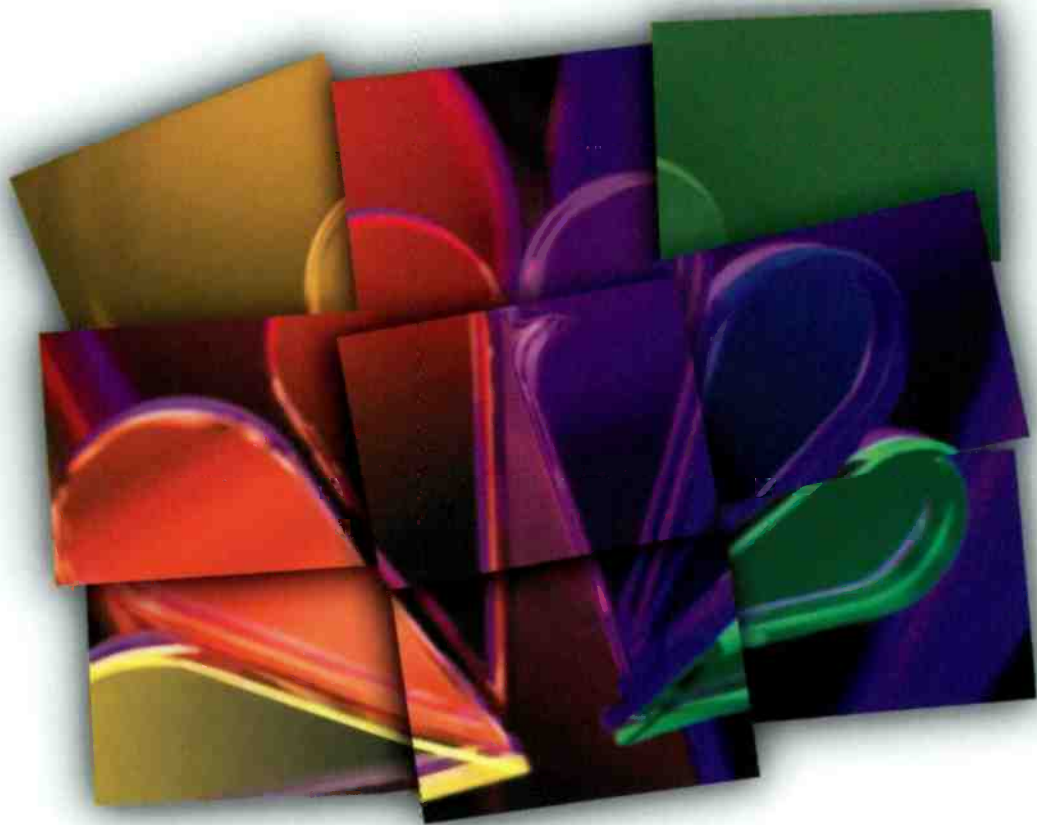
All this leads me to one of my strongest impressions after all those hours of Newseum browsing: it is a wonderful place that all working journalists should visit. If I were a television or radio station general manager, or a network news president, I would assign staffers to come to Washing-

ton and spend some time at the Newseum. It would be a perk, not a working assignment.

No stories would be expected of them; their only orders would be just read and watch and think about journalism and its place in our free society. And they could ponder their own contributions, present and future. It could be a wonderful antidote to all the cynicism, insecurity and gloom that these days envelop so many American journalists. At the very least, it would convince some good guys to stick around and fight the good journalistic fight. ■

It would take a Newseum wall to illustrate Jim Snyder's long and distinguished career in radio and television news. Starting at KDKA radio, he went on to assignments as chief of Group W's Washington news bureau, producer in Washington, D.C. for the CBS *Evening News*, News Director of WTOP-TV Washington, and for 12 years Vice President of News for the Post Newsweek Stations.

THE GOLDEN AGE



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



Letter from Hong Kong

By Deirdre Boyle

—HONG KONG

July 1, 1997 will be remembered for the much-anticipated handover of the British colony of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China. I deliberately avoided the crush of people eager to witness history in person, preferring to visit Hong Kong after the handover hangovers had worn off. I watched the ceremonies on television and observed the mournful Prince of Wales officiating at the demise of the British empire, little dreaming that the further unraveling of imperial Britain would be splashed across TV tubes, magazine covers, and newspaper front pages before the summer ended. As new Special Autonomous Region (SAR) flags were unfurled, people everywhere wondered would Hong Kong be transformed overnight into Beijing's fiefdom or would it remain a financial powerhouse and the West's entre to China?

Life in Hong Kong had returned to normal by the time I arrived in mid-July, if a frantic state of money-making activity is what is normal in Hong Kong. I quickly realized that it would take considerable time to register the impact of the changeover on Hong Kong and its media. I also discovered that summer in Hong Kong is like summer in New York, only more so: soaring humidity, sizzling temperatures, flying cockroaches, rapacious mosquitoes, and oppressive typhoons send everyone indoors. And when the typhoon signal is hoisted, life seems the same regardless of what government is in power: there is

nothing to do but batten down the hatches, hole up in air conditioning, and watch television.

The TV listings in *The South China Morning Post*, one of two local English-language dailies, provided program info for the two free-to-air television stations: *ATV World* (English), *ATV Home* (Cantonese), *TVB Pearl* (English), and *TVB Jade* (Cantonese). Although a number of cable channels are also available —ESPN, HBO, BBC, AUSTV, STAR, CNBC, HBO, etc.—my host, a Hong Kong-born theater director, was far too busy to hook up to cable. I didn't mind. If you are an expat from Germany, Belgium, Australia, or Japan, the international cable channels are a must, allowing you to keep up with the news from home. But if you're an American, you can be entertained and informed in the style to which you're accustomed simply by watching over-the-air TV.

Since 1997 also marked the 50th anniversary of the liberation of two other British colonies, India and Pakistan, these events were recalled with the broadcast of David Attenborough's epic film *Gandhi*, a ratings grabber since Hong Kong audiences are prone to sentimentality. Although British TV series like *The Thin Blue Line* are broadcast here, there are far more U.S. sitcoms and dramas on the English-language channels, leading one to suspect that—where electronic media are concerned—Hong Kong is really an American colony. Featured this summer were golden oldies like *Charlies' Angels*, *Santa Barbara*, and *The Wonder Years* along with *Oprah*, *Sesame*

Street, and the CBS *Evening News*. Trendier series like *Seinfeld*, and *NYPD Blue* were shown along with recent Hollywood films in the prime-time movie slots.

Although the choice of English-language programming seems at first glance designed to appeal to an expat audience, many viewers are Hong Kongese who have been educated in English since grade school. Their impact on programming can be seen, for example, in the decision to drop the hit series *ER* because of the show's reliance on esoteric medical jargon, which ultimately turned off Cantonese audiences.

For speakers of Cantonese and Mandarin, there are numerous entertainment offerings on the Chinese-language stations. Romantic soap operas shot on video and made in Hong Kong, Taiwan or Malaysia prevail in daytime hours along with excellent children's animation programs from Japan. Nighttime offerings include costumed historical dramas featuring martial arts heroes and special FX, series such as *The Demi God and the Semi-Devils* and *The Quest of Three Kingdoms*.

For fans of Hong Kong martial arts films, these TV series are nowhere near as exciting, but they have their loyal fans. One sitcom popular at the moment features a Hong Kong family now living in Canada and trying to adapt. Shot on video, the production values of most local TV series are good, although the acting runs from good to awful. CantoPop stars appear on nighttime music shows that put a new spin on the old *American Bandstand* model.

As my friend pointed out, where Hong Kong TV excels is in its commercials. In August the talented film director Wong Kar-Wai was shooting a short film that would be cut into a number of 30-second commercials for Motorola. Spike Lee had done it for Nike and *The New York Times*.

Hong Kong's role as the region's leading financial center is clearly reflected on television: financial news is reported all during the

day, and there are numerous programs devoted to economic analysis and forecasting. A wide variety of information programs on Asia are also available; weekly news programs on Korea, Taiwan, and other Asian nations are aired, as are daily reports from Guangdong, Shenzhen, Macao, and other nearby business centers. News programs in Cantonese often resemble their American counterparts in style, graphics, studio design, and happy talk patter. The Mandarin news is more staid in style and content, presented by attractive women newscasters in a manner more like the BBC than NBC.

With only rudimentary knowledge of Mandarin, I could just compare the English and Chinese channels for incidence and placement of news stories, not for content or editorial slant. Still, the differences were striking. During the build-up to the 15th Communist Party Congress in August, lengthy stories featuring President Jiang Zemin led the news and were accompanied by videotape on the Chinese channels, whereas the English-language news programs tended to place such video stories in abbreviated form later in the lineup.

Predictably, global public mourning over the death of princess Diana received less coverage on the Chinese channels, which devoted its attention (time and visuals) to the death of Mother Teresa. On the English-language channels, documentaries on Diana were presented as specials in the days surrounding the funeral, and Hong Kong's colonial status was further recalled in nightly news reports of the long lines of mourners who came to sign the books of condolence.

All during the summer doldrums, it seemed as though Hong Kong's transition from British colony to Chinese Special Autonomous Region was not about to cause a television ripple. News programs featured interviews with Martin Lee, outspoken leader of the pro-Democratic faction, speaking optimistically about the future.

Concern over the alarming rise of press

self-censorship that preceded the handover had receded as people became distracted by graphic reports of triad violence in Macao (the nearby Portuguese colony slated for return to China in 1999), traffic fatalities, and the sorry state of Hong Kong hospitals. Death by random violence or medical malpractice has a way of shifting one's attention. Only an insider would have noted with alarm an increase in the number of programs in Mandarin, a shift that may reflect the arrival of more mainland Chinese in the SAR as well as the growing influence of mainland television on local TV.

Then, in late August, the sudden death of Princess Diana captured all the world's attention, including Beijing's, promoting the *People's Daily*, which reflects official Communist Party thinking, to blame the West's press freedom for her death. As Western journalists debated the need for changes to privacy laws, Beijing used Diana's death to defend strict governmental control of the press. This interesting interpretation of freedom of the press coincided with two other ominous events.

In mid August, China's State Council strengthened its ban on foreign investment in the tightly controlled television and radio industries, which serve as censored organs of government propaganda. The Council released new regulations governing the establishment of mainland TV and radio stations as well as the language and content of their programs and advertisements.

"The Government prohibits the establishment of television and radio stations in such forms as wholly foreign-owned enterprises, Sino-foreign joint ventures or Sino-foreign co-operative businesses," Xinhua (the New China News Agency) quoted an official of the Ministry of Radio, Television and Film as saying. The announcement, coming as the U.S. Congress-funded Radio Free Asia reported China had blocked its transmissions to the mainland, showed China was determined to minimize increasing "infiltration" of Western media.

The regulations, signed by Prime Minister Li Peng, give new regulatory strength to the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television. In June, the Ministry banned a Japanese satellite station from being received on the mainland, and the managements of all hotels and apartments for foreigners were ordered to surrender decoders used for receiving its programs.

On August 24th, a 90-minute documentary on the Dalai Lama that dismissed the exiled leader of Tibet as an ungrateful, weak-willed figure was aired on China Central Television (CCTV), which also produced it. Two weeks later Hong Kong's ATV aired the tape, first in English, and then in Cantonese. Editorial writer Andy Ho noted in *The South China Morning Post*, "the move by ATV to air a portrayal last week of the Dalai Lama produced by the Chinese publicity machine has fueled local worries that the local electronic media are in danger of being degraded into a propaganda tool for Beijing."

Had the one-sided documentary been accompanied by a panel discussion, it might have served a useful purpose, Ho suggested, adding that Hong Kong media generally avoid coverage of Tibet, so anyone dependent on local media would be unable to reach an informed position on the conflict there based on the CCTV program.

I watched *The Dalai Lama* and was struck by how effectively the director had borrowed a Western TV documentary style to produce persuasive propaganda that demonized the spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet as a self-absorbed weakling, easily manipulated by the CIA. The tape, masquerading as journalism, was biased, but slickly, and capable of misleading viewers without any other knowledge of the situation.

According to Ho, there is growing fear in Hong Kong that the sphere of public debate will shrink even further in a year or two when local laws supplementing Article 23 of the Basic Law prohibit subversion, secession and other crimes against national security. Audiences already have good reason to

be skeptical of the two free-to-air stations when it comes to sensitive topics.

Six veteran ATV journalists resigned in June, 1994, over confrontation with the management on its handling of a documentary on the military crackdown at Tiananmen Square. And TVB was accused of being obsequious to Beijing, withdrawing a documentary on Mao Zedong in 1993 because officials were offended by descriptions of his sexual proclivities. The station claimed they were shelving the film because of a glut of other titles on Mao, but four years later, the film has yet to be released.

China's attitudes toward press freedom and Western media in mainland China are clear. But what about Hong Kong? Will China honor its promise not to interfere

with Hong Kong's internal affairs, including its media? Does the above decision by one of the two free-to-air channels to broadcast Chinese government propaganda suggest mainland China's influence is growing and unopposed by television channels eager to please the political powers in Beijing? Will the Special Autonomous Region of Hong Kong come to resemble that other SAR, Tibet? Tune in next week. . . ■

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Postscript:

I returned to the United States in mid-September and, badly jet-lagged, sat staring at my TV one night surfing the channels for something to put me to sleep. I happened upon a program curiously familiar: *The Dalai Lama*, aired in Mandarin with subtitles for Cantonese speakers. I watched it for a while, taking in the fact that Chinese government propaganda was being cablecast in New York City.

Should I declare it a victory for public access, or shudder at the invasive presence of foreign government propaganda right under my nose? There would be no public outcry in the English-language press—who would even notice it was on?—but would there be any debate in the Chinese press here? If it were not for our deregulated, free-market approach to cable television and those dangerous ideas of freedom of speech and of press, such a program could not be cablecast in the United States. Yet a reciprocal arrangement is inconceivable on CCTV in China.

A government that takes this much trouble to influence overseas Chinese will not easily be stopped. I felt fatigue that had little to do with jet lag. In the war for the minds and hearts of the people, the media are of paramount strategic importance, something The People's Republic of China knows well. Who will win the war for the hearts and minds of Hong Kong? The millennium may see more reruns of *Charlie's Angels* for weary business travelers in Hong Kong hotels, but what will be available in Mandarin and Cantonese for a new generation no longer educated in English? Something tells me it will not be a dubbed version of *Seven Years in Tibet*. — **D. B.** ■

Hugh Downs of 20/20: “Professional Human Being”

After almost 60 years in broadcasting, Hugh Downs's integrity remains intact as he refuses to take part in 20/20's Marv Albert interview. He impresses TVQ's Special Correspondent as television's quintessential gentleman communicator in this revealing chat about news, anchors and the tabloidization of magazine and talk shows.

By Arthur Unger

Hugh Downs still has trouble defining what he does for a living. Seventeen years ago I interviewed Mr. Downs (and he is definitely a Mr. Downs, not a Hugh) for *The Christian Science Monitor* and we discussed the fact that when he filled out customs forms which asked for occupation, he didn't know how to answer.

Now almost two decades and hundreds of shows later, he is still a bit uncertain

about the correct response. We discuss various categories—communicator, narrator, author, host, anchor, announcer, generalist, purveyor of information, professional human being. Now he jumps at a solution—“Professional human being, that's my favorite!” he declares emphatically.

But, then he reconsiders. “I suppose, really, ‘news anchor’ would be the proper answer. But I am still undecided about what to put down on those forms. I often



put down 'broadcaster,' which to the trade means an owner or manager of a broadcast entity like a TV station or network. But to the general public just means somebody who does broadcasting."

If all of this makes you believe Hugh Downs is an indecisive nerd, nothing could be farther from the truth. Mr. Downs is an intelligent, principled, strong-but-silent Gibraltar of a man with a firm set of opinions about the world of broadcasting and the world in general.

He is earnest about his beliefs and takes a serious and balanced view of the work that he does and the interests he pursues. All with a quiet sense of humor and a benign twinkle in his eyes. He is every teenager's dream of a dad . . . or grandfather. Because Mr. Downs is in his late 70s and shows no signs of slowing down. In fact, since his two recent knee replacements he appears to be as lithe as a man twenty years his junior.

He is definitely a warm personality, even though he does exude a kind of brisk, no-nonsense air of get-down-to-the-business-at-hand. Generalist he may be, but his wide-ranging knowledge and sensitivity to the needs of others for information make him a master purveyor of entertainment-information.

Mr. Downs has served in just about every capacity in broadcasting—reporter, newscaster, interviewer, narrator, host. In May 1989, he celebrated his 50th anniversary in broadcasting (both radio and TV). He served as host of *The Today Show* for nine years, announcer on NBC's *Sid Caesar Hour*, host of *The Tonight Show With Jack Paar* for five years. He was host of the game show, *Concentration*, and the PBS series on aging, *Over Easy*. As well as host-narrator of many award-winning documentaries, all the while often serving as host of PBS's *Live From Lincoln Center*.

Outside of broadcasting, Mr. Downs is active in the National Space Society,

NASA, UNICEF and many geriatric-research organizations, serving as their more-or-less poster child . . . a gracefully aging man who preaches what he practices as he goes about his hobbies of sailing and flying.

Married for many years to Ruth, they have two grown children, Hugh R. and Deirdre L. and homes in Carefree, Arizona, New York City and Massachusetts.

Now, co-host with Barbara Walters of *20/20*, Mr. Downs show no signs of slowing down. He sort of retired once but was persuaded to return to TV for *20/20* about 17 years ago. Now he has no plans to repeat the retiring routine.

Dressed in nondescript white shirt and dark suit, in his equally nondescript ABC News office, TV's quintessential gentleman, Hugh Downs bounds from behind his desk to bid me farewell. "Maybe we'll do this in another 17 years?" he suggests grinning.

I suspect he means it, too.

What follows is the conversation with Hugh Downs. Although the chronology has been changed here and there for reasons of continuity, and there has been some editing due to space requirements, all the answers are verbatim.



Unger: *The Guinness Book of Records* recently listed you as having the greatest number of hours on commercial television. Is that still the case today?

Downs: It probably is. Nobody has contested it, and you have to be careful how you spell it out because there are two people who have spent more time in front of television cameras than I have. One of them is Joe Franklin. And the other is a man in Phoenix, Arizona, who, for many years, had a four-hour-a-day program locally. But if you say "network commer-

cial television,” I think I have the record because at the time Guinness’s research showed that I passed 10,000 hours. Johnny Carson was second, and he had 7,800 and some. So it was a long way for anybody to catch up with me. That came about because of the time-intensive stuff I was doing in the ’50s, ’60s, and early ’70s where I was doing the old *Tonight Show* that I was on five times a week, an hour and three-quarters. And *The Today Show* was two full hours a day, ten hours a week. And in each case, that wasn’t the only television I was doing, because I was doing simultaneously a game program, *Concentration*—that was five hours a week. So those hours mounted up a lot in those decades.

Unger: *Have you figured out how many hours now?*

Downs: No, I haven’t really, and it isn’t that much more now because since passing the 10,000 hours between the retirement time and the fact that I came back to one hour a week, I haven’t figured the hours.

Unger: *How is the Thursday show doing?*

Downs: Well, the ratings at the beginning were very heartening. If we’re left on long enough, we’ll overtake the leaders. I think it will take 18 months or two years.

Unger: *Did you have trouble getting enough material for two shows?*

Downs: Well there’s always trouble. The thing is to get the right material. The world is always fresh, and there’s an awful lot happening. Sometimes there’s more happening than we can even try to cover. But yes, there are more people out there trying to get material, and we’ll just have to get roughly twice the number of stories.

Unger: *Does it mean that you do more?*

Downs: Yes. I do more in the field, really—not maybe twice as much, but I

try to do close to twice as much as I can. My formula over the years has been that I do on average a feature of my own every 4.5 shows. I think that’s about ten a year. It may be a little less with the vacation time I take. But that’s enough to keep me from looking desk-bound or fatigued. I’m in the field all the time.

Unger: *Now, do you do anything else on the air?*

Downs: Not on television. I have radio commentary and also I do *Live From Lincoln Center* on PBS—that’s irregular, and it’s a labor of love, really. I like good music, so I enjoy doing that, but other than that, I’m not doing any television.

Unger: *Are you still very interested and involved in the space program. I think you were the first civilian to ask to be aboard the Space Shuttle?*

Downs: I was. Walter Cronkite was second, and I asked when it was still on the drawing board. It was called the Shuttle, properly, because that name comes from the fact that there was going to be a little earth orbit station out there and the Shuttle would take you out and you’d stay a while and you’d come back on another Shuttle. Well, it isn’t the Shuttle now. It’s renamed the Orbiter, but everybody still calls it the Shuttle. But Scott Carpenter said I was the first to ask to go on it with the astronauts.

Unger: *Lowell Thomas had also asked, and he was 88 then. You said that you would cede the space to him.*

Downs: Yeah, I would have yielded to Lowell . . . There’s no age limit on the Shuttle. If you can pass the flight physical. I’m current in aviation. I passed my flight physical a few months ago, and I stay current. So, to this moment, there is no age limit on the Shuttle.

Unger: *Are you actively involved now?*

Downs: Yes. The Space Institute absorbed some other organizations, and became the National Space Society, and I had been the president and then I was chairman of the board. And now, I'm chairman of the board of governors of the National Space Society. Buzz Aldrin is chairman of the board. I was advisor to NASA for a while. I'm not doing that any more. But I'm active. I keep up with the space effort.

Unger: *Are you flying yourself?*

Downs: Yeah, most of my flying now, I rent airplanes. I don't own an airplane now, but I own a glider, and I like tumbling through the sky in that. For a time, I towed gliders with my bi-plane, and I found that towing is boring, but gliding is not boring, so I do gliding now.

Unger: *And you still maintain your main residence in Carefree, Arizona?*

Downs: Well, technically, my legal residence has shifted to Massachusetts. My advisor said that that was a wise thing to do, but it didn't change anything.

Unger: *Do you have a home in Massachusetts?*

Downs: Yes, I have a home in the Berkshires. But for over a quarter of a century, my legal residence was in Arizona—that's where I voted. That was changed on advice, but it didn't change anything in the amount of time spent at each place, so I still consider Arizona as home.

Unger: *You have so many interests. There's a whole range of them—which are the ones that you are most involved in at this point?*

Downs: Well, right now, I guess it's writing music because I revived that after a while. When I was on staff with NBC many years ago . . . I was interested in writing music before that, but I wrote something for the NBC orchestra that I tried out. I orchestrated and wrote out the parts, and everything. That was later published and had the blessing of performance by a

couple of large orchestras. I never got into the Swan catalogue.

Unger: *Did you have any musical training?*

Downs: No, I was sort of self-taught. I just read the books on musical theory and harmony, and then on counterpoint and orchestration. Incidentally, when I went back to writing this thing that I am now just finishing up, I had gotten so rusty that I had to go back to study because I was afraid that I was writing outside the range of some instruments. I had forgotten about where they can go.

Unger: *Do you play any instruments yourself?*

Downs: No, I never mastered an instrument. I played violin when I was a little kid, and I play piano for my own amusement, but I can't call myself either a violinist or a pianist. I'm a virtuoso on the phonograph—I mean, on the CD player—I'm very good at that.

Unger: *Has your knee surgery to replace both knees slowed you down?*

Downs: It's done the opposite. It was so much better than I expected.

I had a series of injuries over the years. I had always thought that you get injured and then you get well. I didn't believe in permanent injuries until I finally did in one knee very badly.

There was total joint replacement of both knees about two years ago. I expected a lot from it, and I got more than I expected. You know, over a period of about 16 years of deterioration, I got so that I was really in bad shape; even walking was painful. And after the knee replacements, about ten, eleven months afterward, I saw a flight of stairs and I knew I could run up the stairs, and I did. I can run upstairs now, and I hadn't done that for 12 years. So, it really restored a lot to my life.

Unger: *Have you slowed down with age?*

Downs: Obviously, I would not want to

try from an athletic standpoint to do what I did when I was 25 or 30. In that sense, I suppose I've slowed down. Some of it is just wisdom rather than laziness or inability. But in every other department of my life, I think the opposite has taken place. I know there may come a time when I'll slow down, mentally and everything else, but I think my short-term memory, my cognition is better than it was when I was a young man. And if I don't run afoul of an injury or an illness, if I don't run into Alzheimer's or something, I rather expect a reasonable IQ into a very advanced age.

Unger: *Next question would have been: Have you mellowed? But you're so mellow anyway that it doesn't make sense.*

Downs: I know what you mean. In a way I've mellowed, because I think as a younger person in the business and in my private life, there were a lot of unhappy elements. There would be somebody I couldn't work around, and I'd develop dislikes, and I'd have worries about my profession, about my voice, about other things. I don't have those worries anymore, so I guess I have mellowed in that way. I feel better about the world.

Unger: *Are you a happy person?*

Downs: I would say I am happy, but I wouldn't say I'm content because if you're really content, then you don't want anything and ambition flags. There are things I still want to do, and therefore I won't be content until I've done them, so maybe I'll never be content. But I am happy.

Unger: *Will you ever retire?*

Downs: No. I agree with Alex Comfort who once said, "I think the ideal time for retirement is about two weeks." And I don't think that I would ever retire from what I do. I might retire to something else. And one of the things in connection with

the business that I think is interesting in the same way, roughly parallel, that I moved from radio to television—and I did that without trauma, I just blended into it at a time when television was just considered a joke. I thought TV was a gimmick like 3-D movies. That shows what a miserable prophet I am. I didn't realize that it would treat me better than radio did.

In the same way that I moved from one medium to the other, I now am very interested in what's happening cybernetically in our business. Not only the proliferation of channels and the multiplication of choice but the fact that now that cybernetics is moving into it. There's sound on the computer now, and there's going to be full real-time band width for the activities that are happening. I think younger people are paying a lot more attention to some of the cable—but particularly things that give almost information overload, things like Bloomberg and channels that will have stock quotations underneath, and you're learning five or six things at the same time. It is leapfrogging within the cable business.

I think we are going to see a profound change in the way people receive information and transmit it in the relatively near future. And I would be interested at the end of my contract now, when that occurs—two years from now (I just resigned for two years)—in just scouting what those potentials are, whether I should contemplate a lateral move. Right now, there's nothing I would rather do than the 20/20s that I'm doing, but I want to keep the doors open.

Unger: *Do you think the networks are keeping up with cybernetics?*

Downs: I know they're all trying to. And maybe they are keeping up. I just don't know enough about the future and I'm not enough of a prophet to know what they should be doing, but I know that's on their minds.

About Hugh and Barbara and Marv

In October of 1997, Hugh Downs appeared on *Larry King Live* and said that neither he nor Barbara Walters would interview Marv Albert. Then, on Friday, November 6, 1997, Marv Albert appeared on *20/20* interviewed by Barbara Walters. Hugh Downs took the night off rather than sit in his regular co-anchor seat.

He was hailed by Frank Rich, of the *New York Times*, as "a new Howard Beales." Beales was the anchorman in the movie *Network* who threatened to blow his brains out on the air in protest of his network's tabloidization of the news.

Here is what Hugh Downs told *Television Quarterly* about his own protest:

"How do you react to being called a new Howard Beales? Well, I am not mad as hell but I was concerned. There's a danger to the whole industry. I have always adopted the view that *20/20* didn't put anything on the air which said in effect, 'Gee folks, ain't this awful!'

"We do live in a world in which sordid and sensational things happen and we are obliged to cover them... if they are of use to people, if there is some hope of redress or correction or if they enhance people's life. I always thought of our program as being of service. When I appeared on the *Larry King Show*, I said neither I nor Barbara would ever do a Marv Albert interview. I believed that. Then I saw the interview, I felt my integrity was at stake and I thought the best

Unger: *Do you consider yourself computer literate?*

Downs: I suppose so. I thread my way through some web sites, and word processing and a couple of other things, but I'm really limited compared to some people I know in the way they can use a computer.

Unger: *Do you think music for television or music for computers is a different form than music for live performance? The reason I ask is that I once interviewed Martha Graham who said that dance for television is a completely different art form than dance for theater.*

Downs: Yes, that's really true, particularly in popular music. A rock band which does a concert has to be careful not to sound too different from what you can do when you've got 32 tracks that you can mix in a sound studio, and produce a very different kind of thing. I think the element of computers in music is having a great effect on what we may be hearing. There

will always be live performances because people like to go and see people perform. But there's a big difference now in television and movies. People like John Williams, who is enormously prolific and versatile, writes for the movies. It is different from the days when a composer of that magnitude would sit down and write a symphony, and people would go to the concert hall and hear the symphony. There will probably still be symphonies, but I think the bulk of our music will be an adjunct to movies and television.

Unger: *We really don't know what is going to happen in the near future. I've often wondered why somebody doesn't have a "Best Seat In The House Show." That is, sit a camera in the best seat of the house and not do anything else. Maybe there would be some kind of interactive gadget so the viewer at home could zoom in on any part of the stage.*

Downs: You know, I've puzzled at the same thing. Years ago, I had an idea.

ng was not to appear on that show. I didn't think it would cause a big flap. "In talking to the producers, they threw things at me like what would I do with Paula Jones talking about the President's private parts. I said we are talking about a sitting President and people have a right to know about things that reflect on his performing in his office. It's not who the hell is Marv Albert? There is not one bit of socially redeeming element in that interview.

"It was well produced and Barbara did a fine job as she usually does. But what did that do for people? What need to know is there? It seemed pure tabloid, and I just couldn't go with it.

"What was a lesson for me was that I just shouldn't speak for anyone else. I have seen Barbara turn down things before that were less smarmy than this, so I honestly believed she could not do it.

"I worry about a trend. What is happening now? What is causing this trend toward tabloidization?

"If there had to be a flap about my non-appearance, I hope it will focus attention on what is going on in TV news... the fading line between news and entertainment. I found a lot of support among my colleagues for my action.

"Ted Koppel said recently that it is not death or torture or imprisonment that threatens us as American journalists, it is the trivialization of our industry.

"I think that is the danger and it does concern me." —A.U. ■

When cable first began I thought it would not sustain itself in competitive commercial television, but I would have loved to have seen something where you could just show great art. You know what radio did for great music in the days when they started broadcasting the Met operas on radio. The then manager of the Met said no, absolutely because people will stay home on Saturday and listen to the opera and they won't come to the Metropolitan. Well, he was dead wrong because having those Saturday broadcasts created a new crop of opera fans and that's what saved the Met really. And then I thought when television came in, maybe television will do for great art what radio did for great music so you could sit and watch a Rembrandt. It hasn't done that yet. And I'm not sure I understand why.

I wanted to do something, for example, like go to Florence, Italy and do a set-up where you had a slowly moving—maybe

with music in the background or some commentary or something—a slowly moving camera that would go all the way around Michelangelo's David and give you a half hour of being able to see this great art masterpiece. It hasn't happened yet. Maybe it will down the line.

Unger: *Let's switch over to television journalism. How has that kind of journalism changed since you first went into it?*

Downs: I'll tell you how it's changed. I think that television news has become unnecessarily centrist, and I worry about it.

Unger: *Centrist in what way?*

Downs: There's a terrible fear of editorial opinion on TV and a terrible fear of anything that goes away from some relatively narrow rubrics that I would like to get away from. I do these radio commentaries in which I have over the years blasted an administration for something,

Downs: Well, a lot of critics say that they're really confused, and they won't know. I think the public is smarter than we give them credit for. I think they sort this out. Even the print tabloids. I know people buy them, but I think it's a relatively small percent that buy things like the tabloids that rake up everything. Alarmists say that a lot of people believe in them—buy them and believe what they say. I think very few people are naive enough to believe it. They sort it out in their mind, and that's how they know if they tune in *20/20*, they're going to have something that has integrity and is going to try to inform them in the best possible most accurate way. If they tune these other things in, they're going to make the proper judgment of them.

Unger: *There are some things that serious news shows do, which I think should be stopped.*

Downs: What's that?

Unger: *The news "tease." They start by saying, "Somebody was killed in Africa today. Stay tuned and you'll hear . . ."*

Downs: Oh, yes, yes!

Unger: *There is something wrong about teasing people about news events.*

Downs: I've deplored that for a while, too. I've seen local situations where they say, in effect, "Here is a news break . . ." and you say, "Hey, a news break, I'll pay attention." And the somebody comes on and says, "There was a terrible murder in the South Bronx today. Tune in at noon for the details." Whoa, that's not a news break. That's a promo.

Unger: *What is next for you in television? Anchoring the news?*

Downs: I don't have any plans for making changes. One reason is, I don't think that anything that I could go to that would be

up. Now this is not to put down anchoring—I know there's enormous prestige in rendering the service that is done by a Peter Jennings, for example, in keeping people informed. More people do get their news that way, than any other way. But in all honesty, I have done five a week, and my short excursions into hard news taught me that I am much more comfortable in the magazine format where I can do news features and get in depth in some things rather than being corseted in that headline format.

If the network came to me and said, "You know, somebody is retiring, and we want you to take over . . ."—they wouldn't do that, but if they did, I'd have to thank them and say, "No, I don't want to do that" because there is no place that I could go in television now that I would consider up from where I am.

I'm a generalist and I'm happy with doing a magazine that deals with general topics. So, I don't know what would be next. Way down the line if I wanted to lighten my workload, I might try to manipulate something where I was on once a month for a lot more money. I don't think that's going to happen either.

Unger: *How about game shows? I'm not saying you should do a game show now but you did do Concentration.*

Downs: That was the only game show I did. I enjoyed that I think because it appealed to my Scottish blood that I could give away all those prizes and it didn't cost me anything.

Unger: *That was before the big scandal on game shows?*

Downs: No. We went on the air within the week that guy blew the whistle on the primetime game shows. And I mean, it was like, is that the end of it? They're going to sweep them all off the board.

Fortunately, *Concentration* was a game so structured that there was no opportu-

nity or motivation to rig it or to do anything underhanded about it. I had it set so that when the game was on, there was a black tape over the answer. I didn't know the answer until a contestant said what he thought the answer was, and I would tear it off. And we had a guy from Scotland Yard backstage where the stagehands were that loaded the puzzles, so we were really pure.

Unger: *What year was this?*

Downs: That was 1958. So, we weathered that, and it lasted a decade.

Unger: *What do you think of the current top game shows like Jeopardy and Wheel of Fortune?*

Downs: Well, in all honesty, their success is a puzzle to me because I don't play games very well. Game shows of that kind aren't what I watch on television, and so I don't know how to account for their popularity. That sounds snobbish, but I just don't happen to be a game show person.

Unger: *How about the talk shows?*

Downs: There again, you've got a tremendous variety, haven't you? From the sublime to the really smarmy. My grandson for a time worked for a show—I don't want to name it—but he finally quit. He's into acting now because he was a producer, and they asked him and pressured him to doublecross people who would be brought on the program; and he couldn't do it; it was against his integrity. They would tell them that they were on for one reason, and maybe they were on for a different reason. And, of course the notorious murder on the *Jenny Jones Show*.

I don't know whether those shows will be self-policing, or whether there's going to be some kind of action taken. I'd hate to see it infringe on freedom of speech. I happen to agree with whoever it was who said, "The only proper censorship is public boredom." And I think those things tend to

slough off, and the public will get bored with that kind of exploitation.

Unger: *Besides 20/20 and Live From Lincoln Center you often narrate documentaries. How do you decide which ones to do?*

Downs: I like to think I always had a kind of moral code but at the beginning of my career it wasn't true; it developed a little later. Now I recognize that my first allegiance is to the person tuned in and after that to the station or network or agency or sponsor. A guy from Madison Avenue who used to work with me was shocked by that. He said: "Well, you're not thinking about where the bread is buttered." And I said: "Well, maybe not, but I don't think the bread will be buttered for me at all if the person tuned in lost faith in me."

Of what use would I be to a sponsor? I don't think he ever understood what I was saying, but it is expedient as well as principled to take that outlook. It would be unconscionable, unthinkable for me to say something either commercially or editorially that I didn't believe because I was doing it for the money. I couldn't do that.

I can no longer just read what is on the paper, take the money and run. Too many people now put their trust in me.

Unger: *Do you miss the daily contact you used to have with millions of people when you were doing the Today Show?*

Downs: I used to say I missed it because it helped me overcome a distorted picture of my own importance. But now I don't think I require being on the air so much because the other side of that coin is that I learned from taking vacations where I would be out of contact, that the world goes on okay by itself whether I am up to the minute on the news or not.

Unger: *What I usually do in these interviews is give a list of names and ask you to make a very quick appraisal of each; and then quote adjectives and description of you*

by others and have you comment. Let's start with Barbara Walters.

Downs: I'd say very bright, attractive and very able in the news game; ambitious, and to me, very likeable.

Unger: *David Letterman.*

Downs: Oh, God. If I'm frank on these things, I'm going to wind up saying some negative things, I suppose. Letterman is very clever and sits on top of very funny things. He has the habit in the past, a tendency to use people, which I don't see in Leno so much, his competition. It worries me.

Unger: *How about Jay Leno?*

Downs: Jay Leno is a very likeable guy. I remember when I was a guest on his program one time, we were talking about the killer whales, and I had ridden a killer whale, and he said, "Were you afraid?" I said, "No, because killer whales never bother humans. They never chew on a human being." And he said, "Oh, hence the name killer whale." And he was amused by that. No, I always felt I was treated decently as a guest, and I think he has some very funny material.

Unger: *Katie Couric.*

Downs: Because that's competition, I don't have a chance to see her as much. It's hard for me to comment on her. She seems like a bright and perky individual.

Unger: *The show 60 Minutes.*

Downs: A venerable program that's been on so long it established itself very well. It took a while to do it, but it created the audience and established the magazine format for the rest of us to come in and do it.

Unger: *Prime Time Live?*

Downs: *Prime Time Live* is very good. The fact that they do some legwork live, I think is admirable. I envy that in a way because we occasionally do our program live. I was brought up on live. I got into broadcasting

when there wasn't any taping. Everything I did was live, so that's the way I like to work.

Unger: *Dateline?*

Downs: *Dateline* is a phenomenon because it multiplied itself. I mean, I never saw anything cloned like that. I was wrong again. I thought when they did that, it would start screwing up their audience, that all the ratings would go down, and it didn't happen.

Unger: *Do you think that was the reason for a second 20/20—duplicating itself?*

Downs: I secretly suspect that that's part of the reason. It was shown to be successful, and we were very flattered that we were the ones chosen by the company to be cloned. I think we could do the same thing, but I wouldn't have predicted that when *Dateline* first did it.

Unger: *Diane Sawyer.*

Downs: Again, very ambitious, very able, and I don't know what else to say. She's got a very good style and does a good job.

Unger: *Geraldo Riviera.*

Downs: Geraldo is a marvelous guy. His heart is in the right place, and he's done some admirable things. And really, one of the best things about Geraldo, I think, is that he's outraged by injustice. I have seen instances when he was with us where he could be more outraged by injustice against somebody else than against himself, even though I think he likes to be considered a guy with great courage, which he is—he's sensitive to that. And when he left us, it may be the best decision he made because he has been laughing all the way to the bank since.

Unger: *Bryant Gumbel.*

Downs: Able guy. He did the role that I did for a decade on the *Today Show*, and he was very good.

Unger: *Matt Lauer?*

Downs: Again, I haven't been exposed enough to his work to make any meaningful comment on him.

Unger: *Martha Stewart.*

Downs: Probably the same thing. My televiewing is so select that there's a lot that goes on in television that I've not seen . . .

Unger: *Let's go back to the early days. Dave Garroway.*

Downs: You know, every human being is unique and Dave may have been more unique than many people that I've known. He was asked to do the *Today Show* when it started in '52, and his name became a household word. He was a very able guy. He related to the audience with a great deal of reality. He didn't have a stage technique, which a lot of the people in those days were bringing to television. You didn't say "ladies and gentlemen" anymore on television because you were not broadcasting to big groups; you were broadcasting to an individual or a family, and Dave realized that.

Unger: *You don't say "ladies and gentlemen"? . . . It never occurred to me.*

Downs: Yeah, I wouldn't want to go out on a big primetime variety show and say "Ladies and Gentlemen, our next guest is..." You don't do that. You're broadcasting to individuals and small groups.

Unger: *Now, I'll give you a tough one—Roone Arledge.*

Downs: Well, he's some piece of work. I mean, he has a method of dealing with things that is almost unheard of. Maybe it's been exaggerated, but he always says that he doesn't return phone calls. In my first years here, I got paranoid—I thought he was putting the shun on me. Then I found out he does it to everybody.

Now, Roone is a workaholic. He follows up on everything he has to face. And he

does it successfully because he brought ABC to be the #1 sports network, and then to become the #1 news network—and a lot of that simultaneously. I never saw anybody with that much energy or insight. And he does keep his word on stuff—at least everything he promised to me. But he sure has a weird way of working.

Unger: *Okay, now can we go to words which supposedly define you. We'll do the positive ones first. I find that works best, rather than do the negatives too soon. "TV communicator par excellence."*

Downs: I think I do a good job but I know people who do the same things I do, and many of them better . . . for a variety of reasons. I like to think of myself as a link between the material and the viewer. It kind of helps the viewer assimilate. I do that fairly well.

Unger: *"America's #1 generalist."*

Downs: I may plead guilty to that because I really am interested in damn near everything. I can't remember whether it was Alexander Woollcott or somebody else who said once, "I am interested in everything except incest and folk dancing." That's a pretty good statement because I think have just few areas where I really am not interested. And almost anything that comes along, I am sort of a champion dilettante. I like to dabble. I'm deeply interested in a wide variety of things. My wife calls me a generalist. And her definition of the generalist is a person who comes to know less and less about more and more until he knows nothing about everything.

Unger: *"Makes a profession of being a human being."*

Downs: Well, I've said that. That's why I list myself as a professional human being because the most important occupation you can have is being a human being and not just a machine for your greed, or

something to indulge your immature desires. And I like to think that I strive to be a professional human being.

Unger: *"Integrity is indelibly stamped on his forehead."*

Downs: Oh, my. Well, I guess I'm sensitive about anything that would rupture that integrity. That would hurt me more than losing a lot of money or losing friends.

Unger: *Overflows with wit and grace."*

Downs: [laughs] No. I've got to veto that one.

Unger: *"One of TV's most admired personalities."*

Downs: I suppose, if you take a broad enough view. The only really bad press I ever got was an article many years ago, and I found out that the woman who had written the article had done the same thing to David Brinkley and Perry Como, so I figured I was in pretty good company. But that's the only really negative stuff I've gotten. Some people tune in because they hate the personalities as well as because they love him. And I hope that there is a very small percentage that tunes in because they find me annoying.

Unger: *"... surprisingly funny, with a great sense of humor."*

Downs: The "surprisingly" is interesting because I think I give a surface impression of being dead serious about everything but actually I see the world with a great deal of humor.

Unger: *Okay, now we can do some negatives. "Boring."*

Downs: That could be. It was Red Skelton said about me one time: "You ask him what time it is, he tells you how to build a watch." And sometimes I go into detail that may be my enthusiasm but isn't in the sphere of interest of the

person I'm talking to. So, that could be true.

Unger: *"Bland."*

Downs: Well, yes. I'm not going to deny that because I think that again what I try to present is something as unabrasive as possible, and that gives an impression of blandness. If pushed, I'm not a bland person, but I can see why someone might get that impression.

Unger: *"Pseudo-intellectual."*

Downs: The proper definition of "intellectual" is not necessarily an intelligent person, but it is a person who gets his handle on reality through his intellect and not through his emotions. In that respect I am an intellectual.

Unger: *"... an air of superiority."*

Downs: I hope it's not one that I put on. If something like that comes across, I'm lucky. I think that that implies that that's put on, you know, and I try to avoid that.

Unger: *"... a perfect second banana."*

Downs: I don't know. I was in that situation once, you know, for five years . . . That was the *Jack Paar Show*. I started out as the announcer, and then within weeks, I don't know why but maybe he felt he needed comfort, he asked me to come out of the shadows and start the whole show with him. And on occasion he would turn to me for help on something. And occasionally, I was able to answer what he asked. I was not unremittingly supportive of him, but I could give him support. So if that's the job of a second banana, I have to tell you that I did it.

Unger: *"... made announcing an art form."*

Downs: No. Announcing was long since made an art form by great announcers in the past, and I never rose to that level.

Unger: *Then we have both "left-winger" and "right-winger."*

Downs: That's true. My spectrum is so wide as a libertarian, philosophically, I get attacked by both the right and the left.

Unger: "... *Barbara's sidekick.*"

Downs: [laughter] That's funny! Yeah, that's very odd because Barbara has visibility partly because she's a female and attractive, and visibility is easier. And the result is that technically we're equal, but Barbara may be a little more equal in that visibility department.

Unger: "... *seems to want to blend into the woodwork.*"

Downs: Well, there are times when that's the proper thing to do, I suppose. Yes, I think that's not inappropriate.

Unger: *How about "perennial retiree"?*

Downs: I never retired more than once. And I suppose if I ever retire again, it won't be the last time.

Unger: *Any final thoughts?*

Downs: Probably the most important thing to me that I have said here has to do with my strong feelings about the difference between television and radio. TV news tends to be censored while commentators on radio have a much wider latitude. I want to reiterate my feeling that TV news has become unnecessarily centrist.

I hope that in the near future we'll see a wider spectrum of opinion and methods of coverage than we have now. Somebody like Peter Jennings is unsurpassed in newscasting but I would like to see more latitude for him as well as for the other newscasters to make their own opinions clear. ■

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During many years of covering television for *The Christian Science Monitor*, Arthur Unger won national recognition as one of television's most influential critics as well as for his revealing interviews with TV, theater and screen personalities. He is now preparing a book of memoirs and organizing his more than 1,200 audio tapes for *The Arthur Unger Collection* at the Archive of Recorded Sound at the Performing Arts Branch of The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center. All interviews, including this one, will be available for listening shortly.

Sitcom Ruminations...

Television was once a firmly planted thorn in the side of the Humanities, but at many institutions of higher learning, it's heading to the front of the class. A report on an unusual conference of scholars.

By Mary Ann Watson

Browsing through the *New York Times Magazine* one lazy Sunday, the editor of *Television Quarterly* spotted a small item about some “academic jargonizing” that was soon to take place on the campus of Bowling Green State University—a school renown for its dedication to the study of popular culture. The event was a conference this fall entitled “Situating the Comedy: Celebrating 50 Years of the American SitCom.”

Since Bowling Green, Ohio, is not too far off the perimeter of my neck of the woods, and since I have more than a nodding acquaintance with the cultural studies racket, Dick Pack gave me the assignment of checking out the two-day confab. It was, as we're wont to say in the ivory tower, a good gig.

Perusing the program, I was amazed at the number of panels—more than twenty—and the variety of issues they addressed. Some topics were instantly engaging, such as “Pasta,

Passion, Power: Italian Ethnicity and the SitCom." And some were just as quickly off-putting, like "A Semiotic Analysis of the Humor in SitComs: 'Chuckles Bites the Dust' Episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*."

For those who think that scrutinizing sitcoms in graduate seminars is a monumental waste of time, plenty of ammunition could be found at a gathering such as the one in Bowling Green. But those who feel just as deeply that television deserves to be studied as thoroughly as any social institution of enormous power could also find ample evidence of enlightenment that weekend. The full range of quality of thought was represented.

What follows is an impressionistic review of the proceedings—in other words, my take on it, which might, of course, be a completely different one than that of the guy in the next seat.

The first session was on military sitcoms of the 60s and 70s. *McHale's Navy* and *Hogan's Heroes* were part of that odd genre that made WWII seem like a barrel of laughs. But a contemporaneous war was not yet grist for the gag writers mill—nor would it ever be a successful comedy springboard.

One presenter poses a fascinating question: "How did Gomer Pyle avoid Vietnam?" It was a relief to know that I was not the only



Why didn't Gomer Pyle go to Vietnam?

kid who really wondered about that back when teenage boys were regularly being shipped off to Southeast Asia, or when a young man who lived on my block fled to Canada when his draft notice arrived. All these years later, the query rekindles conflicting emotions and arguments.

The ability of a TV sitcom about the Marine Corps to simply tune out a war that was enfolding

every neighborhood in America speaks volumes about television comedy's escapist function in the 1960s. In the next decade, though, starting with *All in the Family*, sitcoms tackled social issues head on.

For almost an hour, panelists discuss *M*A*S*H* and how its plots often mirrored the state of the union. A special guest commentator was on hand for the interchange. Jamie Farr, who played Corporal Maxwell Klinger, listened to the analysis of the landmark series.

Although *M*A*S*H* was set in Korea during the early 1950s, it debuted in 1972, when America was still mired in Vietnam. The anti-war, "Question Authority" sentiment of the series was a perfect fit with its time. The argument was made, however, that the eleven-year series lost its edge in the post-Vietnam years of the show. In the later seasons, a panelist posited, "Reagan's



Did M*A*S*H lose its edge in the Reagan years?

celebration of military prowess results in a softening of the criticism of militarists.”

Mr. Farr, like so many others whose business is to create entertainment, not analyze it, didn't have a great deal of patience with the process. Asked if he'd had other opportunities to hear *M*A*S*H* dissected by scholars, he responded: "Yeah...I've been in these kind of classes before where someone says, 'The reason that dog was barking in the night symbolizes that thing and this thing.' I've heard it before. It just so happens the dog happened to bark and the director said 'Print it!' That's all. People can read into anything."

A local newspaper referred disparagingly to the participants as "junkies of pop culture." It was not an altogether unfair characterization. There was clearly an enjoyment in being in the company of those with shared enthusiasms.

And the people assembled for the sit-com conference, including this writer, have made, or hope to make, careers reading into television programs. So the discussions continued on myriad subjects—

from NBC's "overuse of the wacky, red-headed office worker" to "Why do the teachers on *The Simpsons* always get a bum rap?" to "Why do viewers love *Seinfeld* when all the lead characters are basically unlikable scoundrels?"

Questions of sitcom sexism surfaced, too. Why don't we ever see Norm's wife Vera on *Cheers* or Niles' wife Meris on *Frasier*? Is their status as nonentities a clever comic tech-

nique—or misogyny for the masses? And issues of age also took center stage. How are senior citizens depicted? How are Gen-Xers portrayed? There was even meditation on the true meaning of *My Favorite Martian*.

It seems the only thing we didn't talk about was the show that made this fiftieth-anniversary celebration possible. The landing on Plymouth Rock came in November 1947 with the DuMont network's presentation of *Mary Kay and Johnny*. This live domestic comedy series was about young newly-weds and most of the action took place in their Greenwich Village apartment. The stars, Mary Kay and Johnny Stearns, played themselves. When Mary Kay had a baby boy in 1948, the birth was written into the script—three years before Little Ricky was even a twinkle in his father's eye!



Should Chico have been played by a Mexican-American actor?

A local newspaper covering the meetings referred disparagingly to the participants—virtually all Ph.D.s and doctoral candidates—as “junkies of pop culture.” It was not an altogether unfair characterization. There was clearly an enjoyment of being in the company of those with shared enthusiasms. “Do you remember what building Maynard G. Krebs always wanted to go see being demolished?” someone challenges during a

coffee break between sessions. “The old Endicott Building,” a professor knowledgeable about *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* answers in a flash and is rewarded with nods of approval from those who'd forgotten that bit of trivia.

In the ladies room the conversation drifted to *Murphy Brown*. The consensus among the nose-powderers and slip-adjusters is that the show went straight downhill when Avery was born. “Having a child is the most life-altering experience there is,” one woman explains. “Yet, Murphy hasn't changed a jot.”

“I thought they'd do a Margaret Houlihan on her,” says another, referring to the character Hot Lips on *M*A*S*H* who underwent a major transformation by the end of the series. Everyone agrees that even though they're lapsed fans, they'll look in on the storyline about Murphy's bout with breast

cancer and see if the show redeems itself.

A panel considering the portrayal of Jews in situation comedies offers eye-opening evidence of the social assimilation of the past thirty-five years. We learn that the original pilot of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* didn't fly at the network because the lead character was deemed “too ethnic”—meaning “too Jewish.” The show was recast with a Gentile as the star and the Jewish flavor had to come from the supporting

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cast.

Fast forward to *The Nanny* and the overt portrayal of Jewish identity. Is it progress? Or negative stereotyping? What about the lead character's desperate attempts to snag her rich Gentile boss? Just a cute storyline or a troublesome message for traditional Jewish families? The presentations and discussion provide kosher food for thought.

It's clear that the reason to study sitcoms is that they offer tacit lessons about what is valued in our culture and how to behave in it. They validate and define. So, the most compelling papers at this conference are the ones that address that idea. A presentation entitled "Black Sitcoms of the 1990s: Friend or Foe?" has far more practical value than "A Freud-Rousseauian Perspective on *Seinfeld's* Kramer." To be purposefully arcane about popular programming contributes nothing to our understanding of American life in the twilight of the 20th century.

The after-dinner speaker on Friday night showed clips and slides of 1950s sitcoms, comparing shows with suburban settings, such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*, with that of urban locales, as in *The Honeymooners*, *I Love Lucy*, *The Goldbergs*, and *Mama*. It's a rich discourse that uses television to illustrate contemporary social history.



What if Rob and Laura were Jewish?

The homes and communities of the Andersons and the Cleavers reflect the goals of the Housing Act of 1949 and bolster a national priority of the postwar period—removing women from the paid labor force. This insightful intertwining of television history and American history, though, is still a bit too esoteric for some of the invited representatives of local and regional media outlets. One

businessman at the dinner—who has to worry about the bottom line, not social resonance—grumbles under his breath on the way out, "These academics know just enough to be dangerous."

The next morning's sessions seemed tailored for President Clinton's national dialogue on race. With sitcoms, not personal stories, as the focus, a mixed-race group of men and women speak freely about issues on the screen and how they relate to real life. The point is raised that television's most popular series depict voluntary segregation as a self-evident aspect of American life. That *Friends*, with an all-white cast, and *Living Single*, with an all-black cast, air at the same time is not an innocuous fact. It is a sad symbol of separatism.

The shows rated as doing the poorest

job of representing a multicultural perspective happened to be among the highest rated with viewers—*Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Mad About You*, *Cybill*, *Home Improvement* and *Ellen*. But is the absence of minority characters on those programs any different or worse than the absence of white characters on *Martin* or the many shows on the UPN and WB networks targeting black viewers?

A look at “token” black characters on the shows *3rd Rock from the Sun*, *Boston Common*, and *NewsRadio* reveals the emergence of a new kind of stock character—“the quick-witted sister.” In each case the brassy black women are in subservient positions, doing secretarial and clerical work. But, like Jack Benny’s Rochester, they can always one-up the boss or anyone else who dares to tangle.

The disappointment that a series like *Frank’s Place* was not given better treatment by the network and was not embraced by the mainstream audience is still strong ten years after its debut. In the Fall of 1987, an erudite black man, Frank Parrish, was one of the most interesting characters on prime time. He gave up his university professorship in Boston and took over the restaurant in New Orleans that his estranged father left him in his will.

Frank wasn’t vulgar or crude. He was caring and charming. He had “hopes, dreams, and desires,” a young man concerned about the images of black masculinity on television noted, “just as many white characters have throughout the years on television—and most of us have in real life.”

One scholar uses the term “mediated cultural violence” to describe the assault of many contemporary sitcoms on African-American culture. She reminds us of Bill Cosby’s words of frustration when he addressed the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame in 1992: “I’m saying to you all and I’m begging you now, stop this horrible massacre of images that are being put on the screen, now! It isn’t fair to your children watching because that isn’t us. It isn’t us. It isn’t us...”

In 1994, when *All-American Girl* premiered, Asian Americans hoped it would be a breakthrough from the exclusion and marginalization of Asian characters in TV entertainment and that they would finally be able to watch television and say “It is us.” Margaret Cho, a successful young stand-up comic of Korean descent, starred as the fully assimilated daughter in a family that holds dear the customs of Korean culture.

The comic tension between the values and traditions of the new country and the old seemed to reinforce stereotypes, though, rather than subvert them. It was impossi-

ble, of course, for one show to represent the panoply of the Asian American experience. So heavily loaded with expectations, the series was bound to let down more viewers than it pleased. This discussion ultimately boils down to the question, “Do sitcoms by their nature require broad characterizations that feed racial and ethnic stereotypes?”

Another issue gets raised that fires up debate. A graduate student presenting his

It’s clear that the reason to study sitcoms is that they offer tacit lessons about what is valued in our culture and how to behave in it. They validate and define. So, the most compelling papers at this conference are the ones that address that idea.



Is it “self-reflexivity” or just a good shtick?

research on the portrayal of Italian-American characters comments that some actors, such as Henry Winkler playing Arthur Fonzarelli on *Happy Days*, are not even of Italian descent themselves.

Is this a problem I ask? Isn't that why they call it acting? Would anyone suggest that Meryl Streep should not have been cast in *Sophie's Choice* because she isn't Polish? I think his complaint is carping, but I soon learn that it *is* a problem for others in the room who believe that limited opportunities, especially for people of color, justify ethnic purity.

The Asian cast of *All-American Girl* was mostly non-Korean. Is not knowing the difference between a Chinese-American actor and a Korean-American actor such a bad thing? Am I barbarously insensitive for thinking there are a million more important

things to worry about?

The talk of present-day shows is reminiscent of the controversy that surrounded the casting of Freddie Prinze in *Chico and the Man* in 1974. Mexican-American activists protested that a genuine Chicano wasn't given the part, instead it went to Prinze, who was half Puerto Rican and half Hungarian. In the true spirit of the American melting pot he called himself a “Hungarian.”

Even though a tinge of contentiousness surfaced, the sessions end with a good feeling. The panelists and the participants in the audience feel they've had the opportunity to share thoughts about ideas that matter, ideas that have some connection with life as it's lived. Not so the next panel.

A bright and earnest grad student talks

about “self-reflexivity” in sitcoms—series that had a “show within a show” as the premise, from *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* to *The Larry Sanders Show*. She speaks of sitcoms that “dared to break the fourth wall” as if looking directly into the camera and addressing the audience could get someone arrested. Stinginess, she says, was Jack Benny’s “comedic construct.” Why not just say it was his shtick?

The discussion of “intertextual references about television production” begged the question, “So what?” Assigning a great deal of significance to the obvious doesn’t make it any less so. If “self-referentialism on television” has in fact increased, then what does it mean other than it’s a formula viewers seem to enjoy?

The final session was all about formulas and it mercifully avoided academic jargon. A terrific presentation called, “There Are No New Stories,” documented the “amazing recycling career” of Tom Miller, whose

Miller and Boyett production company has had a string of family-friendly sitcoms. All of the series—including *Perfect Strangers*, *Family Matters*, *Step By Step*, and *Full House*—have shared “revised, reworked, and reinvented situations.” Each, for instance, has had an “eternally popular” camping episode. Clips of different shows using the same well-executed gag about a newcomer sitting in Dad’s seat at the kitchen table make the point dramatically clear. Human nature favors the familiar and TV sitcoms deliver in bushel baskets.

After two days of contemplating the characters, plots, theme songs, and subtexts of situation comedies, the participants gathered for a lovely evening reception and jaw-boned a little more. The three Bowling Green professors who were responsible for putting the conference together—Doctors Angela Nelson, Alison Scott, and Christopher Geist—were warmly thanked and congratulated for their good work.

Murphy Brown Breaks New Ground

“Especially amazing is *Murphy Brown*, considering how hard it had faltered for several years prior to this season and how its current absorption with its protagonist’s recovery from cancer is a minefield that very, very few comedies could get through without getting blown to smithereens. Instead, Candice Bergen’s character and her FYI newsmagazine colleagues are breaking ground every episode . . . by somehow finding humor in her mortality and fight against a life-threatening disease.

“Tonight finds Murphy reeling from the effects of chemotherapy and trying to find relief from her misery late in the episode by sampling marijuana that the usually stodgy Jim (Charles Kimbrough) has bought in the street for her medicinal use. Thus does *Murphy Brown* confront the sizzling issue of marijuana as pain relief for cancer patients—though *in no way* promoting it for recreational use—while also exploring a tenderness between Murphy and Jim without becoming maudlin or manipulative.

“What remarkable work by a comedy. That laughs as well as emotion flow from the script by Tom Seeley and Norm Gunzenhauser and the direction by Steve Zucker-man is an example of the artistry that now separates the newer, better-than-ever *Murphy Brown* from the herd.”

—Howard Rosenberg, *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1997

Even before I sorted through my notes and thoughts about the "Situating the Comedy" conference, the *New York Times* carried an article with the headline, "A Dissertation on *Mr. Ed*?" The report was about a new academic research unit at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University called The Center for the Study of Popular Television. Its director is a young professor named Robert Thompson whose work includes a fine book entitled *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to E.R.*, which was excerpted recently in the pages of *Television Quarterly*.

The undertaking at Syracuse is not without controversy, of course. Naysayers, such as Stephen H. Balch, president of the National Academy of Scholars, borrowing the words of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, call it "dumbing the intellect down."

"Rather than bring students up to the level where an educated person should be," Balch said, "we're bringing education down to their level and filling it up with things that are already part and parcel of their daily life, instead of new challenges."

But this kind of criticism only stiffens the resolve of Dr. Thompson, who claims it's "belle-lettristic apartheid, much of it plain old-fashioned cultural elitism" coming from those with little real knowledge about the subject.

A few days later, *New York Times*' columnist Russell Baker weighed in on the side of the traditionalists with a cutting piece: "Imagine four years of applying yourself to Dagmar and Milton Berle with the same passion other students are applying to *Don Giovanni* and *Moby Dick*. Imagine your despair when, after two years of studying the uses of canned laughter in *I Love Lucy*, the professor assigns you to spend the next two years measuring the qualitative distinction between the canned laughter of *Lucy* and the canned laughter of *Roseanne*. . . . Imagine the humiliation of having to confess that you are majoring

in *Gunsmoke* with minors in *Mister Ed* and *Ding Dong School*."

Baker questioned the idea of "calling junk 'popular culture'" and the wisdom of academia taking it seriously. Personally, I'm torn when I read such debates. Of course a great deal of what's on television is junk. I'm not one of those postmodernists who claim that the World Wide Wrestling Federation and Shakespeare are on the same plane. But don't we want to know what impact the WWF has on our society? I'm curious as all getout.

The simple fact is that in our republic sitcoms matter in the lives of many citizens. Just ask Dan Quayle and Al Gore. Another simple fact is that lousy scholarship has been produced on great works of art and wonderfully insightful research about the most mundane television programming has shed genuine light on the human condition. My vote is that we keep on ruminating. . . . ■

Mary Ann Watson is a professor of telecommunications and film at Eastern Michigan University. She is the author of *Defining Visions: Television and the American Experience Since 1945*, recently published by Harcourt Brace.

CBS



Keep your eye on us.

A Look at Some Contemporary American and British Cop Shows

By Albert Auster

“When constabulary duty’s to be done, The policeman’s lot is not a happy one.”

—W.S. Gilbert, *The Pirates of Penzance*, 1880

When William S. Gilbert wrote those lugubrious words back in 1880 for the operetta *The Pirates of Penzance*, the London police, known as the “Peelers,” were just 52 years old, and the nationwide English police force was barely twenty-five. Yet four years earlier they had already weathered their first corruption scandal, and in subsequent years would face challenges from increased crime, labor unrest, a

resurgent Irish nationalist movement, and a militant band of protesting suffragists, who thought nothing of chaining themselves to the gates of parliament or throwing themselves in front of the king’s race horse. Is it any wonder then that they were unhappy?

In contrast the contemporary American police should be singing, “Happy Days are Here Again.” Violent crime is down nationwide. Indeed in cities notorious for their crime, such as New York, the crime rate is down 37% since 1995, and the homicide rate is at its lowest level since 1968; a fact that hasn’t gone unnoticed by the media.

Nevertheless, despite all this good news, if one takes a look at the police in contemporary TV police shows, their lot still isn’t a happy one. As a matter of fact, added to

their old burden of solving crimes they are also now called upon to grapple with some of our most difficult moral, legal, political and even existential dilemmas.

This hasn't, however, stopped TV cop shows from entering upon what some consider their "golden age." Indeed American police dramas like *Law and Order*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Homicide: Life on the Street*, are the darlings of TV audiences, winding up

Robert Pastorelli
of ABC's *Cracker*



each week in the top ten and twenty Nielsen ratings, and garnering critical responses such as *New York Magazine* TV critic John Leonard's enthusiastic comment that, "so long as *Homicide* is on the air, television is an art form." Complementing these shows and providing further evidence of the generally high quality of the genre, are a number of British shows carried on Public Television and the cable networks such as *Prime Suspect*, *Cracker*, and the legendary detectives (i.e. Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot) featured on PBS's whodunit series, *Mystery*.

Obviously the American TV cop show



Robbie Coltrane plays Fitz in the British TV *Cracker* on Granada Television

has come a long way from *Dragnet* Sergeant Joe Friday's, "Just the facts, ma'am." As a matter of fact, in today's TV cop shows there are no unequivocal facts, just moral and other ambiguities. Take for example *Law and Order*, the longest-running of these series (entering its eighth season it recently won the Emmy for Best Dramatic series).

Ironically, *Law and Order* owes something to *Dragnet* with its docudrama feel, scripts that seem to come straight from the headlines of the tabloid *New York Post*; and its opening narration, "In the criminal justice system..." and twangy guitar chords so reminiscent of *Dragnet's* opening line of "The story you are about to see is true..." and dum-de-dum-dum theme.

Even more conspicuous is *Law and Order's* debt to the "golden age" police drama *Naked City*. Not since the show explored New York City's "eight million" stories, has any series made as much and as good use of the city. On any given day (at costs 20% higher than it would be to film elsewhere) a New Yorker might stumble across *Law and Order's* production crew anywhere from the Battery to the George Washington Bridge. Indeed, if there is a seventh character, to go along with the series' six cast regulars, it is the city, with all its diversity, grittiness, and stories that even allow villains a touch of humanity.

In addition, the show has provided opportunities for hundreds of New York actors. Therefore, just like the older *Naked City* program, where one first caught glimpses of future acting greats such as Dustin Hoffman playing a diamond thief, or the young Robert Redford as a neo-Nazi punk, *Law and Order* provides the opportu-

nity to see major talents (e.g. Christine Baranski in her pre-*Cybill* days as the sister and wife of Mafiosi) that the rest of the world probably won't discover for years.

Law and Order, however, is much more than just the sum of its older cop shows' parts. With its first half hour devoted to catching a criminal and its second half hour to the trial, *Law and Order* is as much a moral mystery as it is a murder mystery.

This is especially true since the program shows no hesitation about tackling stories with complex legal, political, and ethical themes that are more than vaguely reminiscent of celebrated cases such as those of Libby Zion, Bernie Goetz, Tawana Brawley, Joel and Hedda Nussbaum, Dr. Jack Kevorkian, and Katherine Anne Powers.

It is the second—or trial part of the show—that provokes the most complicated responses. Perhaps symbolic of the importance placed on this section, is that

of all the cast changes the show has gone through (and it's gone through as many as the years it's been on the air) the one constant has been District Attorney Adam Schiff.

Played by Stephen Hill (whose career in television goes back to playing the original head spook on *Mission Impossible*), Schiff has elevated intellectual weariness to an art form. Nevertheless, Schiff is no by-the-book D.A. but a solon who is fond of tossing off epigrams like, "There's no Supreme Court of ethics, my friend." Schiff is the one who, though he sometimes strays perilously close to expedience, also frequently attempts to temper justice with mercy.

Compassion is not the key to *Law and Order* and the other cop shows; it is



**Jack Webb in *Dragnet*...
"Just the facts"**

outrage. Nowadays, especially in the post-*Hill Street Blues* era, the illusion that solving the crime restored some sort of social stability is passé. Indeed, while the clearance rate of the average TV cop show would be the envy of any police force in the country, the crimes that are depicted are sometimes so brutal, and the occasional miscarriage of justice so egregious, that they arouse extreme anger among the police.

As a result, the function these cop series have come to perform is less to provide us with reassurance about the stability of the commonweal as they are reflections of our own continuous outrage (despite the declining crime rates) over the anarchy that still exists on many of our city streets; the loopholes in our criminal justice system that allow criminals to go free or get light sentences; and even the corruption on our police forces. Consequently, our TV cops have become as much our Jeremiahs as our Sherlock Holmes.

For example, one episode of *Law and Order* dealt with racism in the legal system and was patterned after the Crown Heights riot and the murder of Yankel Rosenbaum. In this episode, which was called "Sanctuary," (chosen recently as one of *TV Guide's* all-time top 100 television episodes) Ben Stone (Michael Moriarty), who preceded the present incumbent, Jack McCoy (Sam Waterston), as Deputy D.A., was opposed by a Black woman lawyer whose clever legal stratagems included claiming the medieval law of church sanctuary so that the police couldn't arrest her client, and failing that, presenting the specious defense that he was driven to commit the crime by racism and mob hysteria.

These tactics so enraged the usually stoic Stone that he accused her of "infantilizing" her own people. He commented bitterly that, "Just once, I want someone to stand up in this country, and say 'I did it. I'm responsible for my actions, not my television set and not the color of my skin.'"

The purity of Stone's outrage stands in rather marked contrast to the feelings of the detectives on *NYPD Blue*. Now that the initial controversy over the show's obscenity and nudity are behind them, the cops of *NYPD Blue* have gotten down to their real business, which is treating every crime as if it were a personal insult (none of your weary cynicism for these cops).

Ironically, this tone was set rather early in the show's history by the much criticized David Caruso as Detective John Kelly. Caruso earned a great deal of that criticism for his precipitous decision to try and trade up to a movie career. But it was Kelly, with his mannered catch phrases such as "Let it go," "stay close," and "reaching out," who established the tone on the program that solving each and every crime was somehow connected to the working out of one's own personal demons.

With Kelly gone, much of that burden has fallen to Detective Andy Sipowicz (Dennis Franz), his former partner. Early on Sipowicz had his own demons to battle with, such as alcoholism, a bitter divorce, and an estranged son. Then in a perfect bit of series symmetry, he married the assistant D.A., Sylvia Costas (Sharon Lawrence), to whom his cursing, crotch grabbing, "Ipsi this, you prissy little bitch," on the show's first episode, raised one of the red flags that inspired protests from groups like the American Family Association and for a time resulted in 57 ABC affiliates refusing to carry the show. The courtship and marriage to Costas, however, gave Sipowicz (by then a recovering alcoholic) a second chance to reclaim his humanity.

This hasn't, however, lessened his zeal in pursuit of criminals. As a matter of fact, his relentless pugnacity is sometimes an embarrassment, and at others even an annoyance to his more sensitive partner, Bobby Simone (Jimmy Smits). For example, to a tabloid TV reporter who

convinced a cop-killer to surrender with the promise he would be unharmed, Sipowicz said, "Nobody made any promises about your safety, scumbag." On another occasion, to a suspect who complained that Sipowicz wouldn't have hit him if he were rich, Sipowicz replied, "Hey, this is America, I would hit you whether you were rich or poor." Indeed Sipowicz's outrage at crime seems as much his personal pursuit of redemption as it is a professional requirement.

And while there are times when solving crimes seems peripheral to the working out of their own turbulent private lives, the outrage at crime of *NYPD Blue's* detectives is very palpable and very close to the surface. As frequently as one of the detectives is likely to curse out a suspect, they are also just as likely to rail against a system that too often seems to protect the rights of criminals far more than it does those of their victims.

For instance, in one episode one of the detectives replied to a judge who had chastised him with the comment that, "We govern by law. Not your whim." The detective's reply was "Don't tell me how you govern. I work your streets. I clean up after how you govern. How you govern stinks."

Despite this outburst, the courtroom is less likely to be the place for the cops' outrage than the interrogation room. Interrogation room scenes have been a staple of TV police shows from their very beginnings. However, in contrast to the past, when they were most frequently a psycho-

logical battleground, in contemporary series the interrogation room scene is more likely to be the place where the cops express their outrage. Thus, John Kelly once threatened to give a suspected murderer in a series of especially appalling murders "the beating of your life."

Though that moment was unquestionably powerful and would certainly rank high in any pantheon of interrogation room scenes, it would be considered just so much routine to such interrogation scene virtuosos as Jane Tennison (Helen Mirren), Gerry "Fitz" Fitzgerald (Robbie Coltrane), and Inspector Morse (John Thaw), respectively of British television's *Prime Suspect* (Granada TV), *Cracker* (Granada TV) and *Inspector Morse* (Central TV) series. As a matter of fact, these British programs some-

times go the Americans one step better and find themselves confronting their own deepest pain and desires in these scenes.

Certainly, no one outdoes Scotland Yard's Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison for either the brilliance of her interrogations or the intensity of her outrage. Unfortunately, in recent episodes that outrage and intensity seem to have settled into some kind of creative cruise control, with inevitable scenes such as the almost ritualized confrontation between Tennison and her "guv," Detective Chief Superintendent Mike Benfield (John Kernan), where he routinely threatens to take her off whatever case she's on.

Having weathered loutish boozing sexist colleagues, conspiratorial "old boy" networks and an assortment of whiny and caddish lovers to achieve her position, there is precious little hard-charging Chief Inspector Tennison won't do to hang on to a case or convict a criminal.

Nevertheless, having weathered loutish, boozing, sexist colleagues, conspiratorial "old boy" networks, and an assortment of whiny and caddish lovers to achieve her position, there is precious little the hard-charging Tennison won't do to hang on to a case or convict a criminal. Sometimes the implacable tenacity of her outrage takes her to the very borders of unlikeability, as when she orders her squad of detectives to drag a suspect out of bed because, "I want the shit scared out of him," or when she feigns compassion for a dying murderer in order to get a death-bed confession out of him.

At moments like these, while Tennison doesn't necessarily gain our affection, she always manages to command our attention and respect. And nowhere more so than in her interrogation scenes, where she can be by turns icily professional and impulsively passionate. However, Tennison's interrogation scenes are far more than just cat-and-mouse games designed to catch criminals; they are also moments that reveal her own deepest feelings.

In *Prime Suspect: The Lost Child*, which involved pedophilia, and a case very reminiscent of the Polly Klass and Susan Smith murders in the States, questioning the mother of a child who had been kidnapped and found dead, Tennison can barely hold back tears about her own recent abortion. Beside these moments of revealing pain, the interrogation scenes also provide glimpses of hidden passions.

For example, in *Prime Suspect 2*, Tennison had a one-night stand with a black detective, who played the role of a black pimp accused of rape in a mock interrogation with Tennison. During the interview he taunts Tennison saying, "Some white women like it rough." Later on in the privacy of her room, Tennison can barely conceal her curiosity, seductively saying, "What was it you said about white women wanting it rough?"

The messiness of her personal life aside,

Jane Tennison is practically a model of English reserve and propriety in comparison to forensic psychologist Gerry "Fitz" Fitzgerald of the British *Cracker* series (the series that inspired the recent American version on ABC, starring *Murphy Brown's* Eldin, Robert Pastorelli).

Fitz is a fat, chain-smoking, womanizing, compulsive gambler, whose own self-analysis is that, "I drink too much, I smoke too much, I gamble too much. I am too much!"

However Falstaffian Fitz is, however much he disturbs and sometimes alienates his police colleagues, he is also a superb albeit cynical analyst of the criminal mind whose credo is that, "It's the police's job, to seek the truth and justice, good old-fashioned British justice, where a man is innocent until proven Irish."

Confronted by a wide variety of post-Thatcherite serial killers, rapists, and other assorted psychopaths, Fitz's anger at them is as much a reflection of his anger at his own self-destructiveness. As his estranged wife Judith (Barbara Flynn) tells him, everything has become a function of his own "26-year-old terminal bloody existential crisis." Indeed it often seems that Fitz's insight into his own crimes of the heart are his greatest asset in his encounters with criminals.

For instance, in pursuit of the skinhead murderer of a Pakistani storeowner, Fitz candidly confesses to his own racism in order to gain the cooperation of the victim's suspicious family. Later in his interrogation of the killer, whose crime spree started after the death of his father, Fitz breaks down his defenses with reminiscences of his own dad.

In another episode about a contemporary pair of Bonnie and Clyde killers, Fitz gets the female half of the duo to confess with insights into the psychology of self-hatred worthy of Dostoyevsky. At moments like these one forgives, even forgives, Fitz his excesses, in admiration of

his brilliant deductive skill and intuitive genius.

Ultimately, if all of this hard-edged psychological realism begins to grate on you, there is still a place to go where one can get the *frisson* of crime without all the mess and much of the violence, profanity, nudity, of the modern cop show. This, of course, is the old-fashioned whodunit.

Ever since Edgar Allan Poe invented the genre, these grand galleons of crime have sallied forth on their stately rational and reassuring routes. As a matter of fact, even if you had figured out that the butler did it long before the finale, one couldn't help but be fascinated by (or have the need to match wits with) the eccentric amateurs and brilliant policemen, who always came up with the solution to the crime. The other thing you could rely on was that—whether or not the crime was motivated by greed, passion or psychopathology—you could always count on the fact that the solution would be deduced by those charming “little grey cells” of the detective, rather than being beaten out of some poor perp.

Nowadays, with Jessica Fletcher (Angela Lansbury) retired and reaping the rich rewards of syndication, Columbo (Peter Falk) relegated to an occasional movie of the week, those still obsessed with “Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?” have nowhere to turn but PBS's *Mystery* series. There, hosted by the still stunning Diana Rigg, they can get their fill with a legion of such legendary detectives as Hercule Poirot (David Suchet), Horace Rumpole (Leo McKern), Miss Marple (Joan Hickson) and the granddaddy of them all, Sherlock Holmes (Jeremy Brett).

However, ever since 1990 they've also gotten a whiff of something more contemporary in a detective drawn from the pen of Colin Dexter, *Inspector Morse* (John

Thaw). Morse has all of those eccentric tics we've come to love and expect from our favorite whodunit detectives. He is a middle-aged bachelor who adores Mozart (even finding clues to one murder in the libretto of *The Magic Flute*); Bentley motor cars; is a crossword puzzle aficionado—and in perhaps his only bow to plebian tastes, fancies beer and ale over wine.

He likes women, but somehow he never seems to find the right one. Some cynics have suggested he and Chief Inspector Jane Tennison might make an interesting match.

The Morse series—like Kramer of *Seinfeld*, nobody ever uses his first name—takes place in the city of Oxford, and this is more than coincidental. Oxford, a former medieval university town, with its eight-hundred-year-old history, tradition and rituals, is the practically perfect venue for a modern version of the medieval mystery plays, with Morse leading the forces of light against the forces of evil.

In this Manichaean struggle it is usually the modern world that takes a beating for the crime and the other heinous acts committed on the series. Therefore, in nearly every episode we find Morse railing against the contemporary world with comments such as “I hate computers, give me old-fashioned written evidence,” or wistfully complaining that “I am not happy when drugs are involved . . . I can't handle drugs . . . I don't understand why they do it.” Incidentally, in addition to PBS, Morse is seen on a cable network in the U.S. —A&E.

Similarly, Morse eschews painful head-to-head interrogation scenes for more subtle encounters that are filled with remorse and even guilt on his part. Fortunately, Morse has his assistant, the slyly super-competent cockney Detective Sergeant Lewis (Kevin Whately), to rescue him from too much self-pity, as well as happily navigating computers and much else in the modern world for him.

Clearly, our appreciation for the hard-edged cop programs permits us the vicarious pleasure of our police surrogates venting their (and implicitly our own) rage against crime and injustice. On the other hand, our decades-old love affair with detectives like Jessica Fletcher, Columbo, Perry Mason, Kojack, Sherlock Holmes, and Inspector Morse not only reaffirms our faith in the ultimate triumph of good over evil but also supports the constantly beleaguered belief that human reason and intelligence are the equal of any problem. Therefore, these detective mysteries may constitute TV's last bastion of rationalism amidst an irrational sea of sitcom buffoonery, idle talk-show chit-chat, and sports hype.

If the Brits have an American equal with both the passion of Tension and Fitz and the intelligence of Morse, it's the brilliant African-American Baltimore homicide detective, Frank Pembleton (Andre Braugher), of *Homicide: Life on the Street*. *Homicide* has been called, "a *Hill Street* for the nineties," "one of television's all time best police series," and "the best police series ever produced by American television."

Part of its success is due to an ensemble cast which includes Hollywood veterans such as Yaphet Kotto, as the half-Italian, half-African-American, head of homicide detectives, Lt. Al Giardella, and scene stealers such as former standup comic Richard Belzer as the ascerbic Detective John Munch, or Melisa Leo as the tough-minded, independent Sergeant Kay Howard.

The crimes examined on contemporary television cop shows are no longer just susceptible to the skills of criminologists but require the institutional savvy of the social worker, the insights of the seasoned psychoanalyst and the logic of the trained philosopher.

Another important factor in its success is its content, which is made up of equal parts Mamet-like dialogue ("Lie to me with respect"), gritty realism that includes touches like flies buzzing around a corpse, and a look that features leached colors, swooping camera movements and stutter-step editing (the camera frequently repeats the same shot from slightly different angles).

Pembleton's rise to pre-eminence among a stellar group of Baltimore homicide detectives that calls itself the "murder police" is made up of his bulldog determination to solve cases, and his aggressive in-your-face interrogations in what the detectives call "the box." While this might otherwise be the perfect prescription for an American version of *Les Miserables* Inspector Javert, in Pembleton's case it is leavened by a bit of self-deprecating, ironic humor that usually surfaces in his squad car debates with his partner, Detective Tim Bayliss (Kyle Secor).

In those exchanges, which are just as likely to take a philosophical as a personal turn, Pembleton, who grew up in New York City and went to a parochial school built like a "medieval fort . . . where the rules made me feel important," approaches each case with methodical and almost Jesuitical certainty. Whereas Bayliss, whose mother was a Methodist and whose father believed in the Baltimore Colts, is more emotional and ambiguous in his view of the world.

For example, while investigating a particularly brutal murder, Pembleton shocks Bayliss by somehow discovering in the savage killing evidence for the exis-

That New Import

The American version of the British series *Cracker* aired too late for any extended analysis of it to be included in the body of this article. Nevertheless, it raises some interesting points about contemporary American versions of British television programs.

In most of the initial reviews of the ABC series, the critics spent a great deal of time lamenting the fact that Robert Pastorelli was not Robby Coltrane. Any fair appraisal of the American version of the series, however, would have pointed out that in fact Pastorelli did more than a credible job. Though practically a Hollywood nautilus-shaped hard body in comparison to Coltrane's almost 300 pounds of suet, his "Fitz" is just as self destructive and self absorbed. More importantly, however, was Pastorelli's comments in a number of interviews challenging the comparison, by raising the point that even though Marlon Brando did a memorable, even definitive, Stanley Kowalski, it doesn't mean that no one else should attempt the role.

What Pastorelli unfortunately forgot is that *Streetcar* had other assets going for it besides Stanley, such as Tennessee Williams, and Williams's other wonderful characters and language. The same might be said of *Cracker* in that Robbie Coltrane had the very talented and quirky Jimmy McGovern, who created the character based largely on himself, writing his scripts. This was obviously something the producers understood when, for the program's premiere episode, they choose to create an American version of the *Cracker* episode "True Romance," in which Fitz is pursued by an infatuated serial killer. The question then that the comparison Pastorelli with Coltrane really begs is not whether *Cracker* can exist without Coltrane, but can it continue to develop without McGovern.

In the past, Americans had no basis for comparison when an American version of a British series appeared. Who here had ever seen John Speight's *Till Death Do Us Part* before Norman Lear turned it into *All in the Family*? Nowadays, all one has to do is turn on the A&E cable network for the gritty British version of *Cracker*.

— A. A. ■

tence of God ("Look at the evidence. This murder is proof evil exists. If evil exists, then surely God must exist"). Bayliss rejects this bit of casuistry, and when Pembleton encores with the Christian version of the meaning of death ("Death is supposed to be an eternity in heaven, something not to be feared, something to be accepted and embraced"), the incredulous Bayliss asks Pembleton if he really

believes all this. Without missing a beat Pembleton replies, "I wear a bullet proof vest, don't I."

For Pembleton, like his British counterparts, the interrogation room has become the scene of his greatest personal tragedy as well as his professional triumphs. It was there, at the end of the show's fourth season, that he suffered a massive stroke that left him on the verge of death. Though

Pembleton survived, nothing, not even the hair he grew on his previously shaved head to conceal his scars, could hide the emotional wounds that turned this brilliant, dynamic police officer into a wrecked hulk of a man.

Subsequently, Braugher turned Pembleton's slow, agonizing recovery into a limping, stuttering tour de force. And although a great deal was made of his need to pass a firing range test before he could trade a desk job for one back on the streets, Pembleton's own personal test wasn't bull's-eyes but going back into the box and getting confessions.

Certainly, Pembleton and the other detectives on the American and British cop shows have raised the profile of the interrogation room scene, making it the focus of their outrage. However, there is another moment on *Homicide* that stands out and resonates equally for all of these shows, both cop and whodunit. This is a ritual closeup on each episode of a blackboard on which an invisible hand either writes a name in red (unresolved crime) or changes it black (solved).

However, the Sisyphean nature of this image makes it a perfect metaphor not only for *Homicide* but for the other contemporary cop shows and whodunits as well. Thus, whether or not falling crime rates are a temporary respite or a long-term trend, crime, it implies, will always be with us. In addition, the listing of the solved and unsolved crimes is also a symbol of a moral contract between the living and the dead. The terms being that the living will always attempt to gain justice for those who can no longer obtain it for themselves.

The rage of the police that accompanies this covenant is one part frustration over the uphill nature of their job, and another over the fact that the crimes examined on contemporary TV cop shows are no longer just susceptible to the skills of criminologist but require the institutional savvy of the social worker, the insights of the

seasoned psychoanalyst and the logic of the trained philosopher.

Lacking these, and sometimes even solutions to the crimes, all the TV cops and whodunit private eyes can fall back on is empathetic outrage or an almost quaint faith (by contemporary standards) in the efficacy of human reason. This at least supplies the symbolic assurance that someone else feels the victim's pain. It also reaffirms the audience's primal faith in the fact that despite all of life's injustice and tragedy the impulse to do right still survives and will ultimately triumph.

This impulse is confirmation, if anything further were needed, of why the policeman's lot on the contemporary TV cop show is not a happy one. However, all is not yet lost, as even W.S. Gilbert admitted some five years after *The Pirates of Penzance*. In a lyric sung by the title role of *The Mikado* he wrote: "My object all sublime, I shall achieve in time. To let the punishment fit the crime!"

Although most American and British cop shows have generally fallen far short of this goal, they've nonetheless made the pursuit of it a compelling guide to the modern emotional and moral landscape, and in the process created some of the very best moments on contemporary television. ■

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Like, It's Howdy Doody Time...

A dissenter critiques the continued dumbing down of the characters in children's television shows: Quality programming for kids needs more complex, fully developed characters.

By Andy Levinsky

By the time you finish reading this, I may be unemployable, at least in my current role as a children's television producer. That's because I'm about to do something you just don't do if you want to keep working. I'm about to go after a few of the most powerful figures in my field.

Some of America's most familiar, beloved, and profitable children's characters are also among its most empty, and nondescript. Whereas for adult audiences the goal is to create credible, complex, three-dimensional characters, for young viewers the aim is to flatten these very traits until what remains is a stick figure:

straightforward, wholesome, and bland as baby food.

The phenomenon is hardly new. We affectionately recall *Howdy Doody* as a pioneer of children's television, but try to actually come up with a description of his personality, and the only word likely to come to mind is "wooden." *The Smurfs*, now *they* had recognizable human traits—one each. And as far as I'm concerned, the way to spell generic is M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E, a corporate logo masquerading as a cartoon character. For years, I've defied even the biggest Disneyphiles to come up with five adjectives which describe this character we're all supposed to know so well. I'm still

waiting.

Yet the reality never hit me until I saw children's television's newest Stepchild, *Sesame Street*'s Elmo, making a guest appearance on *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*. Long before the whole "Tickle Me" frenzy, something about this helium-voiced shag carpet sample had me seeing red. I couldn't quite put my finger on it until I saw Rosie, one of the most spontaneously funny people on television, struggling to keep up her end of the conversation with a guest who makes Gumby look like Gore Vidal.

When Rosie began hyperventilating over Elmo, I could tell she was setting herself up for a fall. Throughout the course of the "conversation," Elmo seemed to repeat every word his host said in the tone of an adult imitating a child mimicking a baby. (Whenever a children's character speaks in "that funny squeaky voice," watch out! A good rule of thumb: the higher the pitch, the more vapid the character.) Rosie made a valiant effort but even Barbie and Ken would have found this guest empty.

Shortly after, I saw pretty much the same scenario during Elmo's guest shot on *The Frugal Gourmet*. This time, Jeff Smith strained to seem patient and philosophical despite Elmo's incessant, unnerving repetition of his every word. Smith's assistant put up no such act. Maybe playing second banana so long made Craig hypersensitive, but by the time Elmo mistakenly addressed him as "Mister Jeff," the third puppet looked ready to parboil the second.

On *Sesame Street*, Elmo can at least hide behind the nondescript dialogue written for him, but forced from behind the curtain, he's limited to virtually parroting his host. I realize we're talking puppets here, not people, and I don't presume that every sock with a face or line drawing must conform to completely mortal standards. But shouldn't even an imaginary character possess enough personality to

carry on a conversation?

If you think that's such an unrealistic expectation, consider Elmo's own corporate cousins from Children's Television Workshop and the Jim Henson Stable. The reason Kermit and Miss Piggy steal the scenes from their human co-stars is the same reason that a certain rabbit can go one-on-one with a charismatic co-star like Michael Jordan for the course of an entire movie—they're funny, charming, well-defined, and one-of-a-kind. Unique.

Characters of this quality are rarely the ones designed specifically for children. Consider two of the most personable examples, Bullwinkle and Snoopy. In each case, these were characters developed largely for adults and later deemed acceptable for kids only because they were animated (until recently, "cartoons" were thrown into the "children's programming" bin so automatically, it's a wonder Fritz the Cat never was given his own Saturday-morning series).

Even more revealing is the fact that the creators of the most memorable children's characters—people like Jay Ward, Charles Schultz, and Chuck Jones—didn't work in "children's television." And why would they? Gerald Lesser, co-founder of the Children's Television Workshop and currently a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, once observed that in America, children's programming was the thing you'd do if you couldn't get a production job in news or on a sitcom, whereas in Europe, producing children's programming was what you worked your way up to.

Historically, the underlying message of American producers has been not to bother with complex, fully-drawn characters on children's shows. Kids "wouldn't get it," anyway, and parents would just assume they didn't. The ideal character, with this way of thinking, is lack

of character, something bland, comforting, and well suited to the “Drink Your Milk” life lessons these figures were designed to convey.

Part of the motivation for “dumbing down” children’s characters comes from the notion that fully-developed personalities somehow lead to violence or other inappropriate action, and that we’re protecting our kids by keeping their entertainment “innocent.”

It’s the old adage that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, and while this notion sells children short, it’s at least well-intentioned.

A more cynical explanation for bland characters lies in who’s creating them. These days, a studio or network executive assigned to children’s programming is more likely to come from the marketing division of a toy company than the creative side of a production company. The industry’s new breed of “marketer/producers” don’t so much create characters as select them from column A (hot color: purple), column B (cool species: dinosaurs), and column C (all-important merchandising opportunities).

When was the last time you saw a new children’s series proposal, for commercial or even public television, without a prominent section on licensing? The question is not simply whether the lunchbox and action figures are released six months before the series or three months after, but whether the focus on products has shifted the emphasis from the creative side to the marketing side.

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In case the answer isn’t obvious, try mentioning the name Barney or Elmo to a child and I’ll bet they rattle off five physical characteristics before they get one personality trait. The problem isn’t that they don’t get it . . . it’s that there’s nothing to get.

So why are these characters so popular in spite of it all? I discovered part of the answer while shopping for “anything Elmo” for my two-year-old niece (she erupts into belly laughs the second he comes on screen—what can I say?). It

seems a wild pack of students had already cleaned out every last piece of Elmo merchandise . . . *high school* students! It’s a phenomenon I later saw explained in a *Boston Globe* article about “Toddler Teens,” adolescents who, pressured to grow up too fast, regress to the protection of childhood.

Adults, too, are reluctant to come right out and acknowledge that we don’t like some symbol of childhood. If we fail to appreciate Elmo or Barney or Mickey, we’re basically admitting how far removed we’ve

become from our youth. All this I can understand. It’s the kids I’m still trying to figure out. Unlike teens looking for their security blankets, and adults out to prove that they’re still in touch with their “inner-child,” children can afford to be discerning. How come they gravitate to such empty vessels?

Maybe the answer lies in the lack of choices we provide for them. Between parents’ desires to smooth out any rough edges and salespeople gaining creative control, we’ve been turning out some

pretty dull characters.

Recent FCC mandates and some new children's channels may increase the number of options, but expanding the pool doesn't guarantee genuine diversity. That has to come, at least in part, from a change in our definition of "quality" children's programming. Good shows, whether for adults or children, are more than just good messages, and good characters are more than just vehicles to deliver those messages.

There needs to be programming that falls somewhere between the Eat-Your-Broccoli world of Barney and the Eat-My-Shorts world of Bart Simpson.

There have always been plenty of examples from the live-action world that strike this balance—honest and entertaining characters from Mister Hooper to Mister Rogers who deliver important social messages without reducing themselves to mere messengers.

Credible animated characters are a bit more rare, but at least one company seems to be on the right track. Series like *Doug*, *Rugrats* and *Hey Arnold* hold the interest of children and adults alike with strong, recognizable characters. All have become critical as well as commercial hits for Nickelodeon, whose tag line might well be, "If it's not good enough for your parents, it's not good enough for you." Maybe there's a message here. ■

Andy Levinsky is a freelance writer and children's television producer in Boston.

Crossing the Line in Television News

The creator of 60 Minutes says that if Bill Paley, Leonard Goldenson and David Sarnoff were still around they would be standing fast on an act of faith: that crossing the line between news and entertainment is often dishonest and always bad broadcasting. But he believes that news can be worthwhile and profitable at the same time.

By Don Hewitt

We have a big stake in not letting broadcast journalism drift away further than it already has from what is *always was*, and what we *always thought it would be*. When broadcast journalism is not what it purports to be, that's not good for either of us. If you have a story to tell, you want it told by people the public has confidence in, and I fear that confidence is eroding—that a grand and glorious American insti-

tution is in danger of fading from view. Broadcast journalism, as America knew it—relished it and depended on it—in the 40's, the 50's the 60's and a good part of the 70's—is becoming a lost art and may all but vanish by the end of the century.

The network news divisions that once aspired to be *to broadcasting* what the *New York Times* was to print, are now content to be *to broadcasting* what picture magazines are to *print*—respectable in many aspects, but hardly the end-all and be-all to

print journalism, as television's magazines have become the end-all and be-all of broadcast journalism. Let's face it, man does not live by Marv Albert alone.

And where the measure of how CBS News, NBC News and ABC News were doing used to be the kudos that they got from their colleagues and competitors for doing it as well as they did. Today, the measure of how they are doing is what kind of promotable nonsense they can come up with to draw people away from the sitcom that's opposite them on another channel. How many times can one television magazine go looking for "Who Killed Jon Benet-Ramsey?" and come up with the same answer? Nobody knows, or at least, nobody is saying. News competing with entertainment has got to mean cutting corners. You can't compete with a sitcom unless you have no compunction about being *something you aren't*—or, at the very least, being *something you shouldn't be*.

And what, for God's sake, makes a network think, if there aren't enough good writers, producers and actors in Hollywood to fill a primetime schedule, that there are enough good news producers, news writers and news broadcasters in New York to do it? Believe me, there aren't. The plain, honest-to-God, rock-bottom truth is that the network news divisions have—at the behest of their bosses—bitten off more than they can comfortably chew, or digest.

Would that television were blessed with more Bob Schieffers, more Tim Russerts, more Sam Donaldsons, more Cokie Robertses, it would be a cinch to fill the hours the networks call on their news divisions to fill, but, with the exception of the occasional Phil Jones or Jim Wooten, it isn't. It isn't blessed either with a whole hell of a lot of Mike Wallaces, Morley Safers, Ed Bradleys, Steve Krofts and Lesley Stahls. Where are they? Damned if I know. Except I do know that when Mike,

Morley and I tune in *60 Minutes* from The Old Television Home, chances are the broadcast will open with "I'm Ed Bradley ... I'm Steve Kroft ... I'm Lesley Stahl—followed by—I'm Christiane Amanpour, I'm Bob Simon, those stories and a Few Minutes with Andy Rooney's grandson tonight on *60 Minutes*."

Okay? How did *60 Minutes* stay true to its roots and last this long on the top of the heap? Some people say it's our protected time slot. That certainly helped launch us, but staying on top of the heap, once we were launched, came from knowing who we were and what we were and what was expected of us by Bill Paley who, in lock-step with another broadcasting genius named Frank Stanton, was part P.T. Barnum—and part Henry Luce.

No one had ever before played a dual role like that and no one probably ever will again . . . He was, on one hand, the showman who gave America Jack Benny, Jackie Gleason, Lucille Ball, Alan Alda, Carroll O'Connor, Mary Tyler Moore, Dick Van Dyke and Red Skelton. And on the other, the *newsmen* who gave America William L. Shirer, Edward R. Murrow, Howard K. Smith, Elmer Davis, Eric Sevareid, Charles Collingwood and Walter Cronkite.

Admittedly, it was a different time and, admittedly, television was a different business. In New York, where the networks had, and still have, their flagship stations, the dial stopped at 13. Channels 1, 3, 6, 8, 10 and 12 were empty. Two, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11 and 13—that's all there were! But even today, in what is a veritable television bazaar . . . with the dial full, all the way up to a 100, and reaching for 500 . . . I would like to believe that the founding fathers—CBS's Bill Paley, NBC's David Sarnoff and ABC's Leonard Goldenson—were they still around, would have stood fast on what was, for them, an article of faith: News is news and entertainment is entertainment and crossing the line between them is often dishonest and always bad

broadcasting! What worries me . . . would worry them, and should worry everybody, is not that, today, that line is crossed and crisscrossed repeatedly, but that nobody gives a damn that it is.

With so much of television now little more than *anything for a Nielsen number*, the three nightly newscasts—Rather, Brokaw and Jennings—are still doing a pretty damned good job of telling you what happened in the world today . . . Ted Koppel's *Nightline* is still putting some meat on the bones of what you learned earlier in the evening. CBS's *Face The Nation* . . . ABC's *This Week* and NBC's *Meet The Press* continue to put some meat on the bones of what you learned earlier in the week. And each week CBS's *60 Minutes* continues to have more on its mind, and on its plate, than the mugger, the maimer and the misfit of the week. But, with a lonely exception here and there, in that plethora of so-called "news" magazines and syndicated talk shows that have all but taken over network TV, the kind of tasteful and important journalism that made CBS News, ABC News and NBC News giants in their news business, is, for the most part, gone; and nobody seems to care.

On that subject, I can understand television wallowing in the Princess Di story . . . we're pretty good at "wallowing." Fact is, we're better at it than the paparazzi we keep looking down our noses at and treat

as if they're befouling our nest. Remember the pictures of a grieving Prince Harry at the gates of Balmoral Castle, kneeling down to look at the floral tributes to his mother and reaching up to grasp the hand of the Prince of Wales? A very private moment between a little boy and his father . . . turned into a very public one . . . by the paparazzi? No, by us, by CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN and every respectable newspaper in the world.

Should we have shown it? Of course, we should have shown it, but let's stop painting ourselves as somehow more respectable than the paparazzi when—more often than we want to acknowledge—with very *different* cameras we're after the very *same* thing: candid, unposed, moments to share with *our* voyeurs as opposed to *their* voyeurs . . .

The beautiful people don't mind the paparazzi when they serve their purpose. You want to publicize a favorite cause, make sure your press secretary (press secretary if you're royalty . . . press agent if you're not) sees to it that all the stops have been pulled out to have the paparazzi lined up, cameras at the ready, when the limousines pull up. If you fancy yourself one of the beau-

tiful people and a paparazzo isn't interested in taking your picture, you ain't.

Now, how did TV come down with a disease worse than a galloping case of the paparazzi? I think the floodgates were opened when the three networks that used

In today's television world the plain fact is that the present carload of TV news magazines that followed in the wake of *60 Minutes* would have no interest in, and wouldn't know what to do with an Ed Murrow, a Walter Cronkite, an Eric Sevareid, a Charles Collingwood, a John Chancellor, a David Brinkley or an Ed Newman. Today the network news divisions are less concerned with covering news than filling time.

to have something called "Standards and Practices," allowed their owned-and-operated stations to dig down in the mud and come up with reality-based syndicated talk shows that are little more than cesspools overflowing into America's living rooms—and I'm not talking about Oprah, who does what she does as well as anyone in television. The others, for the most part, make what's on the networks' flagship stations no better than what's on the supermarket's magazine racks.

We who work for the networks can't hide behind the fact that those shows are syndicated, and not shows we, ourselves, produced. We bring them to you. And, quite frankly, I think we should be ashamed that the best reality-based programming the stations owned by the network of Dan Rather and *60 Minutes*—the network of Peter Jennings and Ted Koppel—the network of Tom Brokaw and Tim Russert can come up with, are so lacking in both standards and practices.

When I was growing up in television, there was nothing the networks wanted more than to get the FCC off their backs. What they dreamed of was a television world in which they would be free to regulate themselves. What they woke up to—when they finally got what they wanted—was a television world in which nobody regulates anything and everybody bumps into everybody else, and TV magazines make deals with publishers and publicists to help them sell whatever it is they're selling by promising them kid-glove treatment, including letting press agents dictate how much time and how many appearances their client will get.

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Newman. Today the network news divisions are less concerned with covering news than filling time—inexpensively, I might add.

Witness the call Ed Bradley got the morning after he launched a new CBS News program called *Street Stories*. The call came from the top dog at the network whose only comment was "Ed, I think we have a gold mine." Not a word about whether the show was good, bad or indifferent or how Bradley had handled it . . . only "Ed, I think we have a gold mine." And I fear *60 Minutes* is responsible for that.

We were the ones who turned TV news into a gold mine. And now, for too many of the TV news magazines that followed in our footsteps, being a gold mine is what they go to sleep every night praying for: "Our Father who art in Chicago, Nielsen be thy name," which is intoned, not only before they go to sleep, but every hour on the hour during "Sweeps Week," which, if you work in television is "Holy Week"—the week they take the local ratings.

Which brings us to ABC's big exclusive this year: Cambodian dictator Pol Pot coming out of the jungle? No! Ellen De Generis coming out of the closet. And I would venture a guess that ABC couldn't have cared less if she'd come out of the closet or stayed in the closet—as long as she did it during Sweeps Week. And that's no rap at ABC. The same thing would have happened had Ellen been on CBS or NBC.

Looking at the glut of television news magazines, there isn't anyone in this room, is there, who believes the men who run CBS, ABC and NBC woke up one morning and said to themselves: "You know, I don't think television is doing enough to inform the American people"? What they said to themselves was: "Can you friggin' believe the money that *60 Minutes* makes?" . . . which happens to be

true but not by design.

What we started out to do 30 years ago was produce a television journal that would be the broadcast counterpart of *Life* and *Look* magazines. And if there's anything we pride ourselves on more than being the number one broadcast in television once in the 70's; once in the 80's and twice in the 90's, and staying in the top ten for twenty years, it's that never once did we pay the least bit of attention to a "Sweeps Week" and never once did we do anything to attract a rating. Ratings sought us. We never sought them.

I had the great good fortune to come into television early, when it wasn't very good, but it was at least respectable and *trying* to be good. It was 1948 when I left a good paying \$100-a-week job at Acme Newspictures to take an \$80-a-week job in a fledgling industry that had yet to prove that it could even get off the ground, let alone fly.

In 1948 television was being watched mainly in appliance store windows, behind which enterprising salesmen tried to talk customers who came in for vacuum cleaners and air conditioners into indulging themselves in the latest in home appliances . . . a black-and-white Westinghouse or RCA or Dumont. Tell you how long ago it was: How many people here own a Japanese television? A Mitsubishi, a Panasonic, a Sony? Well when I started in television Sony hadn't even built its first TV set. Back then, Americans were just beginning to feel at home with air-conditioning and the idea of a tel-e-visioning—watching little pictures in a box—was more than a little overwhelming. Besides, in 1948, the only little picture in the box worth watching was Milton Berle.

Who knew that a Walter Cronkite, a Jackie Gleason, a Lucille Ball, a Red Skelton, a Mary Tyler Moore, a Barbara Walters, a Mike Wallace, a Huntley and a Brinkley, a *Wagon Train*, a hospital named M*A*S*H, a frog named Kermit and a

horse's ass named Archie were all there just offstage waiting to go on?

Who knew that one day, if you turned your set on after midnight and went dial-hopping, you'd find on one channel a guy telling you how to grow hair? . . . On another, a guy telling you how to grow rich? . . . On another a guy telling you God loves you, but he'd love you more if you'd send him some money? . . . And that if you couldn't reach God, you could always reach Dionne Warwick, who charges more to reach a psychic than Pat Robertson charges to reach God. And if there's a *700 Club* to reach God, and an 800 number to reach a psychic, there are umpteen numbers to reach a girl—courtesy of Time Warner, the amalgamation, God help us, of two American giants, Warner Brothers and *Time Magazine*, who for a good part of the night in New York City, at least, on Time Warner Cable, Channel 35, goes out of the movie business and the magazine business and into the whorehouse business.

Back in television's infancy, before the preachers, the hookers and the psychics moved into the neighborhood, I was there, one of the toddlers, in what, in effect, was a playpen where we made television shows out of Playdough. As I said, we weren't very good, but we were respectable . . .

Somehow, it never dawned on us that we were going to grow up. We thought it was always going to be like that—black-and-white and preserved for posterity on a grainy, out-of-focus, un-watchable film called a kinescope. Videotape hadn't been invented. The first time I heard about it I thought they were kidding. Pictures on tape? Ridiculous! I thought they were kidding about launching a rocket into space. In those days space was something you never had enough of. And orbiting a satellite—what ever the hell that was—to bounce a television picture off it and reach

everybody in the world? What nonsense!

Cable was beyond my ken. Wire up the whole country? You're joking. If you lived in an area where you got more snow than picture, and more ghosts than real people, try a roof antenna. If that doesn't work go back to your radio. If you wanted to change the channel, you got up and you changed the channel. It didn't seem like a big deal.

For the handful of us in 1948 putting out television's first daily 15-minute newscast—*Douglas Edwards with the News*—it was enough that a picture, no matter how snowy, got from Studio 41 in Grand Central Station all the way to an apartment house in the Bronx. Today, it's not enough that the picture gets all the way to an apartment house in Chi-

na. That Chinese family isn't going to get up and change the channel. They've got a remote to change the channel for them. So they can sit in a living room in Xian and look at a CNN newscaster in Atlanta who looks right back at them—thanks to a teleprompter that enables the kind of people Lyndon Johnson used to say couldn't walk and chew gum at the same time to read a script and look at you at the same time.

In 1948, only movie moguls had screening rooms. Today with a videotape store in every shopping mall in America, everybody's a movie mogul. Maybe we're not as healthy as we used to be . . . because a videotape store has moved in where the drugstore used to be.

Cameras that operate without cameramen . . . microphones that operate without wires . . . and yet, do we entertain the public

and tell stories any better than *Studio One* did in the 1950's, when the microphones had wires and the cameras had cameramen, and everything was delivered by coaxial cable? In truth—*three coaxial cables*—about which Ed Wynn once asked: "If the coaxial cable is round, how come the picture comes out square?"

Those three coaxial cables were in effect railroad tracks. One belonged to CBS. One belonged to NBC and one belonged to ABC. If you wanted to go anywhere, you went on our tracks, or you didn't go. What the engineers saw coming, and the poobahs didn't, were tracks in the sky—the *Star Wars* paraphernalia that's now s.o.p. in television—the transponders and satellites that took away the hold CBS, ABC and NBC had on broadcasting. In

the 1950's we were the big three, convinced that *we always would be* . . . just as Ford, Chrysler and General Motors were convinced *they always would be!*

But just as Detroit didn't see the Hondas and the Subaru and the Toyotas crowding them off the road, we didn't see the CNNs and the C-SPANs, and the ESPNs crowding us off the road. Both of us could have used a better rear-view mirror.

Now about telling stories as well as *Studio One* told them . . . telling stories has been the end-all-and-be-all of *60 Minutes*. I am convinced that it is your ear more than your eye that keeps you at a television set. It's what you hear more than what you see that holds your interest. The words you hear and not the pictures you see is what *60 Minutes* is all

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about. Our formula is simple—four words every kid in the world knows: “Tell Me a Story.” It’s that easy.

Watching television is the ultimate in “easy.” You don’t have to get dressed, you don’t have to find a babysitter, you don’t have to find a parking space, don’t have to wait in line, don’t have to buy a ticket, don’t have to find a seat. And since you also don’t have to climb over anyone to walk out, that’s easy, too. Television producers can live with your walking out. What they can’t live with is your not coming back. That’s what happens when stories are told by people who don’t know how to tell a story in real life, as well as on television.

Pictures are, of course, essential to television, but a picture is not *always* worth a thousand words. Sometimes, often times, it’s the other way around.

I don’t remember an Oscar for Best Picture every going to a film that won only for Best Cinematography.

To be sure, an out-of-focus picture leaves a lot to be desired, but out-of-focus sound is a catastrophe. If you don’t know how to communicate with words, you’re in the wrong business. And I fear there are too many people today in my business who are in the wrong business.

Now, there’s got to be someone out there saying to himself or herself: What is he grouching about? He had it made under Paley . . . had it made under Tisch . . . and today has it made under Mike Jordan.

I did and I do. And I know it—know that only a company with a healthy bottom line can afford to give a news producer a top-of-the-line salary, like the one they give me, but my point is, does a network news division have to scrape the bottom of the barrel to stay in business? I don’t think so.

Thirty years ago, when *60 Minutes* went on the air, a marvelous man named Bill Leonard, who later became President of CBS News, gave *60 Minutes* its marching

orders: “Make us proud,” he said.

That could be the last time anyone in television ever said to anyone else in television “Make us proud.” Because he said “Make us proud” and not “Make us money,” we made them a bundle. Because he said “Make us proud” instead of “Get us ratings,” we got him ratings—the best ratings anyone ever saw before for a news broadcast and probably ever will again.

You see, news can be worthwhile and profitable at the same time. Maybe not as profitable as it once was, because today the field is so crowded and the audience is so fragmented. But certainly not as meaningless as some of it has become in the scramble to gobble up a share of that fragmented audience. Maybe it’s time to put the E back in entertainment where it belongs and the N back in news where it belongs and do something for the networks’ S.&P.—their souls as well as their *pocketbooks!*

It all comes down to credibility. That’s something we know to be just as important to you as it is to us. If you believe that old saw that the scariest words in the English language are “Mike Wallace and a *60 Minutes* crew are in the waiting room,” try that on Dow Corning, who found Steve Kroft and a *60 Minutes* crew in their waiting room . . . waiting to tell the story of how they were being taken by lawyers who were manipulating juries into ridiculously high settlements, with no scientific evidence to back up their breast-implant claims.

When the facts of a story run counter to what the public thinks the facts are—as in what happened to Dow Corning—that’s a *60 Minutes* story. *60 Minutes* is not anti-business. *60 Minutes* is business—and a very successful business—because for thirty years we have been supported by the kind of companies you here today represent, companies that don’t countenance anything that isn’t what it purports to be.

When Mike Wallace reported that the gas tank on a Ford Pinto—a product that was advertised on *60 Minutes*—had a tendency to explode, Ford cancelled its commercials—for one week! The next week they were back! Apparently, they thought a news broadcast that told it like it was—even at the expense of a client—was the kind of broadcast they wanted to be associated with.

Neither of us—we nor you—wants to be associated with anything less. ■

Don Hewitt is the creator and executive producer of *60 Minutes*. This is the text of a speech he gave in October 1997 to the Institute for Public Relations Research and Education.

Quote...

Di and Dissent

“We all have to answer very serious questions about the way we responded to Princess Diana’s death. It’s clear that the news brought a genuine surge of emotion and distress to millions of people around the world. What was startling, and even sinister, was the way that the media fed off the response and helped to create a mood which seemed almost cult-like in its intensity. Dissent became impossible as the hysteria mounted; as Diana appeared to be moving along the path to beatification, choosing not to grieve was presented as an act of betrayal.

“This was not a tabloid-driven phenomenon. Television broadcasters everywhere reinforced the public mood with the same soft images, the same reverential tones, the same willingness to question whether we were indeed mourning the passing of a great public servant as opposed to a tragic and vulnerable figure.”

—Richard Lambert, *CJR Columbia Journalism Review*,
November—December, 1997

... Unquote

Nothing Sacred: the View Closeup

Few dramatic series in recent years have aroused as much controversy as Nothing Sacred, ABC'S program about a big city Catholic parish and its priests. It doesn't take the Bing Crosby/Barry Fitzgerald "Going My Way" route—far from it. This essay-review is by the head of a Brooklyn religious community whose career also includes many years as a professor of film and television.

By Sister Camille D'Arienzo

Recently at a ceremony in Tucson, Arizona, Bishop Francis A. Quinn commented that "A priest today... may be the only animal fully aware that he has been put on the endangered species list." The only connection between Bishop Quinn's observation at a real live ordination and the endangered television series on the ABC network about life in a mythical parish is that both the ordination of men to the priesthood and the first

episode of *Nothing Sacred* took place in September, 1997.

When I came to watch that beleaguered program and to write about it, I couldn't help thinking about the Bishop's homily about the "endangered species list," and to reflect, too, on other points he made in that talk. His words had special resonance for me, as I followed episodes in this remarkable new TV series.

"There are two special challenges today," he said. "The first is the very confusion



The St. Thomas Parish staff: Ann Dowd (Sister Maureen); Scott Campbell (Father Eric); Kevin Anderson (Father Ray); Brad Sullivan (Father Leo).

about the meaning of priesthood. Several decades ago one definition was this: A priest is justice on a ball diamond; fortitude with a breviary in his hand. He has the trust of a child, the kindness of a best friend, the authority of an encyclopedia and the versatility of a commando.”

The characters who bring vitality to *Nothing Sacred*'s inner city parish of St. Thomas embody all of those qualities; the episodes (six at the time of this writing) establish the environment and situations through which the parish staff, led by

three priests, Fathers Leo, Ray and Eric, and a woman religious, Sister Maureen (“Mo”), live out their commitment to serve God’s people through sacraments, prayer, counseling and friendship.

Is their behavior always perfect? Of course not. Neither drama nor life can produce or endure perfect people. The series, moreover, is about the struggle to find and hold fast to God in the midst of conflicting values and a wide array of—I can find no better word—temptations. This is the world Catholics believe Christ

entered to teach and redeem, to love unconditionally.

An early review of the series was contained in a Sunday homily by Deacon Don Zirkel. The preacher is a former editor of *The Tablet*, the official newspaper of the Diocese of Brooklyn. Zirkel observed:

“Interesting drama—like interesting Scripture—is about the ordinary, the run of the mill, or the wishy washy. Both the media and the Bible include conflict and disagreement.

“Some think *Nothing Sacred* is the best public relations thing that has happened to Catholics in a long time. Others are upset because it presents a human instead of a perfect Church. The varied reactions show that ABC’s parish is true to life. We Catholics have lots of disagreements—about liturgy and music, birth control, the death penalty, the role of women, politics, welfare, mandatory celibacy, freedom, authority, and much more.”

For this reviewer, it is the struggle with the complexities of life and teachings of the Church that ignites the passions that make compelling drama.

For my analysis, I will enter into the life of the *Nothing Sacred* mythical St. Thomas Parish as if it were the one in which I worship. I intend to measure it against the observations of Bishop Quinn.

There are two special challenges today. The first is the very confusion about the meaning of priesthood.

In one episode, Sidney, the Jewish accountant who left a lucrative position to work for the struggling Catholic parish whose values he upholds, has agreed to let a film crew rent the church for its “Bride of Satan” production. His hope is to soften the script; Father Ray, the 34-year-old frenetically busy pastor, isn’t paying much attention to what’s going on. When Sidney attempts to introduce him as

pastor to the seductive female producer, Ray, without stopping on his way to repair a pipe, mumbles, “priest . . . plumber . . .”

He might have added: maintenance man, counselor, traffic controller, spiritual guide, parochial buffer, lonely man, remembering his past life as lover and party animal. When Ray finally does grasp what the film maker plans to shoot, he sends the crew away, saying, “This is a house of worship, not a movie set.” As much as the parish needs the revenue, the priest won’t prostitute its holy place.

There is no dearth of people ready to tell Father Ray what kind of priest he is. The mother of a teenaged receptionist, Rachel, assails him, blaming the priest for her daughter’s abortion. She expected the priests to prevent it. She claims her right to have her parish priests uphold the teachings of the Catholic Church. She targets Father Ray: “You’re no kind of priest at all.”

When Ray replies softly that he’s doing his best, she shouts: “Your best is never going to be good enough. Everybody knows that. This parish deserves better.”

A priest is justice on a ball diamond...

Poor people facing eviction by an irresponsible landlord chain themselves to a banister on the church steps and conduct a sit-in inside. In response to their plight, Ray calls the errant landlord, Joe Quinn, who happens to be a parishioner who contributes significantly to the struggling church. After a fruitless appeal to logic and law, Ray, in a strong reprimand, warns Quinn that he faces excommunication unless he makes the building livable for the tenants.

The threat of excommunication is certainly an act of desperation on the priest’s part. It is a better expression of Ray’s passion for justice than of rational procedure.

Justice demands that each one receives what is due him. A primary right is respect. In another episode a local politician bent on closing the soup kitchen arrives with a TV news crew. As the camera pans the line of people waiting for food, Ray orders the cameraman not to photograph them with this explanation:

"It's the policy of this Church that no one who comes here for food has his picture taken."

(A priest is) fortitude with a breviary in his hand...

“**B**uilding your endurance. That’s the secret of everything,” Father Ray says at a kitchen gathering. Episode after episode, we discover prayer to be the foundation of his endurance. Ray’s restlessness is evidence of his relentless search for God and the meaning of his own life. The thick book he holds is more likely a Bible than a breviary, but his prayer is an essential component of his day. He may be bored and tired, but he is faithful. He celebrates Mass reverently, rejoices in the baptism of a baby, falls to his knees in church and when, in a segment about Halloween, he recites the traditional “Saint Patrick Breastplate,” recommitment to Christ is in every fibre of his being.

Ray’s vulnerability is as endearing as is that of the program’s wounded wisdom figure, Father Leo.

An older, more traditional priest, Leo was deeply disturbed about Rachel’s abortion — to the point of treating her coldly. This is a man who remembers when “churches were full and priests were kings.” Despite his valiant—and generally successful—efforts to be a good priest, he grows discouraged. He suffers from rejection by a longtime priest friend who is undergoing a crisis of faith and from his beloved engaged niece who has chosen someone else to perform her wedding ceremony — and an Episco-

palian at that

Overcome by these events, tempted to take a drink after a long, successful battle with alcoholism and feeling unimportant to his parishioners, Leo decides to leave for a while to take time with God. He knows he doesn’t stand a chance at sobriety or ministry without that. Before departing, he finds Rachel in the rectory kitchen. He thought he’d convinced her not to have an abortion, pledging the help of the entire staff, either to find an adoptive family or to collectively care for the child. Rachel’s change of mind hurt him deeply, personally. Yet he was able to say from his heart:

“I’ve come to ask you to forgive me for turning my back on you.”

“I let you down,” the girl replies.

“I was wrong for judging you,” Leo counters. “It’s not for me to judge. Only God can do that.”

She asks if God has turned his back on her. The priest comforts her with assurance that God never turned his back on anyone and that “God loves us through one another.”

Although Ray in his confessional counseling had included both the Church’s teaching and the advice to follow her conscience, challenged by Leo, he approaches Rachel with the following paraphrased sentiments:

I’ve spent a sleepless night over you and your unborn baby. When I think about you, Rachel, about your goodness and grace, your intelligence and beauty, I can only conclude that the world would be a better place with your child in it.

*He has the trust
of a child . . .*

Nothing Sacred’s first episode, seeded with intimations of future plots, finds Father Ray called to the parish school to attend to an adolescent boy named Mark who has struck a teacher. The priest confronts a boy filled

with rage. Ray doesn't lecture or seek explanations. He invites the boy to spar with him. His energy spent, Mark sits on the floor with the priest and slowly confides his anger over his mother's death. He says he'd like to just disappear. Ray replies that if he were to do so he "would leave a big hole in the world."

The bond established between the pair isn't enough to heal or prevent the hurt imposed by Alex, Mark's relentlessly demanding father. A suicide attempt lands Mark in a hospital's intensive care unit. While his distraught father seethes outside — partially through envy at the relationship between Ray and his son — the priest administers the Sacrament of the Sick, which is given to people who are gravely ill. It is intimate and spiritually healing.

Moments later Alex replaces Ray at his son's bedside. The life supporting systems evoke remorse and heartrending sobs in the father who kneels before his son, who seems as still as death. In what may be the most beautiful and holiest gesture ever portrayed on prime-time television, the son reaches slowly for the vial on his night stand and anoints his father's bowed head.

(A priest has) . . . the kindness of a best friend

Sister Maureen, who doesn't stand a chance of being ordained, possesses pastoral qualities. Forgiveness is a recurrent theme — forgiveness of others, of self and of God. In one episode, Sister Maureen finds a reclusive parishioner unable to extend forgiveness in any guise. Camille, a deeply depressed, withdrawn parishioner, has spent a year with her back turned on her husband, her friends, her parish church and God. When Mo accepts Camille's husband's invitation to try to break the wall of silence, she follows her hunch and, slowly gets Camille to admit

that she had been raped a block away from the church.

At length, she vents her anger: "I took it for granted God was watching the neighborhood. I don't love God anymore."

It is clear she no longer loves herself either. In an extension of friendship and solidarity, Mo confides her own experience of rape and the subsequent self-loathing that caused her withdrawal for a time. She gives Camille permission to shout her anger at God. "Nothing is stronger than God," Mo says, "not even your demons." At length, a forgiving Camille regains her faith.

(A priest has) the authority of an encyclopedia

Knowledge resulting from years of study and wisdom derived from intensive ministering to people who are in distress or who are undereducated may give the impression (or illusion) of encyclopedic authority. One of the appealingly realistic components of *Nothing Sacred* is that much of the authority in each of the characters comes from the pooling of their spiritual/intellectual resources. They work at problems together, the better to resolve them.

In the "Rachel has an Abortion" episode, Ray, who had been reasonably secure about the quality of his counseling, has to reenter his psyche after a confrontation with an irate Father Leo. The agitated Leo challenges Ray's clarity in telling Joe Quinn, the unjust landlord, that his actions were sinful and deserving of excommunication, while advising the confused young teenager, Rachel, to follow her own conscience about the taking of the life of her unborn child. The ability of the parish staff to share honestly and deeply increases their individual and collective authority.

Where Ray speaks with the greatest

authority is, in my estimation, when he challenges the young man who has gotten Rachel pregnant. He comes to Ray as a penitent, wanting only to be absolved of sin. He's protecting himself, as is evident in his explanation: "It's just this thing that happened."

Ray explodes: "This thing that happened! You had sex. You were drunk. You were lying, taking advantage of a girl!"

No easy absolution here. Absolution requires a determination to change one's behavior, to make amends.

(A priest) has the versatility of a commando

For evidence of versatility I nominate Mo, Sister Maureen. If you saw the episode, you're probably already conjuring up the Wedding Reception. The day that was Meant-To-Be-Perfect suffered one calamity after another. The church basement, the site of the parish soup kitchen, becomes an unwanted substitute for a proper reception hall. The food, intended to be stored in the refrigerator, is unwittingly served to the poor people who come for their meal. So is the wedding cake.

Mo, upon realizing the multifaceted fiasco, whips into creative alternatives. She orders empty boxes the size of cake layers to be tiered and covered with white icing. The top layer is constructed of Twinkies or some such. As far as the bride and groom are concerned, the day is saved.

Those who believe that the greatest versatility lies in the realm of spirit and values may agree with my nomination of Ray in the episode portraying Grace's Funeral.

Leo discovers Grace, a loyal and lovable elderly parishioner, dead in the first pew. Her final instruction was that Ray conduct her funeral. That infuriates her husband, Joe, who perceives Ray as the symbol of all that

was destroyed by the Second Vatican Council. Ray is, for Joe, the anti-Christ. Further, Ray doesn't wear clerical garb. He discontinued Benediction and rosary devotions. Because of Ray and his ilk, Catholics no longer heard sung the beautiful *Panis Angelicus*, whose exact interpretation may have escaped them, but not its meaning...

Ray knows the man's sentiments and is aware, too, of the tension between the daughters and between them and their father. It appears to Ray a no-win situation, and he tries to get out of it. To Leo, he admits, "I'm not a very good priest."

The response comes: "Well, Bing Crosby's dead and so is Barry Fitzgerald, so it's up to you."

"Commando versatility" is visible in Father Ray's use of pre-Vatican II black vestments in place of the currently preferred white ones, and when Joe enters the church belatedly and hesitantly, Ray signals the organist, who intones the *Panis Angelicus*. Joe joins in the singing. Peace is for the moment restored.

Speaking of choice, I have chosen to tape and watch every episode of *Nothing Sacred*: in the evening is too early for many of us busy people. Another related personal choice is to challenge anyone who approaches me with a petition to boycott the series because this endangered series about endangered priests endangers the Church that has survived two thousand years of the war between good and evil, from within and without. My weapon is a question: "Have you seen the program?" So far the petition pushers have not.

To those who trust leadership of the boycott's organizers, I advise the following: Those who circulate the petitions may do so out of personal convictions; however, in asking you to condemn a series you haven't seen, they are inviting you to perform an act of intellectual

dishonesty unworthy of your intelligence or integrity.

Sociologist Father Andrew Greeley called the show “the best public relations coup since the film *Dead Man Walking*. He continued, “*Nothing Sacred* illuminates the compassion of priest and humanity of the church with rare clarity. It may have its flaws, but Catholics should celebrate.”

I conclude with an observation from Don Zirkel, another fan quoted earlier in this piece: “Some want every teaching shown with catechism-like clarity, or else they hope to put the series off the air. If they succeed, will we be better off, back in the TV wasteland where so few people have any religious values whatsoever? If so, no one will try another Catholic program for a long, long time.” ■

Sister Camille D'Arienzo is President of the Brooklyn Community of Sisters of Mercy, and is Vice President/President-Elect of the National Leadership of Conference of Women Religious. For 20 years, she was a professor in the radio and TV department of Brooklyn College. She is heard regularly on WINS radio, New York, as a commentator.

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TV's Magazines— Fact or Fiction?

By Jack Kuney

The annual birthing ritual which holds the television community spellbound each Fall has come and gone. I try to keep up with each new season, but as the sitcoms get younger and I get older and older, my patience for previewing gets thinner and thinner. Demographically, I am more attuned to the magazine shows that periodically broke into the rating books this past summer, displacing CBS's legendary *60 Minutes* in the top ten. So I took a month's hiatus from my normal Fall viewing—mainly pro football—and immersed myself, in that emerging phenomenon, the “magazine” show.

My hope was to be able to connect with certain trends I perceived in this genre and comment on them, as opposed to exercising any critical impulses I would normally be prone to use. There were questions which needed to be answered: What are television “magazines”? What makes them different from the news? Why the sudden aura of success—the emergence of

more and more magazine shows with higher ratings? Are the shows news or are they entertainment? Or both? Where is all this leading us as program producers? What does this trend mean for television?

The weeks in which I began my concerted viewing were not typical. The terrible tragedy of Princess Diana had just occurred and everyone jumped on the bandwagon. According to the *Video Information Show Report*—an industry news letter that monitors every news and information magazine show—there were 360 segments on Diana broadcast in the month following her death. That seems to be a news magazine record. The biggest offender was the syndicated show *Extra*. It aired 62 segments about her in the four weeks following the tragic accident. On the network end, *Dateline* NBC topped out at 26.

This might explain NBC's early September rating success, when their overall performance, including six editions of *Dateline*, swamped ABC's debut of *Monday*

Night Football. That trend continued throughout the month. ABC's *Primetime Live* was still living off Diana's image in early October with two stories on the late Princess. One, an interview with Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, who bills herself as "Diana's best friend," by Diane Sawyer.

It was a very touching, moving piece, but a rehash of what we had been told many times. At that late date, it was, in my view, too much already. Sam Donaldson closed the same show with another Di story, an interview with a young woman who was a bridesmaid at Diana's wedding to Prince Charles. It was overkill.

Was this news or entertainment? The Di story had already been reported and re-reported. What realistic purpose—except a grab for ratings—did a last few tears shed over Diana's bier do?

Larry Grossman, former president of NBC News, always an omniscient voice in the television wilderness, told me recently:

"The so-called network news magazines have little relationship to the traditional coverage of hard news. Basically, what they do is provide low-cost, nonfiction feature entertainment in prime time. News magazines offer comparatively inexpensive, generally uncontroversial and very profitable programming for the network, helping to amortize the cost of the network's news divisions. One reason they are produced by news and not entertainment is that they fall outside the restrictions which limit how much prime time the networks can own and program. Under the label of news, they have unlimited ownership (with syndication rights) and control."

Mr. Grossman goes on to explain there was really no reason why these programs could not be produced by the networks' own programming divisions, or purchased, as many are, from syndicators. Over 90% of the nation's individual televi-

sion outlets now go to programs like *Entertainment Tonight*, *Hard Copy*, *Extra*, *Inside Edition*, *American Journal*, *Real TV*—tabloid-like replicates of the prime-time magazines—to fill their pre-network hours.

It appears as if everyone in broadcasting is trying to recreate the news as entertainment-friendly. By its very nature, then, news becomes an anachronism, because its prime thrust should be informational, whether entertaining or not.

In reviewing my notes on the more than 100 individual pieces I saw in my month of viewing "magazine" shows, I became most aware of the infinite variety of material these programs had to choose from, and often wondered why certain choices were made. For each of the five programs I spent most of my hours with—*20/20*, *Dateline*, *Primetime Live*, *60 Minutes*, and *Public Eye*, Brian Gumble's new magazine series for CBS—the same material was available, yet each was remarkably different. Strangely, there were very few specific duplications or repeats.

I found only one story in my month of viewing that received "exclusive" treatment by three of the five programs, and that was a story about several teenagers in Pearl, Mississippi, who are being charged with a plot to kill, in what was called a "Satanic Campaign." It was a "juicy" piece, sensational in all its aspects; front-page news for the tabloids, lost in the back pages of the *New York Times*. No reason left in my mind why this piece was chosen—as a sure rating-getter. Journalism be damned.

One other story, also replicated, again involved teenagers. Some youngsters acting as pranksters, whose late-night beer drinking antics included the removal of some roadside stop signs, which unfortunately caused the death of one of their peers. What's more exploitable than

drunken teenagers? A sad story, but hardly front-page news.

Much that I viewed was open to criticism, but I also saw some fine investigative journalism, with good use of hidden cameras. *Dateline* covered the last moments of a videographer who had stayed on Montserrat as the volcano was blowing, putting his own life in jeopardy. *Primetime Live* did a segment on the current crisis in North Vietnam, with Diane Sawyer actually on scene. It was a great piece of reportage, obviously gotten under the most difficult of circumstances.

Public Eye did their version of the same story in their preview program, but Brian Gumbel sitting in a chair of a CBS studio didn't have the same impact Diane Sawyer did on scene.

Primetime Live also produced a good piece on the selling of human organs obtained from Red Chinese prisoners, who were executed for that purpose. A shocking story using lots of hidden camera. Absolutely first rate. I know it's a generalization, drawn from only a month's viewing, but it struck me that ABC's work in the field is heads above the work of both NBC and CBS.

Incidentally, it was a bit startling to see Diane Sawyer on scene in Vietnam, as there is very little movement by anchor stars in and out of the studio chairs, except for *60 Minutes*. Almost all the leading figures in prime-time magazines are studio-bound, and do very little but lead-ins and lead-outs and an occasional interview. The programs all make much of being "live," but all that's living is the talking head. Most of the actual segments are presented by the network's second eche-

lon, most of whom are quite capable news people.

In my month of viewing, I watched a lot of *Dateline*, which seems to be taking up more and more of NBC's late evening lineup. Jane Pauley, a personal favorite of mine, and Shane Phillips, the Arrow collar ad, share the billing with Tom Brokaw, Katie Couric and Maria Shriver. In the twelve *Datelines* I watched, Brokaw ap-

peared only once, and Katie Couric only once, and that a brief postlude to a story, and Shriver never at all. A bit of a cheat, I might say.

I believe one of *60 Minutes*' great strengths is in the way they use their people, not only evident by their presence, but in how carefully they are integrated in their individual segments. The legwork is done by producers in the field, of

course, but the transition to air is so smooth, it's difficult to discern the fine line when the on-air personality takes over.

Mike Wallace stands at the head of the class. I was particularly impressed by an interview he did with the Republican maverick from Arizona, Sen. John McCain. There was no one's office to crash, but he still conducted a masterful interview about Congressional spending with McCain. It was great reporting, right off the front pages; he asked all the right questions.

Very few producers have faith in their own stories. News becomes secondary. They look for the lurid, the salacious, the exploitive. Lead story on one *Dateline*: a love affair between a mature teacher and a 13-year-old student. Lead story on Brian Gumbel's new show, *Public Eye*, was a rehash of the Sgt. Gene McKinney rape story; the lead story on his second show was titled *God's Work*, about how the

It's tough to be original, and good investigative reporting takes time—something your average magazine show apparently doesn't have—and a budget that will indulge reporters in the field.

Unitarian Church offers sex education courses to their children. The Unitarians were intent on educating their children within the confines of the church; Gumbel was fixed on what was “kinky.”

Over and over again, I found a preoccupation with old shopworn stories. Staff researchers must be kept busy culling over the files of men jailed—rightly or wrongly—and death-row inmates. Plus, of course, searching medical journals for the latest “disease of the week.” It’s tough to be original, and good investigative reporting takes time—something your average magazine show apparently doesn’t have—and a budget that will indulge reporters in the field.

As a result, many of the magazine segments are re-examinations of stories which ran last week, last month or last year in some magazine somewhere, in some newspaper, or in some obscure journal. They are often editorial assemblages, putting a new spin on something, a different moral judgment, a different slant, always looking for ways to connect with the audience. The producers obviously feel content on most stories is limited, so it has become routine to make silly and stupid connections by other means.

Dateline is a notable example. Almost every item on the show is featured on some sort of *Dateline* banner: *Dateline Spotlight*; *Dateline Follow-up*; *Dateline Feedback*; *Dateline Family Focus*; *Dateline Animal Kingdom*; *Dateline Discovery*; *Dateline/People Magazine Exclusive*; *Dateline Hidden Camera Investigation*; *Dateline Question of the Week*; and finally, most inane of all, the *Dateline Time Line*, a particularly useless gimmick, where Jane Pauley shows some footage from the recent past and asks the audience to guess what year these incidents occurred. Jane Pauley deserves better than this.

There is obviously a shortage of good

stories out in wonderland, not enough to cover the demand, so producers desperately search for other ways to connect with the audience. The line between news and entertainment grows dimmer and dimmer, and the programs become conduits for promoting the networks’ programs, repositories for new books and new movies and even new products.

First stop on the grand PR tour, the television magazines. I was particularly amused by *Primetime Live*’s treatment of Brad Pitt, in town to promote his new movie, *Seven Years in Tibet*. In a piece graphically titled *The Sexiest Man Alive*, ABC crowed about the exclusivity of their booking, and Diane Sawyer gave him kid gloves treatment. The inarticulate Pitt bombed, just as he did in all of the many “exclusive” appearances he made during the week’s flacking of his movie. He should have been “exclusive” for *Entertainment Tonight*.

What should magazine shows aspire to? I would suggest that each producer of a prime-time magazine program have, as required viewing, the classic CBS series *Sunday Morning*, developed under the leadership of a brilliant producer named Shad Northshield, with Charles Kuralt as a literate anchor. The current host, Charles Osgood, is not Charles Kuralt, but then who is?

I recognize very few of the names on the credits anymore, but standards remain surprisingly high, as the show seeks out fresh and engaging stories, avoiding the hokey and the trite. They’ve had their share of budget cuts, but the impact of this wonderful series continues. Tradition and talent will out.

Well, I would expect this report to have little impact on any of the three major networks’ gatekeepers. Television’s magazines are firmly implanted in the marketplace, and any decisions about “magazines,” their content and continuance, will be made there.

I must add that the week following my month of intensive viewing became "sex" week for the networks. ABC began on Monday night with a documentary, produced by their news department, titled: *Love, Lust and Marriage*. Let me continue by quoting Walter Goodman in the *New York Times*:

"The bug is evidently catching. This week the entire NBC news operation comes down with *The Sex War: The Tension Between Men and Women*. *Meet The Press* displayed the first symptoms yesterday with an unsparkling argument between a feminist and a (male) conservative about differences in the way men and women view the world. *Today* succumbs this morning with a report on how the

sexes communicate in the workplace; tonight *Dateline NBC* brings us a female helicopter pilot who is asserting a constitutional right to breast-feed, and the NBC *Nightly News* and MSNBC promise to be in a fever about the subject all week. Hey, NBC, try counseling."

Ironically, as television news magazines proliferate, TV news bureaus the world over are being cut back, documentaries on important issues are disappearing from network schedules, and hard news budgets are being reduced. What more can I say? Bring back the news, as news. ■

Jack Kuney has been a director, producer and executive in both local and network television. He was also in charge of the Master of Fine Arts in Television program at Brooklyn College.

Bookends...

Most current writing about television seems to be characterized by an assertive cynical savviness. Where once the journalist Lillian Ross caused a sensation by revealing the commonplace scheming and manipulation that was a large part of making of even a "quality" movie such as *The Red Badge of Courage*, lately it has become almost a staple of Sunday newspaper magazines (and of much other journalism about television) to describe even more cynical and manipulative workings that regularly take place behind the scenes of a popular television show. Still it strikes me that this determined savviness and determined concentration on the behind-the-scenes working of the industry is merely another aspect of an intrinsically sentimental and even passive view of commercial television.

In other words, the critical perspective is often cynical or what is called "tough-minded," but for the most part it seems to be part of a general embrace of the television industry by critics and audience alike, who while sternly describing behind-the-scenes manipulations also pay dutiful and sometimes scholarly heed to "the industry's" grandly announced doctrines and imperatives.

—Michael J. Arlen, in *The View from Highway 1*, essays on TV published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in 1976; reprinted by Syracuse University Press 1997.

A Source is a Source, of Course, of Course . . .

Encyclopedia of Television

edited by Horace Newcomb

Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997.

By Dan Einstein

By the end of the 1960's, nearly everyone had noted television's impact on the world and had formulated an opinion on the matter. However, it was not until the following decade, some fifty-odd years after the birth of the medium, that inquiry into its long and varied history began in earnest.

For the past twenty years we have been inundated with literally thousands of volumes on television's past. Everything from innocuous picture book excursions down memory lane to significant scholarly efforts line the shelves of libraries and bookstores. But while systematic inquiry into television's history has only recently come into its own, the medium could never boast of having anything approaching a comprehensive encyclopedia.

In 1977, respected author and journalist Les Brown published *Les Brown's Encyclopedia of Television*, a useful but rather limited volume that has been twice

revised, most recently in 1991. Brown's work was a serviceable overview, which was only partially successful, but which would suffice until something better came along.

Finally, that something better has: a comprehensive, 2,200-page, lavishly illustrated, three-volume

compendium entitled, appropriately enough, the *Encyclopedia of Television*. Produced under the auspices of one of the country's major television archives, Chicago's Museum of Broadcast Communications, and edited under the guiding hand of one of

the nation's foremost scholars of television history and content, Dr. Horace Newcomb, Professor of Communication, University of Texas at Austin, the *Encyclopedia of Television* is a major step forward in television scholarship, one that will certainly become the standard television reference work of first record for many years to come.

Over three years in the making and utilizing the contributions of more than



Review & Comment

300 distinguished scholars, the *Encyclopedia* is a remarkable achievement: a major reference work that provides descriptions, histories, information and analysis on over 1,200 people, programs and topics related to television. It aims, and largely succeeds, at being the most useful and comprehensive work of its kind, a basic reference tool that can serve as a firm starting point for students, scholars and researchers, for anyone interested in, as editor Newcomb writes, "exploring and understanding the significance of television in our time."

Now, while one can argue that a true television encyclopedia cannot be complete unless it takes into account the entire television world, one must recognize that the subject is simply too vast for even the most complete of volumes. While necessity demands that choices be made, readers can only hope that those choices are the correct ones.

Newcomb's first task was to assemble an advisory committee and set them toward the almost impossible job of organizing the *Encyclopedia* into a comprehensive and cohesive whole; of reducing thousands of people, programs and topics into a manageable group that would still bring out the richness and diversity that is television, while at the same time providing an accurate account of the medium from its beginnings to the present day and into the future.

The question Newcomb posed was simply, "What knowledge of television is most worth having?" While he is smart enough to know that no single publication could ever hope to come up with a complete answer to that most basic of questions, he also knows that any decent encyclopedia offers a "multitude of begin-

ning points from which to trace the intersections, conflicts, struggles, and convergences that can be applied, used as partial explanations for particular events, policies, developments, even for the existence of particular television shows."

A decision to focus the *Encyclopedia* on the major English-speaking television-producing countries was made early on. Consequently, the vast majority of entries deal with television personalities, programs and subjects drawn from Australia, Canada, England and the United States. However, not wanting to blithely ignore the international scope and influence of the medium, the editor included additional extended essays that offer valuable historical and descriptive insights into television in a number of other countries (France, Greece, Italy, Scotland, Egypt, Israel, Japan, etc.). Perhaps someday an additional volume will deal with international television in greater depth. It is most definitely needed.

In any event, as we search through the three volumes, we are confronted with a multitude of well-written, well-researched and informative entries that, in essence, provide a tour of television in the English-speaking world. Essays on individuals cover performers, directors, writers, producers, executives and governmental policymakers from British writer Michael Abbensetts to pioneer inventor Vladimir Zworykin. Each entry includes a full and detailed biography, credits, and an evaluation of the particular person's contributions to television.

Specific series or individual programs (*Absolutely Fabulous* to *Zorro*) were selected for inclusion as being in some way seminal to the history of television, whether they were worldwide hits

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(*The Cosby Show*, *Dallas*, *Bonanza* for example, but no *Baywatch!*); cult favorites (*Twin Peaks*, *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*); perennial classics (*The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Twilight Zone*, *The Singing Detective*); or landmark programs (*Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy*). These entries include lists of principal performers and producers, a programming chronology, and a critical essay that assesses the program's place in television history.

Topical entries cover a wide range of subjects, from companies, institutions and organizations (A.C. Nielsen Company, Federal Communications Commission, the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences); to particular programming genres (Westerns, Quiz Shows, Documentaries); to issues central to the medium's history (Violence and Television; Racism, Ethnicity and Television; Children and Television; Blacklisting); to technology (Videotape, Kinescope, Betacam, Digital Television); to historical events that have a relation to television (The Army-McCarthy Hearings, the JFK and RFK assassinations and funerals); to governmental, legal and regulatory issues (the "Freeze" of 1948, the Betamax Case).

Each entry concludes with a bibliographic list of important references for further reading and cross references uncovering perhaps unknown connections, which can aid in forming a more complete picture of a particular subject. So, research into *Kukla, Fran & Ollie*, for example, begins with an overview of the series. Then one is steered to entries that directly relate to the program (Burr Tillstrom, Fran Allison, Children and Television, Chicago School of Television) and to related subjects (Jim Henson, the

Muppets).

As one delves further into the volumes, however, many subjects turn up missing. Over the span of a couple of weeks, I browsed through the books searching for entries on a number of people and programs that arose during the course of my workdays. Although I did locate many, I was disappointed not to find others that I would have expected to see: among them, director George Schaefer, the man responsible for dozens of wonderful *Hallmark Hall of Fame* dramas; game-show producer and quiz-show scandal figure Jack Barry; veteran personalities Art Linkletter and Dennis James; director Alfred Hitchcock and his long-running *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*; comedian Jerry Lewis; and shows such as *Shindig*, *People Are Funny* and the aforementioned *Baywatch*.

I realize, of course, that even the most complete encyclopedia cannot cover absolutely everything, and trust that readers will be as forgiving, recognizing what a singular achievement these massive volumes represent.

The *Encyclopedia of Television* is certainly not for everyone. The price alone (\$300) eliminates most casual researchers and TV buffs. It is, however, a must for libraries and archives. Any television reference section will be much the poorer without it. As Bullwinkle J. Moose (not an entry!!!) used to say, "A very useful book." ■

Dan Einstein is the Television Archivist at the UCLA Film and Television Archive and is the author of *Special Edition: A Guide to Network Television Documentary Series and Special News Reports, 1955-1979* and *Special Edition: A Guide to Network Television Documentary Series and Special News Reports, 1980-1989*.



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A major textbook for the info age

Media and Culture.

An introduction to Mass Communication

By Richard Campbell

St. Martin's Press, New York

By Richard Pack

The author's grandmother gets a note in the preface, as well she might. She watched a great deal of TV in her time, roaming from Lawrence Welk—who lives on in the PBS rerun sky like some Sci-Fi hero—to soap operas and other favorites like *Dallas*, *60 Minutes*, the national news, and studio wrestling. Fast forward to her grandchildren who started out with *Sesame Street* and Mr. Rogers and eventually introduced their uneasy parents to MTV and *Beavis and Butt-head*. The family that stays together also occasionally watches television together, so over the years the Campbell clan watched *The Simpsons*, *Northern Exposure*, and the Chicago Bulls.

Richard Campbell appreciates that the mass media “. . . are part of everyone's life story”, but he warns against getting mired in instant-nostalgia, whether for old reruns of reruns, old comic books, or old movies. “But to understand our lives in the context of a larger world,” he writes,

“we need some distance from personal history. We need to stand back from our experience and view the media's impact through a larger lens.”

Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication is an impressive title. It could be the label for a post-graduate course or a scholarly seminar. But he has the equipment for such a difficult assignment, including the requisite long lenses, and a few for close-ups. To produce such a textbook in the digital age, is complex and demanding.

How do you write and compile a textbook that manages to examine the key technological developments from the Industrial Age to the Information Age; from the printing press and telegraph to television and the Internet? Along the way in this *Dot:Com* era that intrepid scholar must deal with newspapers, books, television, radio, cable, video games, CD's, CD-ROMs, e-mail, computers, communications satellites—and rock and roll. All this, plus some economics, politics, and philosophy.



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Somehow, Professor Campbell brings off this challenging assignment with authority, and style. In any league, academic or general, he's a first-class writer. No jargon here—no hype. He is not a disciple of the technical futurists, the academic pundits, the showbiz savants. Probably, in some campus circles, with their over-emphasis on high theory, his kind of text would be underrated, because it avoids in-group prose that only a privileged few can understand.

Sure, he knows the lingo, and can explain, for example, "The linear model of mass communication: *Messages—Channel—Gatekeeper—Feedback*. But whether he is analyzing the differences between hi-culture and low-culture, or the problems of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, or how a sitcom is produced, he is always accessible. As it goes about the task of challenging students to study, and to think about, the history and future of the media, this is a book that uses language as common currency, rather than as an exclusive passport to specialized knowledge.

The organization of *Media and Culture* is another of its assets. It is divided into five main parts: "Mass Media and the Cultural Landscape" (introducing key concepts and critical processes for investigating issues, and media industries, and media convergence's); "Sound and Images" (surveying media students know well: music, movies, cable, radio); "Words and Pictures" (the first media—print, books, newspapers, magazines); "The Business of Mass Media" (examines advertising and public relations, how they're organized and the social and ethical issues their practitioners face); "Democratic Expression and the Mass Media." (What is news? Ethics and news media, invading privacy, conflicts of interest, First Amendment vs. Sixth.)

These five sections are each divided into

two or more chapters. A typical chapter, "Television and the power of visual culture" has a wide range: early technology and the development of TV; main programming trends in the TV age; the decline of the network era; the economics of television. Another, "Cable and the Specialization of television" focuses on early technology as well as the development of cable, and includes cable's franchising "wars", franchising frenzy, regulation and Federal cable laws, must-carry rules.

Although Campbell asks his students to become "cultural activists" by investigating and challenging the power of the mass media in daily life, and their influence on democratic life and consumer culture, this book can be a practical career guide as well. The would-be newspaper reporter, for example, will find material on changes in styles of writing, and the broadcasting oriented students will find useful notes on how syndication works, including such in-stuff as barter vs. cash deals.

This author's expertise is more than theoretical. In addition to a distinguished career as a university teacher, he has worked as a print reporter and broadcast news writer. He was recently appointed director of the School of Journalism at Middle Tennessee State University.

Case Studies also contribute importantly to both the theoretical and the practical aspects of the text, dealing with an individual, industry or problem that captures the spirit of a particular medium. Among them are Madonna, the WEB, television violence, women and advertising, TV ratings, *60 Minutes*, rap music and copyright violations, radio and TV talk shows. The titles of these profiles are invit-

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ing—"Ted Turner Cable Power Broker and Global News Broker." And this one: "The Alternative Journalism of Dorothy Day and I.F. Stone." —Great journalists both, but Ms. Day has recently been suggested for Sainthood. I. F. Stone has not.

Although some media scholars often ghettoize the subject of ethics by treating it as a separate isolated chapter near the end of the book, *Media Culture* integrates meaningful discussion into its larger story. Each chapter zeroes in on important ethical problems—usually under the heading of *Examining Ethics*. Among the topics covered, are TV's impact on community values; teens and talk shows; Nike and sneaker commercials; hidden news cameras; book censorship; challenges confronting journalists. An especially intriguing section is "How *Time* Covers Time Warner."

These features are presented with striking impact, combining both text and graphics to make points and motivate students to examine the issues. *The Jenny Jones Show* is the core of an examination of "Teens and TV Talk Shows." A dramatic-color photo taken off the TV screen reveals one of the sad moments of that program with the television caption supered beneath: DONNA . . . SCOTT . . . JOHN . . . plus ominous words from the programmers: "Donna's setting up her friends Scott and John . . . Scott has a secret crush on John . . ." And so it started, on the way to a tragic conclusion, a truly provocative case history.

Typically, the author uses other compelling devices to deepen the impact of the information. In this segment, there's a display list of "Talk TVs Top Shows," that aids in probing the *Jenny Jones Show*, and other tabloid series—a sidebar in color

headed "Talk Show Titles:"

- Honey, I have a secret
- Housewives vs. Strippers
- Should parents do time for their kids' crime?
- Low-life Teenagers
- My teen can't go without sex
- Irresponsible Teen Moms
- My daughter looks like a slut
- My mom is a slut
- Mother ran off with her daughter's fiancee
- You're too old to be dating a teen.

The culture of journalism chapter on "Values, Ethics and Democracy" confronts students with this formidable question, targeting reporters: "What is the moral and social responsibility not only for the stories they report, but for the actual events or issues they are shaping for millions of people?"

It might be tough for students who are assigned the Campbell textbook to nod off in class, because the challenging Review Questions will keep them reading, thinking, and arguing. Here's another: As we move from a print-oriented Industrial Age to a digital-based Information Age, what do you think the effects will be on individuals, communities and nations? . . . Do you read international news, and if not, why not?"—If I were a TV network or local News Director, I'd like to sit in when a bright class kicks that one around.

And then there's a lively exercise which some real network executives should eavesdrop on, to hear what the kids might dream up: "What changes would you try to make on what America watches, if you were a network executive?"

A class in communications, or a work-

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ing pro in any media, could spend a lot of time productively reflecting on this teaser: "What evidence of demonizing the media have you seen in your own life? Draw on comments from your parents, teachers, religious leaders, friends. Discuss whether these criticisms have been justified."

A promotional blurb publishers once used for certain books was "...lavishly illustrated." Well, *Media and Culture* is just that. The Campbell broth is a rich and meaty one, of photos old and new, sketches, historical drawings, technical layouts, and even cartoons. The fascinating graphics are never employed, as gimmicks; instead, they underscore points, document ideas and issues and serve as a useful adjunct to the text. On occasion, they add some sharp humor.

Among the illustrative devices which run throughout are small boxed quotes, strategically placed in the book's wide margins; sort of mini-sidebars, running a gamut that includes Frank Sinatra, Camille Paglia, Marshall McLuhan, George Bernard Shaw, George Burns, Edward Bernays, George Will, Ernest Hemingway, H.L. Mencken, and Chuck Berry.

My favorite quote is by Herbert Hoover who said: "I believe the quickest way to kill broadcasting is to use it for direct advertising." He said it in 1924 when he was Secretary of Commerce.

Aristotle is also quoted, indirectly, via Alfred Hitchcock, in a sidebar comment in a passage on television drama: "Aristotle once said they a play should have a beginning, a middle and an end. But what did he know? Today, a play must have a first half, a second half, and a station break."

A cultural perspective is, of course, the unifying concept which runs throughout Campbell's book and enables him to bring

into focus so many complex and diverse elements. "An understanding of culture is indispensable for understanding the contemporary mass media as well as their history," he writes. "Culture provides the framework in which all the media develops and in turn people use media frames to give meaning to their lives."

Media and Culture asks readers—not just students, but in the author's words, "all of us . . . to become critical consumers of the media, and engaged citizens in the society that the media helped shape . . ." Campbell abundantly provides the tools for studying, and investigating, their influence on democratic life and consumer culture.

"Some cultural phenomenon are popular, and others are not," he points out. "Some appeal to certain age groups or social classes; some, such as rock and roll, jazz and classical music are popular worldwide. Some aspects of culture are considered elite in one place (opera in the United States) and popular in another (opera in Italy)." In 20th century America critics and audience have established a hierarchy of culture which pits HIGH CULTURE—ballet, symphony, art museums, and classical literature—against LOW CULTURE, all the popular stuff like daytime serials, comic books, rock and rap music, talk radio.

Campbell himself obviously does not subscribe to this theory, but he includes a full page color illustration of a ladder of *Culture as a Hierarchy*, at the bottom are programs like the *Jenny Jones Show* and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* as juicy examples of Low Culture; up the top are High Culture models like *Hamlet*, *Aida*, Emily Dickinson poetry, the National Gallery of Art. Somewhere in the

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middle, cling *Murphy Brown* and the *Oprah Winfrey Show*.

The Hi-Low ladder is there to stimulate debate: "Look at this highly arbitrary arrangement, and see if you agree or disagree. What are the strengths and limitations of thinking about culture in these terms?"

Campbell much prefers to think about culture as a map; as an ongoing process, which allows for individuality and "...has many side roads and small towns, unexpected areas." He contrasts cultural phenomenon which may seem stable and comforting with some that tend toward "...the innovative, unfamiliar, unstable, and challenging." Because of the shifting values in modern society, and media convergence, he adds, most forms of culture demonstrate both of these tendencies—the hierarchical ladder, and the map.

Campbell urges that we should strip adjectives like high, low, popular, and mass from culture: "We must imagine culture as more complicated than the Hi-Low model." He cautions his students against cynicism, which makes it "... easy to form a critical view of advertising, talk shows, rock stars and tabloids that flood the cultural landscape. Cynicism is no substitute for solid criticism." Instead, he calls for a balanced position between taking a critical position, and becoming tolerant of diverse forms of expression.

"A cynical view usually involves some form of intolerance and either too much or too little information."

Certainly, no cynic could have written this passage about citizen responsibility in these digital times. It reflects the mind and spirit of the author:

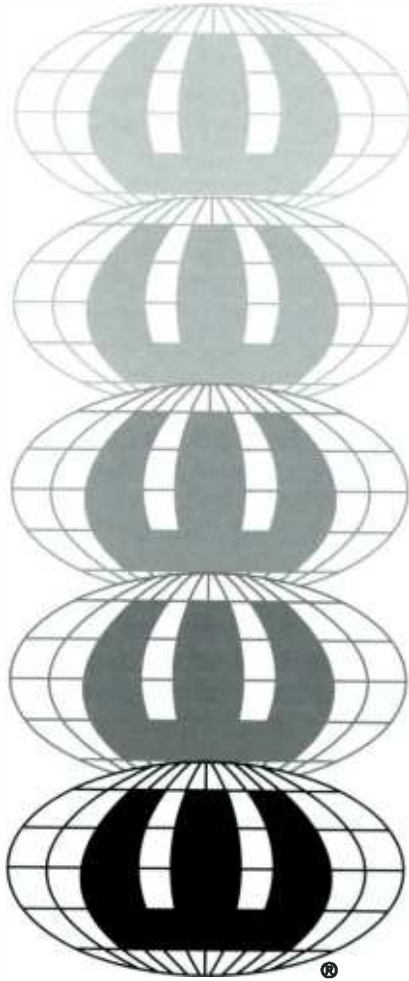
"As we struggle to determine the future of converging print, electronic, and digital media and to broaden the democratic spirit

underlying media technology, we need to stay engaged in spirited public debates about media ownership and control, about commercial speech and free expression. As citizens, we need to pay attention to who is included and excluded from the opportunities not only to buy products but to speak out and shape the cultural landscape. To accomplish this, we need to challenge our journalists and our leaders. Even more important, we need to challenge ourselves to become watchdogs—critical consumers and engaged citizens—who learn from the past, care about the present, and map mass media's future."

Richard Campbell understands the medium; he has the right message.

I have one quarrel with publishers of this splendid book, which will be used in college classrooms across the country for many years to come. It is called a textbook, and it is that, but much more. With a bit of editing, this could be a book for the general public, as well as concerned professionals in television, film, radio and journalism; a wakeup call for some of them. ■

Richard Pack, the editor of *Television Quarterly*, was formerly vice president of programming and production for a company formerly called Westinghouse Broadcasting.



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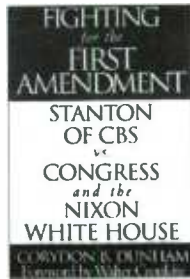
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Books in Brief

By Fritz Jacobi

Fighting for the First Amendment: Stanton of CBS vs. Congress and the Nixon White House

By Corydon B. Dunham
Praeger, Westport, CT



"In every challenge to freedom of press and speech, it has been abundantly clear that only an informed public is a free public," writes Walter Cronkite in a foreword to this splendid book. "This precious inheritance of ours, the constitutionally protected right to know what our government is doing in our name, is under daily attack by those in government who would prefer to do their business in the dark . . . As President of CBS, Frank Stanton stood up for the broadcast press and resisted government attempts to intimidate it."

Dunham, a lawyer who served for many years as NBC's executive vice-president and general counsel, has written an absolutely gripping account of the parlous times in 1971 when, after CBS News broadcast a documentary called *The Selling of the Pentagon*, CBS News was investi-

gated by a committee of Congress with support from the Nixon White House. The author turns a brilliant spotlight on Stanton's heroism when he risked being jailed for contempt of Congress as he fought for the freedom of the broadcast press and refused to turn over outtakes from the documentary to the Congressional committee.

Besides providing invaluable historical perspective and explication of such landmarks as the Supreme Court's *Red Lion* decision, which established considerably less protection for broadcast speech than the freedom afforded print journalism, the author gives fascinating insights into the relationships and antagonisms prevailing among CBS's top brass: William Paley, Richard Salant and Fred Friendly, among others. It is worth noting that Paley was not supportive of Stanton's gutsy stand.

Along the way we are treated to new and well-documented evidence of Nixon's enmity to the press and his concerted efforts—abetted by his tattered lackeys Colson and Haldeman—to intimidate the networks. After nearly 25 years, this reviewer's blood boiled all over again. *Fighting for the First Amendment* is a page-turner, a dramatic evocation of what the author aptly calls "a defining moment for broadcast journalism."

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With Heroic Truth: The Life of Edward R. Murrow

By Norman H. Finkelstein
Clarion Books, New York

Speaking of heroes, here is an exemplary book for teenagers. There are implied but not didactic lessons in civics and good-citizenship, notably in the author's splendid evocation of Murrow's television programs that helped to bring down McCarthy. There are other fascinating revelations, among them young Murrow's integration of the National Student Federation of America, in Atlanta, of all places, in 1930; and his work with the Institute for International Education on behalf of German scholars fleeing Hitler in the mid-1930's. Later highlights deal with some of Murrow's historic pre-war reporting, including Hitler's march into Austria and then the Munich crisis (Chamberlain's "Peace in our time.") This is all presented in an absorbing and fast-paced manner.

Then there is London and wartime. "Murrow did not immediately recognize the impact he had on American public opinion," Finkelstein writes. "Yet each night, fifteen million Americans regularly tuned to his broadcasts and hung on to every word of the distant war most knew would eventually affect them."

The author's perspectives are both constructive and instructive, expressed in simple if occasionally cliché-laden prose.



He cleverly focuses on Murrow's teen-aged son Casey, who participated in many aspects of his famed father's life, so that the target audience has a protagonist with whom to identify.

With Heroic Truth dramatizes Murrow's finest qualities by portraying such programs as his searing radio report from Buchenwald, the McCarthy television programs and *Harvest of Shame*, about migrant workers. This is an admirable book.

The More You Watch the Less You Know

By Danny Schechter
Seven Stories Press, New York

What is advertised in a 60-page introduction as an indictment of corporate control of the media is actually an autobiography and a self-serving one at that. A long-time alternative-media broadcast journalist and professional anti-establishmentarian, Schechter served, among other assignments, as news director and principal newscaster on the Boston radio station WBCN, which he describes in his book as "druggy, sexy, and always rocking, countercultural and oppositional, amplifying our side of the generational wars." Abbie Hoffman was a frequent guest.

One problem with Schechter's book is that it appears to have been put together in an awful hurry. Grammar gaffes and spelling disasters abound: "who" for "whom," "reprise" for "reprieve," "



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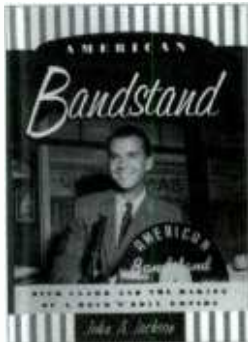
“temperments,” “commitment” and then some. There are no notes, no index, no bibliography and, presumably, no editor.

Many of Schechter’s targets are legitimate, however, particularly the newsless local TV news shows and major media mergers (although on the letter score Ben Bagdikian is far more eloquent). And the author has solid credentials: WGBH, CNN, ABC News and Globalvision, his own production company, and even a prestigious Nieman Fellowship at Harvard in addition to his 10 years at WBCN. The real problem is that there is so much inveighing and polemically correct tirading that it’s like the boy who cried wolf, especially when he keeps on looking for conservatives under every bed: by the time he gets to proposing some quite rational media reforms our eyes have long glazed over.

American Bandstand: Dick Clark and the Making of a Rock ‘n’ Roll Empire

By John A. Jackson
Oxford University Press, New York

American Bandstand was the longest-running network television show in history and for a time enabled Philadelphia to become the pop music capital of the world. One of network television’s first indigenous personalities, Clark is one of the medium’s most durable celebrities (the first to have shows



appear simultaneously on all three networks) and one of Hollywood’s most successful independent producers. It is an indication of Jackson’s skill that his book is thoroughly engrossing even to a reader who might have had no initial interest in the subject matter.

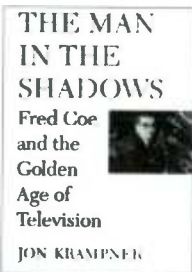
Clark used every single opportunity he could to make money. He managed artists, pressed records, organized tours, owned labels. He survived the payola scandal, wriggling out of it with all the mysterious dexterity of a Houdini, his squeaky-clean image untarnished. He nimbly side-stepped investigators of his personal finances and massive multiple ownerships of independent businesses. All of these miracles are meticulously documented by the author, who bolsters his research with solid historical background and perspective. This is a kind of sociological history via pop music taste.

Refreshingly, Jackson never grovels before his Midas-like subject. He’s impressed but neither adulatory nor star-struck: “Despite his introduction to America as a benign television host, when it came to advancing himself, Clark was more akin to a wolf in sheep’s clothing—a sharply focused self-promoter and cunning businessman who went to great lengths to contrive his public image,” Jackson writes. And on the subject of blacks in the studio, he adds, “the facts surrounding the integration on *American Bandstand* have been muddled, portraying Clark as more of an activist than he was at the time.”

In his enthusiasm the author occasionally tells you more than you care to know, for instance, about the convolutions of the record business or the move of *American Bandstand* from local show to ABC network fixture. But overall this is a valuable record of an era and a personality that will never be duplicated.

The Man in the Shadows Fred Coe and the Golden Age of Television

By Jon Krampner
Rutgers University Press,
New Brunswick, NJ



Despite the fact that it is exhaustively researched, this work is a much less successful biography than that of Dick Clark. The producer of *Philco Television Playhouse*, the careful cosetter of

writers like Paddy Chayefsky, the winner of countless awards, Coe was an extraordinary and extraordinarily difficult man—a drinker, a failure as a father, a maddeningly indecisive individual—who simply doesn't come to life in Krampner's book.

Is the problem that Coe died in 1979 and the author had no access to him? Whatever the reason, *The Man in the Shadows* has a kind of synthetic, stale air about it. Somehow the reader isn't made to care about all those internecine squabbles, like Coe's savage clash with writer David Swift, for instance.

Yet Krampner vividly evokes the temper of the times: the start-up of television in the late 1940's, the unbearably stressful conditions of producing live drama in a studio, the *Red Channels* blacklist, the interference by advertising-agency executives, Coe's deteriorating status at NBC after the departure of Pat Weaver and the arrival of Robert Kintner, who was committed to filmed programming, among other episodes.

"Fred Coe's *Philco-Goodyear Playhouse* is not the best-known dramatic show in American television history. But in terms of the programs it aired and the talents it spawned, it is the most important," Krampner writes. "It was [his] miserable fate to be the consummate dramatic artist in a medium largely devoid of artistic integrity."

Booknotes America's Finest Authors on Reading, Writing, and the Power of Ideas

By Brian Lamb
Time Books (Random House), New York

Although this column generally reviews books about television and not television about books, we make an exception here because so many readers of *Television Quarterly* are writers that this collection of highlights from Brian Lamb's excellent C-SPAN program *Booknotes* should be of interest to them. The 120 interviewees include a stellar cast of storytellers, reporters and public figures. Many of them describe how they became writers, what inspired them.

Authors tell "about how and why they write, where they work, and what happens if they get writer's block," Lamb says in his introduction. "We also see how book editors, literary agents, spouses and other family members play essential roles in the process of making a book."

Some choice quotes stand out. "I think if I knew all about it and I knew exactly what I was going to say, I probably



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wouldn't want to write the book," says biographer David McCullough, "because there would be no search, there would be no exploration of a country I've never been to. . ." Simon Schama: "There is an enormous hunger... for good, well-written narrative history. Historians in universities for a long time have sneered at this... There are a lot of people... who actually write very well in university departments, but they just don't feel they're permitted to relax somewhat and write history as a story and as an account of human experience."

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Daniel Boorstin became interested in words when he participated in high-school oratorical contests. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "fell in love with James Baldwin's use of language." *The Wall Street Journal's* James B. Stewart was influenced by "a wonderful English teacher [who] always said, 'Read, read, read!'"

A remarkable number of Lamb's subjects write in longhand—Shelby Foote with "dip pen," George Will with a fountain pen, Doris Kearns Goodwin "cannot think on the typewriter." James Thomas Flexner uses a typewriter, but not "any kind of those modern machines. I don't believe in them. I think they make books much too long." A delicious collection! ■

Fritz Jacobi was an assistant editor at Random House and wrote for *The New Yorker* before publicizing NBC's early television programs, enlisting in the public television wars and eventually joining the Columbia Business School. He now tutors New York City high-school students in English.

Correction: "The Media Monopoly and Other Myths" article in the previous issue of *Television Quarterly* (Vol. XXIX, Number 1) is by Eli M. Noam and Robert N. Freeman. Mr. Noam's name was incorrectly spelled on the issue's cover and table of contents.

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