

**MYTHOLOGIZING CHARLES VAN DOREN:  
THE 1950S, THE MEDIA, AND THE MAKING OF CULTURAL MEMORY**

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The myth of Charles Van Doren, as recorded in mass media retellings of the 1959 television quiz show scandal, is a story of a good-intentioned, intelligent young man who was tempted by the muses of fame and fortune to make a deal with some television devils, then was involved in the cover-up of their deceptions, only to finally tell the truth and yet still pay dearly for his transgressions. The Charles Van Doren story this dissertation tells, however, is more about the loaded phrase “the 1950s,” which implies simultaneously contradictory narratives of progress and stagnation, assimilation and isolation, hope and fear; more about “the Media,” our “window on the world,” our reflection, our bearer of good dreams; and more about the business and government institutions that boosted their own public images while reaping in financial rewards—at the expense of Charles Van Doren, hundreds of other quiz show contestants, and the American public at large.

Informed by audience reception, consumerism, cultural memory, genre, popular culture, and technology studies; Cold War history; feminist theory; historiography; literary criticism; mass communication research; media criticism; political economy; and television history, my research utilizes archival records, historical mass media, and other primary and secondary sources to tell a different story of Charles Van Doren than the one most often remembered. Chapter 1 is a tale of the commercial television industry in the Cold War and of the industry

practices manipulated by quiz show producers for profit. Chapter 2 considers the female consumers the television industry wanted so desperately to reach and the social implications of intentionally including intelligent women as quiz show winners. Chapter 3 reconstructs the history of crafted symbolism attached to Van Doren across mass media. Chapter 4 features the voices of an American public clamorously protesting the larger American institutions they blamed for Van Doren's fall. Chapter 5 assesses the ways Charles Van Doren has come to represent the quiz show scandal in our cultural memory as well as the significant relationships between the television industry and its regulatory overseers, which have shaped what gets remembered (and how), to protect their own interests.

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## PREFACE

This project has been, quite literally, a lifelong endeavor that began in the early 1970s on the brown shag carpet of my grandparents' living room, in front of the television. None of us knew then that my fascination with game shows would lead me here, and it would be an untruth to say that I got here without a madly talented supporting cast. A group of very special people I have had the good fortune to encounter in my lifetime have encouraged and assisted me, nourished and enlightened me, ridden out the ups and downs, never given up on me despite the many opportunities I presented to them to do so, and earned my undying gratitude in the process. Charles Van Doren has said that good fortune is really ninety-five percent luck—which makes me one of the luckiest people on the planet. But here are the real stars of this show.

My committee members played vital roles in my intellectual and pedagogical development. Jane Feuer has always told it like it is (a trait I could not live without) and has given me ample insight into how to be a survivor, whether or not I ever find myself on an island with Jeff Probst. Jane undoubtedly deserves the bulk of the credit for aligning the cosmos so that I could finally finish this, and she is, hands down, one of my favorite scholars and favorite people. Brent Malin helped greatly with making sense of the portrayals of masculinity in Van Doren's mediated story and was a much-needed cheerleader down the home stretch. His sense of humor kept me sane in the surrounding insanity. Ron Zboray understands manuscript archives and the secrets to their navigation better than anyone else I know, and his knowledge has proven

invaluable to this project. Without his assistance, there probably would be no Chapter 4. Jonathan Sterne not only taught me how to teach media studies but also stuck with me and this project well beyond what he signed on for. For every gesture of benevolence he has shown me over the years, I am eternally grateful. My deepest heartfelt gratitude goes to Carol Stabile, the person who always seems to understand my half-formulated thoughts and interests better than I do. She has been my mentor, my defender, my idol and role model, the voice of reason, a damn good listener, and a truly generous friend. I cannot imagine where I would be without her.

Others who played pivotal roles in the process of this dissertation include Robin Means Coleman, whose most priceless lesson taught me that “why” is never the best question to ask when you are in pursuit of the truth. Also, for the talks about Omar, Stringer, Bodie, and the rest of David Simon’s B’more crews: we will always have Charm City. I am thankful to Elaine Tyler May for her comments and feedback on an early draft of Chapter 2 during “The Good Life” panel at the 2005 American Studies Association conference. On top of that, her genuine compassion and concern regarding the loss of my grandmother just days before the conference will never be forgotten. Jocelyn K. Wilk, Public Services Archivist at Columbia University Archives, is one of my heroes. She answered every question I had, searched through boxes and files on multiple occasions when I could not, and went above and beyond the call of duty time and time again on my behalf. She is, in my opinion, Columbia University’s most valuable asset. Michael Schaller, whether he knows it or not, planted the seeds of this dissertation in fall 1993 in the most awesome (and memorable) history course University of Arizona students will ever find. Not only did he illuminate the context of my childhood in History 440 and provide me with my first glimpse of Charles Van Doren but he also proved that storytelling, combined with heavy doses of wit, is an effective teaching method. Without his class—which I still think about daily,

almost twenty years later—none of this would have been possible. Thom Baggerman, my Borg, has been there for me since day one of my graduate school career, read draft after draft after draft, listened to my whining without the faintest hint of discernable judgment, formulated sentences for me when I was incapable of doing so, and rearranged his schedule for me more than once. Resistance really *is* futile: I am your biggest fan.

All the credit for any literary stylings that may be found in these pages goes to Alison Moore, who showed me, by example, that good writing is about leaving your heart raw on the page. Jaime Clarke continuously shares his passion for writing (and writers) with me and remains one of my best friends despite distance and life trajectories. Richard Crary very thoughtfully read and commented on drafts of several chapters. His “academic outsider” opinions are treasured; there is more than one reason that he is the *only* person from my middle school that I still know. Laurie and Emilio Aguirre, Aric Allen, Eileen Cassidy, Sheila Convery, Frank Giamboy Jr., Fran Marino, and Karen Rae Marshall have given me years of friendships that have meant the world to me. You all have kept my eyes wide open.

Charles Van Doren could have told me to take a flying leap when I informed him this spring that I had written a dissertation that was (and was not) about him. But he did not. Instead, he—and Gerry Van Doren, too—has been gracious and kind. While I completed this work in its entirety without his direct assistance, his many examples of grace under pressure and overall humanity throughout the last half-century have been crucial in figuring out fact from fiction. Everything he has accomplished since 1962 is so much more important than what he was unable to do in 1958.

My one-of-a-kind family has been the source of great joys, unconditional love, emotional sustenance, inherited stubbornness, and the meanings of right and wrong. Bertha McWha and Ed

Tomlinson may no longer be here to share in my accomplishments, but I believe they would be proud, if not a little perplexed, that their granddaughter spent so many years in school. Claire and Aubrey Fisher Sr. have shown a remarkable and unwavering faith in the American Dream despite the heart-wrenching realities that would have led other people (myself included) to throw in the towel, and it was in their split-level suburban house that my interest in game shows began. Every day I can hear my grandmother saying, “Education is the one thing no one can ever take away from you.” Elaine and Aubrey Jr., Nicole, and Erin have allowed me to travel my own roads but always kept the lights on so I could still find my way home. One of these days, I will repay your selflessness.

Finally, my alpha and omega—Madeline, the one I was waiting my whole life for, and Gavin, the best surprise I could have ever imagined—I hope that one day you will understand that you are the inspirations that fuel my will and determination. Every word of this is meant for, and because of, you, and I love you both—equally—with every ounce of my being.

To everyone who has had a hand in this project over the years: Thank you.

## INTRODUCTION

Many modern invocations of “the 1950s” are meant to conjure up wistful visions of happy single-family homes on the stable consumer-age frontiers that supported the nation’s postwar economic prosperity—and of the innocent, trusting pioneers who inhabited those homes. These uniform images persist, particularly in mass media and politics, despite the wealth of academic scholarship that examines the tensions of cultural, social, and political realities running contrary to such utopian claims. In mass-mediated American memory, for instance, the television quiz show scandal of 1959 marks a dark moment in history when the public “lost faith in television” and its ability to portray “truth” objectively. While the quandary was declared repairable through network self-policing, the final result of which was total, tighter network control of all programming, the solution also required complete disassociation between television executives and the handful of participants who would become industry scapegoats, vilified emblems of the temptations of financial gain and personal advancement at the expense of the public’s trust. Even highly informative academic accounts of the scandal, which mercilessly uncover the larger web of deception and motive behind the production of the initial public fraud and its ensuing regulatory consequences, unquestioningly accept that Charles Van Doren was received by the public as a primary symbol of American moral failure. Yet ample empirical evidence of initial reactions following the scandal suggests that the audience’s relationship to Charles Van Doren,

as well as their understanding of the scandal as a whole, has been oversimplified, reduced to easy-to-use soundbytes.

The Charles Van Doren myth that has become part of our cultural memory of the 1959 quiz show scandal is more deeply a story about television in 1950s Cold War American culture. By 1950, television was neither a new industry nor a new technology, although it was newly affordable and becoming widely available to the American public, who bought television sets in unprecedented numbers throughout the decade. By the mid 1950s, television, it seemed, was everywhere. “The pervasiveness, immediacy and intimacy of television make it one of the most powerful influences on men’s minds that the world has ever known,” asserted George A. Coddling Jr. in *The Nation*. “If used with imagination and a sense of responsibility, it has vast potentials for enriching men’s minds. But by design or accident it can also be turned into a wearisome propaganda machine; or, hardly better, just another instrument for amusement and distraction, luring the viewer to go on listening until he can no longer hear, to watch until he can no longer see.”<sup>1</sup> In this context, television, as the newest mass communication technology and source of leisure-time occupation, was consequently the newest site of contestation in a larger national discourse about social roles and values. Advocates insisted that television brought families together and that, as a medium, it was a revolutionary, democratizing force because it reached the masses. Opponents claimed that, like film and radio before it, television taught apathy, immorality, and, above all, violence with unfettered abandon and that continued television viewing would only lead to a nation of passive “videots” who could no longer think for themselves. Charles Van Doren merely became the fulcrum for these and other issues in mass media throughout the latter half of the 1950s.

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<sup>1</sup> George A. Coddling Jr., “High Cost of Free TV,” *Nation*, November 7, 1959, 329.

My dissertation seeks to reshape the existing academic focus on the associations between media industries and political institutions and between television industry insiders and their carefully selected contestants by instead analyzing the relationships between media industries and audiences as they coalesce *around* Van Doren at a particular cultural moment in time. Historically specific elements combined to elevate Van Doren to national fame, but his television stardom was contingent upon his ability to draw profitable commodity audiences to NBC. In effect, Van Doren became a site through which industry insiders “imagined” their audiences and through which audiences responded to the industry and its advertisers. Public responses following the scandal indicate that the audience, more often than not, believed that much deeper social structures and cultural influences led Van Doren—and more than 200 other television quiz show contestants just like him—to agree to participate in the fraud. Thousands of people showed their support for Van Doren in a variety of ways, from letter-writing campaigns and student-led protests to a county-inspired electoral write-in candidacy—and victory—in Middle America.<sup>2</sup>

Quiz show audiences talked back to cultural institutions. Those institutions, however, not only ignored public opinion then but have also engaged in erasing it from the cultural narrative about that historical moment ever since. The framework for subsequent cultural memories of the scandal has been crafted instead by media discourses that shifted immediate accountability from corporate media institutions themselves to the moral shortcomings of private individuals. In reducing the issue to passing personal judgment on the efficacy of a clear conscience and an “unpolluted” soul, media outlets encouraged audience members to determine their own

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<sup>2</sup> On Tuesday, 3 November 1959, the day after Charles Van Doren’s congressional testimony resulted in his dismissal from Columbia University and NBC, the citizens of Hallock, Minnesota, spontaneously elected him as their constable. “City Voters Return Incumbents to Office,” *Kittson County Enterprise*, November 4, 1959; and “Election of Van Doren Here Gets Wide Spread Publicity,” *Kittson County Enterprise*, November 11, 1959. Courtesy of Kittson County Historical Society, Lake Bronson, Minnesota.

understandings of an *individual's* “elementary choices between good and evil, truth and lies.”<sup>3</sup> Within this reductive discursive frame, even the blame assigned to the industry was dispersed to a smaller number of unmanageable “renegades” and not to the commercial structure of television itself or to the capitalist ideologies it promoted.

The economic, industrial, and legal contexts of the 1959 quiz show scandal have been well researched and provocatively discussed by several scholars, most notably Kent Anderson, *Television Fraud: The History and Implications of the Quiz Show Scandals*; Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, 1933-1953*, vol. 2 and *The Image Empire: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, from 1953*, vol. 3; William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics*; Richard N. Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties*; Olaf Hoerschelmann, “A Scandalous Genre: A Cultural History of Quiz Shows in American Broadcasting” and *Rules of the Game: Quiz Shows and American Culture*; Walter Karp, “The Quiz Show Scandal”; Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*; Michael R. Real, “Historical/Ethical Interpretation: Reconstructing the Quiz Show Scandal”; Joseph Stone and Tim Yohn, *Prime Time and Misdemeanors: Investigating the 1950s TV Quiz Scandal—A D.A.’s Account*; Richard S. Tedlow, “Intellect on Television: The Quiz Show Scandal of the 1950s”; and Meyer Weinberg, *TV In America: The Morality of Hard Cash*. To these astute analyses, my project adds interrelated cultural factors that influenced both the parameters of how the scandal would be discussed in mass media and of how Americans understood the scandal as it unfolded.

Television history—a largely sordid tale of government acquiescence to and enabling of corporate power and greed, filtered through the combined (often negative) effects of industry

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<sup>3</sup> “Excerpts from Editorial Comments in the Nation on Van Doren’s Testimony,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1959, 29.

oligopoly and consumer capitalism on individual inventors, on technological quality and availability, on the talents of actors/directors/producers/production crews, on television program content, and on viewers—is a necessary starting point, as business interests have dominated regulatory and other industry decision-making in the U.S. since the 1930s. Television’s planned development from the commercial broadcasting model cultivated for radio affected not only corporate financial considerations but also representations of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation deemed suitable for viewing in private citizens’ living rooms. Increasingly in the 1950s, television sets were becoming standard equipment in U.S. domestic spheres. In roughly half a decade, television firmly—and forcefully—captivated the American public’s fancy, handily surpassing all other leisure-time activities in both frequency and duration. The saturation of television into so many lives was aided by the solidification of a nationwide commercial broadcasting industry, the dispersion of single families in the burgeoning suburbs, and big business’ need to keep Americans enthralled by the world of consumer goods and enraptured by the freedoms it promised. Out of this particular cultural climate emerged a television genre that awarded large sums of money to “deserving” contestants, women and men who, through diligent effort, had organized and maintained a catalog of knowledge. New York County District Attorney investigations and sealed grand jury hearings would largely dismantle the quiz programs’ claims to authenticity by fall 1958; congressional proceedings the following year very publicly confirmed widespread duplicity across networks. Witness testimonies show that program producers had carefully selected primetime quiz show contestants from pools of applicants, based on criteria of audience appeal, and had provided the questions—if not the answers—in advance to the contestants they deemed most marketable.

Existing scholarship links early television audience appeal to 1950s' conceptualizations of consumerism and gender, although the majority focuses on the relationships between these conceptualizations and middle-class domesticity or ethnic and racial representations of working-class women. Notable titles include John Fiske, "Everyday Quizzes Everyday Life"; Nina Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television*; Eileen R. Meehan, "Heads of Household and Ladies of the House: Gender, Genre, and Broadcast Ratings, 1929-1990"; Andrea L. Press, *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience*; Georganne Scheiner, "Would You Like to be Queen for a Day?: Finding a Working Class Voice in American Television of the 1950s"; Lynn C. Spangler, *Television Women from Lucy to Friends: Fifty Years of Sitcoms and Feminism*; Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*; Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, eds., *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*; and Ella Taylor, *Prime Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America*. Building from these resources, this project considers the juncture of audience appeal, consumerism, gender, and celebrity as it manifested in the primetime quiz shows. Within a brief moment of Cold War convergence, American hopes and fears amalgamated around a single prominent media symbol designed primarily for female consumers: Charles Van Doren. With Van Doren's emergence on the national mass media scene via newspaper and magazine features as well as a lucrative NBC contract that led to his appearances as a commentator, special affairs reporter, and host, including a daily appearance on the NBC morning program *Today* beginning in October 1958, the attention paid to the earnest young Ivy League college professor connoted that being smart was, in its own way, "hep" and, more importantly, profitable. Even though the discourse of intellectualism on the primetime television quiz shows limited "profitable knowledge" to the "facts"—the recitation

of names, places, and dates—“eggheads” like Van Doren promoted the benefits of higher education, which was an expanding commodity market itself, yet one deemed necessary to maintain the quality of the nation’s security and rapid economic progress.

In the U.S., as elsewhere around the world, post-WWII was a time of tense social and cultural change. While global superpowers jockeyed for rights to international domination, individual countries tried to cope internally with their own devastations and hopes for the future. Americans engaged in a national identity building project that showcased the suburban lives of nuclear families as the model material symbols of citizenship and of capitalism’s benefits and strengths. Media outlets repeated and reaffirmed this cultural narrative; their many methods and messages leave residual influences on how we remember post-war America even today. Because of the national media attention paid over the latter half of the 1950s to the success of the primetime television quiz shows, to popular winning contestants, and then to the “heartbreaking” realization it had all been an elaborate hoax, the quiz show scandal is cemented as a turning point in American television history. Yet, the quiz show genre itself predates television, and in its history is a chronology of scandals that should trouble all claims that the culminating events of 1959 were an anomaly.

Charles Van Doren was simply the contestant most intertwined in a larger Cold War national narrative, particularly once he became hailed as “America’s ‘answer to Sputnik’” by popular media. As a whole, however, *all* primetime quiz contestants supported positive conceptualizations of the “fairness” of a consumer society and promoted the rewards of a strong work ethic. These representations coagulated in a particular media moment during a cultural climate in which, nationally, conservative lawmakers emphasized dueling threats of annihilation from external and internal weaknesses, both real and imaginary. In the unfolding revelations

throughout the 1950s that politics, the media, and “newsworthy” players in both institutions were not all they had once seemed to be, Americans—individually and collectively—appeared as weak on the inside as they were on the outside. In their search for a center of balance and, in their overwhelming turn toward domesticity, for a place to call home, Americans had wholeheartedly embraced television, the newest and fastest-growing mass media technology of the 1950s, into domestic spheres across the country. The scandal unquestioningly illuminated that with the permanent fixturing of TV sets in U.S. homes came also the acceptance—however reluctant—of the big-business consumerist ideologies underwriting the programming that made the sets more valuable than mere furniture pieces.

Mass media in the 1950s (and since) promoted an equality based squarely in the realm of access to and obtainment of capitalist-based consumer goods. As networks and program producers vied for audience ratings that would attract big-name corporate sponsors, they simultaneously had to acknowledge changing social realities taking shape across the country. Women were the fastest-growing segment of the work force throughout the first half of the 1950s, and their increasing financial autonomy and influence on domestic goods and other consumer purchases factored heavily in television programming equations. The intentional integration of educated career women among television quiz show winners suggests that producers and sponsors searched for the most effective mode of address to sell to women with disposable incomes. Recognizing the contributions and accomplishments of a wide range of social types, the primetime quiz shows effectively operated to bring reflections of Americans to millions of households nationwide, yet such social realities have been obscured in subsequent cultural memories of the scandal.

As mass media increasingly become crucial components of the “historical record” in our society, it is important to consider not only the vested interests of media in managing cultural memory—particularly when it is about media themselves—but also what information gets omitted from historical narratives. When the transparency of the quiz shows proved untenably ambiguous, those institutions with the most stakes in controlling the cultural narrative reshaped it to their own advantage. In part, this project undertakes a historical reception study that challenges the prevailing cultural narratives about the scandal and Charles Van Doren’s involvement in it. Contrary to the corrective narrative that elevates Van Doren to the characterization of “scoundrel” in the eyes of an astonished American public, my investigation of primary archival materials—namely the more than 850 letters, postcards, and telegrams that flooded Columbia University’s administrative offices upon Van Doren’s dismissal, reveals that the public understood the scandal from perspectives at odds with media synopses of their “utter dismay.” Likewise, a spectrum of initial reactions to Van Doren’s congressional testimony was represented in popular print media. Rather than blaming a single individual, most public correspondence locates accountability in larger social realities, most notably the deplorably low salaries paid to education professionals. Between 1959 and the early 1990s, however, media accounts of the scandal began to position Van Doren as the antithesis to “the public.” Throughout this dissertation, I trace the shifting narrative of Van Doren and elaborate on the cultural significance of redistributing culpability to a single person.

To thread the contexts of the early television industry, the cultural climate of the Cold War, and the gendered significance of postwar consumerism in situating the success of primetime quiz shows in the mid-1950s and Charles Van Doren’s subsequent rise to national media stardom, my research draws from a variety of primary and secondary source materials,

including existing scholarship, original 1950s primetime television quiz show broadcasts, 1950s biographical newspaper and magazine coverage of Van Doren and other quiz show contestants, additional 1950s newspaper and magazine articles pertinent to the topics of gender and consumerism, 1950s entertainment and advertising industry trade literature, personal correspondence and administrative files archived at Columbia University, government files from the National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland (NACP), and a longitudinal survey of select periodical databases across time. My goals are 1) to reconstruct the historical path of the current cultural memory about the primetime quiz shows, the 1959 scandal, and Charles Van Doren and 2) to reintroduce some often-overlooked aspects of the visual representations provided by the quiz shows while amplifying the original 1950s public responses to those representations.

My analysis revisits a wide range of original newspaper and magazine articles from the 1950s, published by such ventures as *Business Week*, *The Commonwealth*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Life*, *Look*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, the *New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, *Newsweek*, *The Reporter*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Time*, *TV Guide*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. In addition to an extensive five-year span of mass media coverage of Charles Van Doren, from his rise to national prominence in January 1957 through his New York County perjury conviction (for which he received a suspended one-year sentence) in January 1962, I also consider newspaper and magazine coverage of other big-money primetime contestants, from the premiere of *The \$64,000 Question* in June 1955 through the media coverage of the U.S. House of Representatives hearings on quiz show practices in fall 1959, as points of comparison. In particular, Herbert Stempel, Vivienne Nearing, and Elfrida von Nardroff—all contestants on *Twenty-One*—provide specific alternative visual constructions to Van Doren’s “all-American

boy” image. Likewise, certain big-money winners on *The \$64,000 Question*, such as Joyce Brothers, Barbara Hall, and Teddy Nadler, provide assorted similarities and contrasts to Van Doren’s narrative. In recording the consistencies and inconsistencies in the way these media publicly portrayed celebrity, I probe the significance of mass circulation in providing a uniform, shared experience for the public-at large.

The more than 850 archived public responses to Columbia University’s dismissal of Van Doren from its faculty following his congressional testimony in November 1959 allows for an innovative consideration of what Charles Van Doren meant to members of the larger public, of the oft-repeated rationalizations for support or condemnation of his predicament, and of the extent to which mass media representations of Van Doren served as the foundation for the public’s rationalizations. This empirical component is also a means to determine who/what gets included and excluded from later mass media representations.

Finally, a historical survey of relevant periodicals, coinciding with the advent of the big-money primetime quiz shows in the mid-1950s through the current historical moment, provides concrete insight into how, when, and where Charles Van Doren and the quiz show scandal have reappeared in U.S. mass media consciousness. More importantly, close analysis of Van Doren’s reemergences indicates to what ends the underlying issues—for the television industry, the federal government, and the public—have shaped American cultural memory. With these empirical elements serving as the foundations of investigation, this dissertation ultimately addresses how media create a permanent record of events that forms a substantial basis for cultural memory.

Chapter One interlaces the early television industry within the U.S. cultural climate of the 1950s. Drawing primarily from existing scholarship, this chapter considers both the political-

economic structure of the industry and the specific social conditions that enabled the rise of primetime television quiz shows. As an advertiser-supported domestic medium, television broadcasters were bound to their relationship with the audience in multiple ways. The primetime quiz shows appeared to fulfill audience enlightenment requirements, even while they simultaneously delivered enormous audiences to sponsors, but their success hinged on the effective marketing of contestants as ordinary-and-yet-extraordinary through publicity features in other mass media. As an historical overview that necessarily sets the larger stage of the frenzied postwar era upon which Charles Van Doren emerged, this chapter draws out the ramifications of industry mandates as they manifest in the unprecedented popularity of primetime television quiz shows in the mid-1950s. By situating the public's association of television with "the truth," this chapter probes the significance of the audience appeal techniques quiz show producers employed—in terms of genre and the manipulation of a realism aesthetic—and considers the historical relationships between mass media, education, and consumerism in the government's national project of citizen-shaping.

Chapter Two further addresses issues of celebrity, in relation to gender and consumerism, through its focus on the incorporation of professional, intelligent women as worthy—and winning—primetime quiz show contestants in the 1950s. Despite the turn toward domesticity documented by Elaine Tyler May, in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*; Ella Taylor, in *Prime Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America*; and Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, representations of intelligent, ambitious, career-minded women were regularly offered by such programs as *Twenty-One* and *The \$64,000 Question* for millions of viewers to see. Overall, this chapter considers the social and cultural consequences of these visual constructions, which are

based on tropes about gender, race, ethnicity, and class, by analyzing the mass media discourses generated by their incorporation into primetime television programming.

Chapter Three traces the formation and disassembling of Charles Van Doren as a national media celebrity in print journalism over a five-year span, from 1957 through 1962. Our cultural memory of the quiz show scandal—and more significantly, of Charles Van Doren as its primary symbol—relies heavily upon a small portion of media reports published after 2 November 1959, when Van Doren was sworn in at U.S. Congressional hearings and admitted he had been a coached participant, pretending to be real, during his quiz show contests. The more critical pieces of journalism about Charles Van Doren, however, are found in national magazines, newspaper columns, and industry trade journals from 1957 to 1958. In these earlier news reports and editorials, Van Doren is utilized as a site of contestation about education, knowledge, celebrity, loyalty, and free-market enterprise, among other concerns. His superficial presence in mass media has always related directly to these deeper issues, and as such, this chapter reconstructs the development of Charles Van Doren's national media image through an analysis of when, where, why, and how Van Doren was presented to the American media public.

Chapter Four examines the public's first-hand responses to the scandal as they were expressed in 865 pieces of correspondence sent to Columbia University in late 1959, upon the resignation of Charles Van Doren from the university's faculty. Far from being panic-stricken or dumbfounded, most members of the American public sympathized with Van Doren and his plight as a pawn in the quiz show fraud and in NBC's network interests. Using information divulged in the public's communications, this chapter contests the American cultural memory of the public's contempt for Van Doren. Overwhelmingly, individual citizens believed that Charles Van Doren's self-reflexive, remorseful confession to the entire nation transformed him into the

ideal candidate to educate the public about truth, that elusive element of reality that led ultimately to knowledge.

Chapter Five brings the narrative of Charles Van Doren and the quiz show scandals up-to-date through a longitudinal study of media reports over time. From Van Doren's 1959 congressional confession to the media blitz that surrounded Robert Redford's 1994 feature film *Quiz Show* to NBC's short-lived attempt to revive *Twenty-One* on primetime in 2000, American cultural memory of the 1959 quiz show scandal has been welded together by media corporations. Since the participants themselves remained eerily silent about the 1950s quiz show fraud, media reports have become largely the basis of our historical record of these events. As such, this chapter traces the development of media discourses about Van Doren and the scandal, from the initial containment of the quiz show narrative by broadcasters and the federal government for economic and public image reasons to prominent media retellings of the contained narrative since. In determining who gets included and excluded from history—and why—this chapter additionally considers the cultural implications of organizing media discourses about the scandal around a single individual, especially when Columbia University correspondence and State Department and Federal Communications Commission documents, housed at NACP, reveal what was honestly at issue for many American citizens in the late 1950s, both abroad and at home. In American cultural memory, however, Van Doren's representation in relation to the scandal symbolizes individual responsibility while obscuring the social aspects of citizenship.

## 1.0 THE 1950S PRIMETIME QUIZ SHOWS AND THE ELEMENTS OF TELEVISION SUCCESS

In 1950, Gilbert Seldes recognized television as “incomparably the conveyor of truth,” a characterization that helps to situate the significance of televisual representations in 1950s society. Television’s ability to transmit “instantaneously and completely an actual event the outcome of which cannot be foretold” was considered, even by the medium’s critics, its greatest asset.<sup>1</sup> As the newest incarnation of visual mass media—and one that had become remarkably accessible after the end of World War II—television provided Americans with a “window on the world,” transmitting mass-marketed imagery of both domestic and social spheres to millions of people nationwide. Television was credited with broadening viewers’ perspectives, making the remote familiar, and raising public aspirations. Some claimed television was also a revolutionary democratizing force that strengthened national culture and political identities, thereby creating better-informed citizens.<sup>2</sup> It surely cultivated consumers.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Seldes, *The Great Audience* (New York: Viking, 1950), 163-64, 187.

<sup>2</sup> Leo Bogart, *The Age of Television* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1956/1958). Leo Bogart was also Revlon’s director of marketing research at the time he conducted this sociological television study. In Bogart’s analysis, television’s limits as a one-way communication channel were offset by the fact that the viewer was still engaged to make sense of the messages. He innocuously concluded that television was the purveyor of American ideas about the world, and that viewers formed opinions and gained knowledge, in part, *because* of their exposure to television viewing. For additional considerations of how audience members were discursively positioned as citizens, see Anna McCarthy, *The Citizen Machine: Governing by Television in 1950s America* (New York: The New Press, 2010); and Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).

Beneath its proclaimed transparency, television had developed as a commodity market. As Seldes also noted in 1950, the “big broadcasters” were “building television from a blueprint, eliminating the structural weaknesses of early radio.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout the 1950s, the television industry became a web of codependent interests, “an ever-fluctuating relationship between three powers: network officialdom, sponsors and their advertising agencies, and the program packagers,” with three hundred or so production companies creating more than seventy percent of all regularly scheduled network programming by the end of the decade.<sup>4</sup> This institutional structure endorsed by NBC, CBS, the sponsors, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and others ensured that television’s only profit-making capabilities were inextricably tied to attracting large viewing audiences, all those sun-glinted apples waiting to be picked from the orchards of single-family homes that sprouted up everywhere across America. The sheer volume of viewers translated to product sales for sponsors, but the numbers could then also be used by production companies and networks to entice sponsors to buy more—and higher-priced—advertising. Political economists have consistently surmised the ways in which all parties valued the viewers who were also members of the “consumerist caste,” those who had income to dispose of willingly.<sup>5</sup> As a tradeoff in television business deals, sponsors had successfully intervened in sculpting television program content as they saw fit, to prevent viewers from

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<sup>3</sup> Seldes, *The Great Audience*, 160.

<sup>4</sup> “The Ultimate Responsibility,” *Time*, November 16, 1959, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,811468,00.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Dallas W. Smythe, who served as Chief Economist for the FCC in the 1940s, assessed mass media’s reliance on consumer audiences in “The Consumer’s Stake in Radio and Television,” *Quarterly of Film, Radio, and Television* 6.2 (1951): 109-28. Following Smythe, Eileen Meehan has further elaborated on the television industry’s exploitation of commodity audiences. Reference to the “consumerist caste” comes from Meehan, “Heads of Household and Ladies of the House: Gender, Genre and Broadcast Ratings, 1929-1990,” in *Ruthless Criticism*, ed. William Solomon and Robert McChesney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 205.

making negative associations between sponsoring companies and subject matter that offended consumer sensibilities.<sup>6</sup>

When Charles Van Doren made his first appearance on *Twenty-One* in November 1956, approximately seven out of every ten U.S. households owned at least one television, and Americans spent more time watching them than earning wages.<sup>7</sup> The statistics brought elation to the networks, stations, and sponsors, but in the background of news reports of the industry's successes were grumbings about television's responsibilities to the public that owned the airwaves over which their profit-making enterprises were broadcast. Should not television enrich the lives of the nation's citizens, and not just entertain them enough that they would put up with all the sales pitches?

A few television production companies—most notably, Entertainment Productions, Inc. (EPI); Barry-Enright Productions, Inc.; and Goodson-Todman—engineered a particular programming format in the 1950s that enabled television to appear to fulfill both halves of the enrichment-entertainment duality of broadcasting—quiz shows. Quiz show producers, in effect, maximized several aspects of the conditions in which they operated. On television, they brought information to the public, thereby serving the “public interest” clause to which broadcasters were held. They also brought incredibly large viewing audiences to sponsors, thereby excelling at the advertising function of the medium. This fusion was possible because the producers craftily exploited television's immediacy and visual elements to create and sustain drama that would keep the audience tuned in. With effective public relations campaigns, the details of which were

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<sup>6</sup> For an exceptional documentation of the various ways sponsors interfered with early television programming content, see Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, 1933-1953*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), and *The Image Empire: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, from 1953*, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> Michael Schaller, Robert D. Schulzinger, and Virginia Scharff, eds., *Present Tense: The United States Since 1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 136.

lauded throughout various popular culture and trade media, the television quiz shows enjoyed wild successes because they filled audience heads (both viewers and potential sponsors) with good dreams.

This chapter provides an historical overview of the television industry as it operated in the 1950s cultural climate and situates the primetime television big-money quiz shows of that decade within a multi-faceted television context. Of primary consideration are the role and function of television as an advertising medium inside the domestic sphere, the aesthetic components of quiz show productions, and the cultivation of a consumer audience. The producers orchestrated feel-good narratives through the use of realism, stage props, and carefully designed characters, with the end goal of earning large profits. Their efforts ignited a national quiz craze that made several individuals, the networks, and the sponsors very rich. Their same decisions would also lead to very drastic effects on the television industry, on federal law, and on the lives of several participants.

## **1.1 WE NOW RETURN YOU TO OUR REGULARLY SCHEDULED ADVERTISER-SUPPORTED BROADCAST**

By the mid-1920s, radio entrepreneurs had discovered the secret to making large profits in the broadcasting industry was as simple as selling programming timeslots to sponsors for advertising purposes. The cost was determined by projected audience numbers: the more people listening, the higher the price tag on that particular timeslot. Simultaneously, television was developing as

“radio with pictures.” By the late 1930s, initial regular television broadcasts took to the airwaves, but there were few receivers and still less to watch.<sup>8</sup>

Since its establishment in the 1920s, the FCC had acted as the government-appointed overseer of the public airwaves on which corporate radio and television broadcasts were transmitted.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the public debates in the 1920s concerning the function and operation of radio, resonant television debates were not significantly public. The largest radio network owners met little opposition or resistance as they strategized throughout the 1930s and 1940s for an easy transition to control the new television medium. Four interim, frozen years between 1948 and 1952, during which the FCC did not issue new television station licenses until a frequency bandwidth assignment plan could be reconfigured, considerably cemented television’s advertising-supported broadcasting structure.<sup>10</sup>

The FCC had cultivated a laissez-faire attitude toward the networks, which were unlicensed and relatively beyond the agency’s circumscribed jurisdiction over stations. The hands-off approach to network business favored by the FCC is not surprising, considering the

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<sup>8</sup> Schaller, *Present Tense*, 61-62. “One broadcast by a mobile unit consisted of hours of planes landing at New York La Guardia Airport.”

<sup>9</sup> The Federal Communications Commission developed from the original Federal Radio Commission (FRC), which was the regulatory agency established in 1926. The name was changed as part of the Communications Act of 1934.

<sup>10</sup> Radio Corporation of America (RCA), in particular, had a vested interest in radio as owner of two networks and as a radio equipment manufacturer. Early television patent wars pitted RCA and President David Sarnoff (often referred to as “The General”) against Philo T. Farnsworth, a “lone inventor” who had first imagined how to make a workable electronic television camera tube at the age of 14 while mowing a field of hay on his family’s Idaho farm. In the end, Sarnoff and company successfully strong-armed Farnsworth back into obscurity and took control of the manufacturing and licensing of iconoscope technology. With an informed business assumption that television would (eventually) surpass radio in earned profits, RCA quickly initiated a foray into postwar television production. Using NBC as an experimental television station enabled RCA to shape the development of the television industry as an extension of radio, and RCA’s virtual monopoly on technology and equipment patents added legal weight to their specific interests. Simultaneously, Sarnoff was largely responsible for driving his former friend, FM radio inventor Edwin Howard Armstrong, to commit suicide in February 1954, by prolonging court battles over ownership of patents and refusing to allow Armstrong to utilize optimum bandwidth (which Sarnoff secured for television transmissions) for FM transmissions, favoring television over radio. See Evan I. Schwartz, *The Last Lone Inventor: A Tale of Genius, Deceit, and the Birth of Television* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002); Daniel Stashower, *The Boy Genius and the Mogul: The Untold Story of Television* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002); and Tony Faulkner, “FM: Frequency Modulation or Fallen Man,” in *Radiotext(e)*, ed. Neil Strauss (New York: Semiotext(e), 1993), 61-65.

agency's chairmen were usually former advertising executives and government administrators.<sup>11</sup> Commissioners overall were largely sympathetic to business causes and were generally accommodating to broadcasters' industry suggestions. With few exceptions, the broadcasters and their overseers worked cooperatively to ensure that a competitive, commercially based broadcasting system flourished in the U.S.

During the licensing freeze, broadcast critics such as Seldes and Charles Siepmann, as well as FCC Chief Economist Dallas Smythe, vocalized continued concern about the social roles and economic structure of the television medium that was supposed to serve the "public interest, convenience, and necessity," according to the 1934 Communications Act. By the mid-1950s, however, the networks earned \$1.5 billion a year in advertising revenues. Their economic power, as William Boddy explained, left no chance that Congress would significantly alter the industry.<sup>12</sup> "Thus thirty-six minutes a day, at the very least, the American family watches commercials; each week, the viewer spends a little over four hours, each year the staggering total of eight and a half days, looking at nothing but commercials," lamented George A. Coddling Jr. in *The Nation*.<sup>13</sup> Coddling and several other editorialists writing for national magazines in the latter half of the decade continued to question the relationships between citizens, their government, and the broadcasting industry, despite the fact that television was firmly entrenched in radio's commercially supported infrastructure. Business and government may have

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<sup>11</sup> One such commissioner was Abbott Washburn, the Deputy Director of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), who was charged with containing the international media coverage of the U.S. television quiz show scandal that broke in 1959, according to declassified State Department files at the National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. Edward R. Murrow took over as Director of the USIA, replacing Washburn, in 1961. Washburn was appointed FCC Commissioner in 1974 and served until 1982.

<sup>12</sup> William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 17.

<sup>13</sup> George A. Coddling Jr., "High Cost of Free TV," *Nation*, November 7, 1959, 330.

definitively decided in favor of commercial broadcasting, but the public was not quite done wishing for something better.

Millions of television viewers—as well as national print media contributors and television executives—thought they found the ultimate representation of that “something better” in Charles Van Doren. Through his broadcast appearances on NBC from 1957 to 1959, Van Doren made educational subjects entertaining for home viewers. Van Doren’s televisual presence synthesized long-debated elements of public interest (and necessity, for that matter) with the broadcasting industry’s profit-making goals. His effectiveness at doing so would also lead to him becoming the primary symbol of the quiz show scandal since 1959.

### 1.1.1 A Domestic Medium

Throughout the Cold War, as the mass-production industrial boom influenced the growth patterns and social organization of the U.S. population, Americans were mobilized to master various postwar missions of good citizenship.<sup>14</sup> Lynn Spigel and Anna McCarthy have each analyzed the ways in which television positioned viewers as individual Cold War citizens, with what Spigel notes as the “dual goals of separation from and integration into the outside world.”<sup>15</sup> In the postwar suburbs, where Americans “secured a position of meaning in the *public* sphere through their new-found social identities as *private* landowners,” citizenship was expressed through “neighborhood bonding and community participation.”<sup>16</sup> Further, McCarthy determined that “the Cold War conception of the citizen as individual embodied a particular set of traits and

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<sup>14</sup> In addition to Spigel and McCarthy, already noted, see also Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003); and Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32. Emphasis in original.

qualities, linked to broader ideas about the nation and serving particular economic and political goals.” The citizenship project, in McCarthy’s estimation, led to “the constitution of a rational, moderate, and self-managing self, informed enough to evaluate intelligently the choices it confronted in the marketplace, in the political arena, and in the realm of arts and culture.”<sup>17</sup>

By the mid-1950s, the national citizenship project had normalized the middle-class single-family unit—a gainfully employed father and a homemaker mother who competently reared children of leisure in rapidly growing suburbs—as the epitome of civic fulfillment. Within the sanctioned definition, men worked outside the home and women were positioned within the domestic sphere, where their primary economic power lay in being responsible for home-focused purchase decisions that would ensure the stability and health of the central family unit. This domestic consumer trope was abundantly apparent across advertiser-sponsored popular media, from mass-marketed magazines to television programs, in which women were bombarded with messages about products that would make their kitchen countertops and bathrooms tidier, their children and husbands happier, and their households more efficient.

Television and the home simply went together. Spigel notes that “The years which witnessed television’s arrival in domestic space were marked by a vast production of discourses which spoke to the relationship between television, the home and the family.”<sup>18</sup> Television sets themselves were pieces of prized furniture in the 1950s, and many were elaborately designed to be the focal point of the living room’s décor. The set, a material object that carried the markings of social status, spoke volumes about a family’s financial standing and taste level. One’s ability to afford more than one set might also make the difference between happy, successful children

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<sup>17</sup> McCarthy, *Citizen Machine*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Lynn Spigel, “Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948-1955,” in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 11.

and social pariahs, as television programming promised to prevent the kind of boredom that drove boys to commit acts of vandalism and that led girls to smirched piety. Not only could television curb juvenile delinquency, but it could also bring people together. Without having to spend the effort or hard-earned cash to go out, citizens could relax and enjoy entertainment in the comfort of their own homes, among friends. Images of television parties became a staple in print advertisements for living room sets. Television also promised to broaden its audience's social horizons by bringing sanitized representations of the faraway, outside world to viewers in the safe retreat of their domestic space.

At odds with these utopian discourses, however, were warnings that television corrupted youths, rotted brains, and created lonely, isolated, passive video addicts. The standard rebuttal, from the industry as well as its supporters, was that the viewer is free to turn to another program or free to turn off the set altogether, the key word stressed in such rebuttals being “free.” Television, like radio, was brought to the public free of charge, which as networks and stations rationalized, was the entire reason the industry was advertiser-supported. Instead of asking the viewers to bear the costs of production and distribution, networks asked in exchange from viewers only their attention to a few products and companies who did finance the industry's inner-workings. In television business logic, it was a small price for the audience to pay.

With mobile privatization and a baby boom in full swing, television's physical location inside the home required family-friendly programming.<sup>19</sup> Despite being hampered by Supreme Court rulings that prohibited the FCC from interfering with television program content—because

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<sup>19</sup> Raymond Williams coined the term “mobile privatization” in his landmark cultural studies work *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975). As Williams explains, social conditions played an equal factor to technological inventions and innovations in the spread of television as a communication medium. He uses mobile privatization to describe the gradual reconfigurations of “home” and “work,” or the private and public spheres.

it violated First Amendment rights—the FCC was able to institute a Television Code in 1952 that defined television as a “family medium,” and as such, it was restricted to providing only “wholesome entertainment” to viewers. Modeled on the Hollywood Production Code that managed the film industry, the Television Code officially declared, “Obscenity, blasphemy, vulgarity, illicit sex, and explicit violence were prohibited.”<sup>20</sup> Beyond these decency criteria, content had to be suitable for family viewing and in line with the larger ideological goals of a rigidly structured postwar society. Almost all dramatic experimentation was abruptly dismissed in the wake of Senator Joe McCarthy’s reign of terror, which interrogated any programming with a socially sympathetic theme and blacklisted countless industry insiders. “It is the responsibility of television to bear constantly in mind that the audience is primarily a home audience, and consequently that television’s relationship to viewers is that between guest and host,” asserted the Code.<sup>21</sup> Programming should tread lightly around controversial subjects—or ignore them altogether—so as not to offend viewers who may then harbor ill will toward the sponsor who paid to air the offending content.

Descriptions of naïve or sensitive viewers really only served the interests of sponsors who claimed bland storylines and unoffensive characters were the best way to endear television viewers to their products. To say that Americans of that decade were “innocents” or gullible is quite misleading. Television industry insiders knew all too well that their 1950s viewing audience was largely a generation that had been affected by grotesque horrors throughout the previous decade. Media had been communication sources for real-world violence and death found in U.S. military fatalities during World War II, with its own links to images of Nazi

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 68-69.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 68.

concentration camps and atomic mushroom clouds over Japan, and in the more recent past in Korea. There had also been the Rosenberg executions, the communist witch hunts, and ongoing unrest over school desegregation, to name but a few of the obvious realities that likely complicated the world view of 1950s citizens. Rather than remind viewers of the complexity of the modern world, television producers and sponsors tended to promote idealized suburban lifestyles and the plentiful commodities that comprised them. In an increasingly competitive consumer-goods market, however, television program sponsors themselves were looking for “something different” to showcase their product.<sup>22</sup>

### **1.1.2 Standard Programming Fare**

Television’s primetime programming was replete with familiar casts of characters and settings in situation comedies, crime dramas, and westerns, combined with the fluid contemporaneity of news and current affairs, interview shows, dramatic plays, and sporting events. Situation comedies captured glimpses of domestic life, both ideal and otherwise. Familial bonds triumphed over external forces, whose threats extended no further than the untruths of misguided children or the embarrassing worry of neighborhood mix-ups. Problems could be solved in less than thirty minutes, once sponsors’ advertising spots were figured into the equation, and disappointments were satisfactorily resolved so as not to linger over from week to week.<sup>23</sup> Similarly in crime

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<sup>22</sup> Barnouw, *Image Empire*, 58.

<sup>23</sup> In her examination of 1950s family melodramas, Nina Leibman found that, on television, mothers were often absent, subservient, inadequate, or omnipresent, and that “No matter how involved mothers are in the detailed upbringing of their children...it is the fathers who have the final authority and respect.” See Nina Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 123. In her analysis of 1950s and 1960s sitcoms, Mary Beth Haralovich likewise found an emphasis on the “family ensemble and its homelife—breadwinner father, homemaker mother, and growing children placed within the domestic space of the suburban home.” See Mary Beth Haralovich, “Sit-coms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker,” in

dramas and westerns, disruptions in the social order status quo were solved or dutifully handled within an allotted timeframe, with wrongdoers adequately punished and heroes committed to continuing the good fight against injustice.

“Our system is forced by financial consideration to cater to the mass taste; the result is often an extremely low level of intellectual fare,” noted Coddling, among others.<sup>24</sup> The taste level of the masses had been cause for concern for a number of critics. In an effort to counteract what many saw as “mindless” entertainment, the networks were required, under the FCC umbrella of “public interest, convenience, and necessity,” to provide “sustaining programs,” such as news and public affairs programs, which were typically produced and sponsored by the networks or nonprofit groups. Sustaining programs were geared toward educational, cultural enlightenment, and religious themes, and were posited to meet the needs and interests of smaller, local audience segments in their respective markets. It is important, however, that to the networks and producers, “neither commercialism nor popular entertainment was seen as incompatible with public service.”<sup>25</sup> As Olaf Hoerschelmann notes, the broadcast industry was “caught between the ideal of audience enlightenment and the need to produce popular entertainment.”<sup>26</sup> The combination of popular commercial entertainment and civic responsibility was exactly the niche quiz shows filled, as big-money primetime programs became wildly popular while claiming to impart a service to the public.

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*Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 61.

<sup>24</sup> Coddling, “High Cost of Free TV,” 330.

<sup>25</sup> Michele Hilmes, “Introduction,” in *NBC: America’s Network*, ed. Michele Hilmes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 22.

<sup>26</sup> Olaf Hoerschelmann, *Rules of the Game: Quiz Shows and American Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 80.

### 1.1.3 Political Economy of Quiz Shows

Television's 1950s industry climate was extremely competitive, with so many restrictions on what was deemed suitable for broadcasting and so few networks to broadcast any programming at all. Inclusion in the medium was never guaranteed. Industry regulations enacted in 1956 permitted networks to own only a small number of shows, usually handpicked for their high ratings. By contracting out most content production to defray their costs and overhead, networks reduced their financial risk—and responsibility—for programming, placing most of the burden on producers and sponsors. Advertisers selected from any number of “packages” put together by an independent production company, and in exchange for providing the expense budget for a skeleton crew, studio rental, and equipment, the advertising sponsor became a focal point of the program.

To those who profited from the broadcasts, a program's value was inextricably linked to the size of the audience that could be drawn to it. Production companies, like EPI, Barry-Enright Productions, Goodson-Todman, and others, devoted themselves to designing formats for games, putting them through test runs to work out the kinks in technique and timing, and finalizing the governing rules before they went about trying to sell their ideas to sponsors. Dan Enright claimed that he created *Twenty-One* when, after a full day of quiz show design disappointments, he and his fellow producers Jack Barry and Bob Noah “quit in disgust and started to play blackjack,” the gambling table game on which his quiz show would be modeled.<sup>27</sup> It took fifteen additional months of planning, experimenting, and auditioning before it was ready for primetime audience consumption. They could not afford to leave anything to chance.

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<sup>27</sup> Alfred Bester, “Life Among the Giveaway Programs,” *Holiday*, May 1957, 116.

In addition to stable, economical costs, quiz shows offered sponsors a number of advantages over filmed serials and big-name celebrity extravaganzas. Because they were live programs, rather than filmed and edited in advance, the quiz shows required shorter contractual commitments from sponsors and were easily cancelled if the sponsor became dissatisfied for any reason. More importantly, the “talent”—contestants—voluntarily appeared for “free,” and only expected to be given an *opportunity* to win money or prizes. “And there is a bottomless well of amateurs waiting to display their talents” for little reward, noted the *New York Times Magazine* in December 1957.<sup>28</sup> Responsibility was often left to the producers to keep the program within its budget, and any prize winnings that exceeded the weekly allotment were payable solely by the producers. It was in the interest of all parties to have winners, but it was in the producers’ interests to have winners who did not win too much.

In June 1955, Revlon, the make-up manufacturer, opted to sponsor *The \$64,000 Question* for the summer season. While it seemed that the quiz show would be the perfect television program format, the early contests were largely unsuccessful. They also proved to be unpopular with their sponsor. When Charles Revson of Revlon saw the initial matches, he described them as boring, tedious, and unwatchable. Fearing the programs would be unable to sustain an audience, Revson stipulated changes, including the incorporation of likeable contestants by whatever means necessary.<sup>29</sup> His instructions, carried through by EPI producers, led to *The \$64,000 Question* becoming the most popular program on television within six weeks of its

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<sup>28</sup>Gordon Cotler, “The Question About Quiz Shows,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 1, 1957, 98.

<sup>29</sup> See Kent Anderson, *Television Fraud: The History and Implications of the Quiz Show Scandals* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), for text from Revson memos that instructed producers to let contestants win or to get rid of them intentionally. Copies of Charles Revson’s memos were also admitted as evidence at the 1959 House subcommittee hearings. The complete congressional investigation of quiz show fraud is recorded in U.S. House of Representatives, *Investigation of Television Quiz Shows, Hearings*, 86th Congress, 1st Session, 1959, *Special Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight of the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), hereafter cited as *Hearings*.

premiere. When, according to a *New York Times Magazine* report, some eighty-nine percent of all television sets in use were tuned in at one time to watch the program, Revlon settled on paying \$70,000 a week for access to the fifty to sixty million viewers in the regular audience.<sup>30</sup> By 1957, the quiz show awarded contestants an average of only \$18,000 per week.<sup>31</sup> The rest went to EPI and its employees.

A year after *The \$64,000 Question* proved to be a runaway success, Pharmaceuticals, Inc., maker of over-the-counter iron supplement Geritol, signed a 26-week sponsorship contract with Barry-Enright Productions for the quiz program *Twenty-One*, to air weekly on primetime NBC, beginning in fall 1956. Pharmaceuticals, Inc. paid \$15,000 per show toward expenses on top of \$10,000 per week in prize money in exchange for aired goodwill toward the Geritol product, logo, and company name.<sup>32</sup> Despite the relatively low cost of quiz show production, at a minimum of \$100,000 per month, the sponsor expected to reach a wide audience and to make a profit on its investment. To meet those demands—and to ensure continued success in the television industry—producers resorted to choreographing dramatic fabrications to keep viewers tuned in. Using showmanship skills to enhance the formulaic narratives of contestant story arcs, producers ensured audience entertainment value trumped everything else.

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<sup>30</sup> Cotler, “The Question About Quiz Shows,” 93.

<sup>31</sup> Bester, “Life Among the Giveaway Programs,” 116.

<sup>32</sup> Anderson, *Television Fraud*, 45-46.

## 1.2 PART COMPETITION, PART ADVERTISEMENT, PART MAGIC SHOW: THE ELEMENTS OF ATTRACTING AN AUDIENCE

In the mid-1950s, quiz shows were known by such labels as “giveaway, question-and-answer, contest, cash-and-query, question-bee, and gift shows.”<sup>33</sup> What they had in common was that each occurred in a specific weekly setting in which easily identifiable characters engaged in plots carefully crafted by producers for maximum audience appeal.<sup>34</sup> The quiz show formula had already proven itself a successful audience phenomenon in radio format by the late 1930s.<sup>35</sup> “Unlike most radio genres, the quiz show did not emerge as an adaptation of literary, cinematic, or theatrical entertainment,” notes Jason Mittell.<sup>36</sup> Rather, as Thomas A. DeLong suggests, the quiz shows evolved from America’s fascination with games—“specifically newspaper puzzles, parlor games, spelling bees, and gambling.”<sup>37</sup> It was the gambling aspect of radio quizzes that had drawn the ire of the FCC, which forced many off the air for violating established restrictions against on-air lotteries. Mittell describes the quiz show genre as “a cluster of definitions, interpretations, and evaluations,” that include “the vital precedent that the quiz show belonged at

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<sup>33</sup> Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 35.

<sup>34</sup> Two canonical texts are particularly relevant to this argument: Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217-52; and Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94-116.

<sup>35</sup> The radio quiz programs were popular enough to warrant an audience research study by Herta Herzog for the Columbia Bureau of Applied Social Research by the late 1930s. See Herzog, “Professor Quiz—A Gratification Study,” in *Radio and the Printed Page: An Introduction to the Study of Radio and Its Role in the Communication of Ideas*, ed. Paul F. Lazarsfeld (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), 64-93.

<sup>36</sup> Mittell, *Genre and Television*, 33. For theoretical conceptions of film genre, see Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), and Steve Neale, ed. *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> Thomas A. DeLong traces the development of quiz shows in *Quiz Craze: America’s Infatuation with Game Shows* (New York: Praeger, 1991). This generic lineage is also quoted in Mittell, *Genre and Television*, 33.

the center of highly publicized controversies.”<sup>38</sup> It was a radio precedent that would continue with the television versions as well.

Less than twenty years later, the same radio quiz show formula, which relied on audience identification (either positive or negative) with the contestants, was relatively simple to adapt to television. Producers utilized the drama inherent in live visual broadcasting to appeal to their audiences. In the transition from radio to television—and from sound to sight—quiz show producers strategically increased potential prize winnings, stretched matches to carry over to following episodes, and added flair through stage props such as isolation booths, armed guards and bank vaults, or fact-checking judges, all inauthentic enhancements to keep viewers tuned in and sponsors willing to foot the weekly bill. Because of the fact-filled, family-friendly content, such programs were used to fulfill educational broadcast licensing criteria, programming time that was otherwise unattractive to advertising sponsors.

The big-money primetime quizzes used consistent, familiar textual elements, including set design, program hosts, attractive female stage escorts, recognizable characters, and financial payouts, to shape audience reception of the programs.<sup>39</sup> Set designs were sparse and background scenery went unchanged, but the spotlights illuminated the standard isolation booths, which intensified the moments of consequence for individual contestants. While in the isolation booths, contestants wore headphones, an image meant to convey the silence in extrication from the masses. Contemporary motivation research psychologists commented on the dramatic purpose

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<sup>38</sup> Mittell, *Genre and Television*, 33.

<sup>39</sup> My understanding of the quiz show genre is based on Rick Altman’s semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach to analyzing film genres delineated in *Film/Genre*. This paradigmatic method stipulates a process in which, first, the semantic elements exhibited by diverse programming texts provide a sundry of series titles suitable for further genre consideration. After compiling an inclusive list, the researcher is then called upon to consider what syntactical elements reveal the meaning-bearing structures of the genre, whittling down the potential list of texts to a more manageable, more exclusive number. Finally, pragmatically, one needs to consider to what ends those elements are invoked.

for which isolation booths were used: “the Booth heightens identification by providing a physical setting in which the viewer can be, so to speak, in the contestant’s shoes.”<sup>40</sup> Successful quiz shows included a sociable host who could make it seem as though contestants were “old friends” and still maintain an authoritative presence while he held the questions and answers in his hand. Hosts also had to be accomplished salesmen who could hawk the sponsor’s product with ease. For every host there were the magician’s assistants, those distracting decorative women who drew focused attention to the impending isolation of contestants as they were assisted into the booth. The contestants, selected to remind audience members of themselves or of someone they knew, were charmers who brought smiles to weary living room faces or who provided an example worthy of emulation. The contestants vied against one another or against the clock in an effort to win the true star of the show—the reward.

By 1957, television critics, audiences, producers, networks, and sponsors recognized five different types of quiz shows. Do-Good Shows, the most visible of which was *Queen for a Day*, were described as “true-life soap operas in game format,” with “[a]n unstated theme...that behind each candidate is a man who has somehow failed her.”<sup>41</sup> Do-Good shows existed to connect household appliances to needy women and the household appliance manufacturers’ “good name” to isolated incidents of charity. Not every unfortunate woman had her needs fulfilled, leaving Gordon Cotler of the *New York Times Magazine* to comment, “The viewer is rewarded with the message that for most of us the fairy godmother never comes.”<sup>42</sup>

Stunt Shows were intended to feature contestants simply having fun. Some, such as *Beat the Clock* and *Truth or Consequences*, required those who made it to the stage to do any number

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<sup>40</sup> Cotler, “The Question About Quiz Shows,” 90.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

of balancing acts with unbalanceable objects or to demonstrate their physical coordination in unusual circumstances. Another vein of Stunt Shows compelled contestants to guess at questions imbued with popular culture references. *Name That Tune* and *Dough Re Mi*, for instance, required contestants to identify the titles of musical compositions, while on *Dotto*, competitors had to connect a series of dots to uncover a picture of a famous person.

Panel Games, such as *I've Got a Secret* and *What's My Line*, were guessing games with three or four regular celebrity panelists. The popular personalities were the reasons viewers usually tuned in. "Panels must be put together with the same attention to variety as a plate of *antipasto*—so much humor, so much wisdom, a lacing of beauty, a dash of acerbity," observed Cotler.<sup>43</sup> The repartee of the celebrities provided audience entertainment; the contestants and their successes or failures were of secondary consideration.

A combination of the Stunt Shows and the Panel Games, Audience Giveaway Games, like *The Price Is Right*, were part panel game, in that four contestants vied against each other at one time, and part stunt show, in that contestants had to guess the correct price of various pieces of merchandise that were then "given away" by the host to the consumer who most closely appraised the suggested retail price. In July 1958, *Time* reported that "Giveaway games are probably the cheapest form of TV publicity, since the manufacturer swaps merchandise—often low-priced items—for screen time...a giveaway plug [for Tappan ranges] costs only .0042¢ per 1,000 viewers, far less than a regular commercial." The downside, according to the *Time* report, was that "to break onto one of these shows, a company often has to make an under-the-table payoff in cash or merchandise to the show's producer or to a middleman."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 94. Emphasis in original.

<sup>44</sup> "The Giveaways," *Time*, July 7, 1958, 66-67.

True Quiz Shows featured “amateur contestants who answer questions for prizes—sometimes money, sometimes merchandise.”<sup>45</sup> The questions were often academic in nature, requiring educational study and precise memorization. More importantly, the financial rewards were astonishing. Many winning dollar amounts were life changing, in consideration of the fact that a \$10,000 yearly salary put a taxpayer in a high middle-class bracket. The bold were rewarded with riches never before seen, and the wonderful sponsoring corporations were providing their own money to make dreams come true for average citizens. Every week, quiz show hosts passed out checks or handed over the keys to consolation Cadillacs or granted school-age children four-year full-ride college scholarships and a year abroad with their families, all on behalf of a few consumer goods manufacturers.

On the big-money primetime shows, “the sponsor often has more to gain than the contestant from a big win. The free newspaper space and increased ratings that accompany a big-money killing are well worth the cash outlay. And the sponsor has only ill will to garner from the defeat of a public favorite,” analyzed Cotler.<sup>46</sup> The competition for audience favoritism and media publicity led to alterations in program formats from time to time. When the public was no longer dazzled enough by the prospect of someone winning \$64,000 amidst other offerings of \$100,000 and more, EPI adapted by quadrupling the potential payouts of its high-stakes programs. “We’re improving our product all the time,” said *The \$64,000 Question* executive producer Steve Carlin.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Cotler, “The Question About Quiz Shows,” 93.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Cotler, “The Question About Quiz Shows,” 94.

### 1.2.1 Realism, Not Reality<sup>48</sup>

The 1950s primetime quiz shows, as a whole, were some of the most well-crafted television fictions of the decade. While contestants were real people with real lives, their quiz show appearances were character roles, and the matches were nothing more than dramatic exhibitions. Rather than ask the audience to suspend their disbelief and enter a recognizably fictional space, the television industry wanted viewers to believe what they saw was real—and spontaneously happening. Television provided viewers with a sense of immediacy on a daily basis. That electric “live-ness,” which “reverberates with suggestions of ‘being there’...‘bringing it to you as it really is,’” was manipulated by producers for profit.<sup>49</sup> Producers intentionally crossed the boundaries of reality by instituting industry-standardized methods to predetermine outcomes, based on audience ratings and contestant popularity. For the television industry insiders, realism became rationalized and ritualized as a *better than* model of reality.

When casting contestants, producers looked for general intelligence but more preferred “interesting lives. We want nice, plain people with a little heart and some humor,” claimed representatives of many popular quiz shows in the late 1950s.<sup>50</sup> Applicants were subjected to “a maze of interminable interviews and pseudoscientific character analyses” to make sure they met producer—and sponsor—specifications.<sup>51</sup> *The \$64,000 Question* used preliminary questionnaires, telephone interviews, and in-person analyses to select their contestants, while

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<sup>48</sup> My conceptualization of Realism as “a set of conventions that stand in for reality”—and how the *mise-en-scène* elements are utilized in the quiz shows—is indebted to Jonathan Sterne and his Mass Communication Process course at the University of Pittsburgh, 2003-04.

<sup>49</sup> Jane Feuer, “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology,” in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1983), 14.

<sup>50</sup> “Getting Rich on TV,” *Newsweek*, March 25, 1957, 64.

<sup>51</sup> “The People Getters,” *Time*, August 25, 1958, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,868759,00.html>.

*Twenty-One* producers screened potential candidates through a series of written tests that led to a two-hour interview “designed to find out whether [the contestant] measures up to the program’s high standards in ‘charm, modesty, and a cultured background.’”<sup>52</sup> Questionnaires and tests were utilized to find a certain caliber of knowledge, for surely contestants were plausibly required to know something to get on the show, but the preliminary written exams also gave the producers a very clear idea of what the contestants did and did not know. This allowed the producers to keep contestants somewhat in the dark, if they chose to ask the questions the contestant had already answered correctly. It likewise gave the producers a clear-cut way to oust a contestant, simply by asking a question the contestant had already gotten wrong. While executive producers claimed their shows were looking for contestants who were “in every way normal,” and “good, honest, three-dimensional people,” successful candidates were the ones who could be marketed to the viewing audience and to print media in character roles.<sup>53</sup>

Different types of quiz shows had different preferred favorite “types,” and a very specific idea about who met their criteria. The “ideal daytime couple,” for instance, “comes from Indiana. The boy is 26, the girl 24; they are white and Protestant and they have two kids,” detailed talent agent Diane Lawson, adding, “Of course, on the intellectual evening shows, like *Twenty-One* and *The \$64,000 Question*, they can’t be too choosy—they have to have some brains, too.”<sup>54</sup> Talent agencies, such as Lawson & Lawson, often scoured the streets of New York City in search of potential candidates for the growing number of quiz programs on the air. Assistants at the agency coached those applicants who passed the initial screenings in showmanship techniques: “You gotta ham it up. Don’t just blurt it out. Hold it back, stretch for it. But whatever you do, say

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<sup>52</sup> “Getting Rich on TV,” 65.

<sup>53</sup> Steve Carlin is quoted in Cotler, “The Question About Quiz Shows,” 94.

<sup>54</sup> “The People Getters.”

something! Give it the old bedazz. You can't just sit there like blobs of liver."<sup>55</sup> Intelligence or a photogenic face was one thing, but the right performance skills were necessary to make it finally to the television screen.

In his 1958 television study, Leo Bogart noted:

The contestants in these [quiz] programs are as carefully screened and selected for their talent and audience appeal as are the star entertainers of any television variety show. Yet the viewers are drawn powerfully to the program by their belief that the quiz represents real life drama being played before their eyes. The protagonists are individuals whom they envy and admire and with whom they identify their own hopes and dreams. The events taking place are considered as though they are altogether unexpected, like the surprising turns of a plot in a mystery novel. Attention is mobilized and held because the viewers feel that they are witnessing great moments of decision.<sup>56</sup>

Far from being loftily untouchable like traditional film and television stars, quiz show contestants were grounded in a reality relatable to viewers. Contestants on the big-stakes quiz shows held or were retired from full-time jobs or attended college (or junior high school, in some cases), and all were tied to family members, whether parents, siblings, or spouse.<sup>57</sup> "The typical American has many facets, and those who doubt it show little faith in the American way," insisted executive producer Carlin.<sup>58</sup> Quiz shows merely highlighted how wonderful Americans—and American consumerism—were.

Live studio audiences were perhaps the most exploited feature of the quiz shows, as week after week, hundreds of unwitting observers became part of the spectacle. In the background, on the sound track, home viewers could hear in-studio audiences, people just like themselves, giggling at contestants' witty remarks and applauding both the victors and the fallen. The host,

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Bogart, *Age of Television*, 32-33.

<sup>57</sup> Children were not mentioned on air in any of the *Twenty-One* episodes I viewed at The Paley Center for Media in New York, and of the contestants eventually convicted of perjury in 1962, none were mentioned in the *New York Times* as parents.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Cotler, "The Question About Quiz Shows," 98.

serving as an authority figure of the producers and sponsors, was intended to preserve the integrity of the competition. Hovering in the background was the inkling that, with live television, the unpredictable could happen at any moment.

### **1.2.2 Dramatic Narrative**

Drama was ensconced in every production decision made by executives, who went to great lengths to make the contests look as artless as possible, using sparse stage sets and a number of live, real people to enhance a sense of dramatic, unscripted spontaneity. *The \$64,000 Question*, for example, employed security guards who wheeled a bank safe that protected the night's questions onto the stage before each match, accompanied by a bank official who attested to the precautions taken to insure the ethical transparency of the program. Meanwhile, on *Twenty-One*, where individualism was spotlighted in symbolic solitary confinement, the heavily lit isolation booths were temperature-adjusted from a production control booth so that contestants would easily perspire, giving the impression to viewers that they were under great pressure to answer correctly since so much money was at stake.

Dramatic moments were, in fact, designed into the very formats of the high-stakes quiz shows to sustain audience draw through narratives that often carried over from one week to the next. All of the best-known 1950s quiz shows featured the "Hangover Contestant or Continuing Hero" to build returning viewership. "The Hangover Contestant device recognized that the more a viewer identified with a contestant, the more successful the show, and the increased exposure to a contestant meant increased identification. Rules were run up to permit successful contestants

(the only kind viewers like) to come back to subsequent shows,” reported Cotler.<sup>59</sup> *The \$64,000 Question* required contestants to pass incremental steps over the course of four weeks to reach the top prize, which meant viewers would also have to be watching for four weeks to see if the contestant reached the final goal. *Twenty-One* often had to end their scheduled half-hour broadcast in mid-match suspense due to time constraints, but the contestants would always be back the following week. As John Lardner of *The New Yorker* characterized, contestants “hang on in the game week after week, building plot and character. They can be followed like the figures in a serial adventure.”<sup>60</sup> In theory, audience members would want to find out what happened to the contestants they liked—as well as the ones they disliked.

Producers counted on audience identification for their success. Herta Herzog’s early radio quiz show research had found that audience members engaged in a type of solidarity with contestants and rooted for the contestant “most like [her or him]self.”<sup>61</sup> By positioning viewers to put themselves in the contestants’ shoes, the quiz shows required individual audience members to contemplate their own views on—and desires for—fame and fortune. They also asked viewers unspoken questions about risk and safety.<sup>62</sup> As Dan Wakefield observed, the high-stakes quiz shows “provide one of the last spectacles of risk in our increasingly ‘canned’ and ‘packaged’ society.”<sup>63</sup> Fame and fortune were routinely awarded to adventurous spirits, those individuals daring enough to wager their winnings and reputations on live national television, but along with each opportunity for more money or bigger prizes came additional negative possibilities, such as losing everything already accumulated or being humiliated in front of the

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<sup>59</sup> Cotler, “The Question About Quiz Shows,” 90.

<sup>60</sup> John Lardner, “The Air: Life Around the Booths,” *New Yorker*, November 30, 1957, 150.

<sup>61</sup> Herzog, “Professor Quiz,” 69-70.

<sup>62</sup> In order to make the contestants appear more ordinary, producers often instructed them to answer relatively easy questions incorrectly. See the U.S. House of Representatives *Hearings* transcripts for detailed first-person explanations of these decisions.

<sup>63</sup> Dan Wakefield, “The Fabulous Sweat Box,” *Nation*, March 30, 1957, 272.

whole country. Contestants, at some point, had to exercise cautious sensibility in calculating their odds of winning: How sure was the contestant that he or she would know the right answer when asked? To what lengths would someone go for riches and renown? How much money was enough?

Producers' casting choices and narrative efforts ultimately met with great success throughout the latter half of the 1950s. By May 1958, 55,000 people queued in front of television studios and Manhattan theaters all seven days every week for a chance to get into a quiz show studio audience. *Newsweek* reported that "Another 80 million vied by mail for their share of the monthly boodle: An estimated million dollars in cash and goods."<sup>64</sup> As much as everyone across America seemed to want a share of the quiz show bounty, they had to know that the odds were against them; relatively few people actually appeared on primetime television, and fewer still achieved fame and fortune. The audience's desires for reward and recognition were distinctly pursuable, but not necessarily attainable. The producers simply had to fan the flames of desire to keep the fortune-seekers' hopes alive. To keep the quiz frenzy aflutter, production companies, networks, and sponsors promoted fan-favorite contestants across media outlets—from guest appearances on other network shows to newspaper publicity stunts to feature articles in national magazines. Contestants became, at least temporarily, media celebrities. Their media saturation, in the context of the quiz shows' rewards-for-knowledge premise, simultaneously drew attention to education and the role it played in capitalism's bout for world domination against communism.

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<sup>64</sup> "The TV Quiz—How Far?" *Newsweek*, May 5, 1958, 107.

### 1.2.3 The Morals of the Stories

Television quiz shows not only projected immediacy and showcased drama, but they also supported long-cherished American cultural myths about equal opportunity, financial independence, and honest rewards. In general, the defining moral messages of the quiz show narratives thematically stressed upward mobility, hard work, self-reliance, and the commodification of information. The big-money True Quiz shows, in particular, displayed well-educated Americans compensated monetarily for their arduous study and well-developed mental abilities.

The narratives performed by big-money primetime quiz show contestants were entrenched in cultural lore of America as a melting pot of opportunity, where riches were merely footsteps—and a lucky break—away. “Our Presidents come from log cabins and our corporation heads once worked as shipping clerks,” noted the editor of *The Commonwealth*.<sup>65</sup> The positive emphasis on the success of those citizens who “dared” simultaneously disguised the reality that many more people from log cabins or who worked as shipping clerks achieved neither status. In the American Dream, individuals were responsible for themselves, and all social and cultural contexts were erased. It was more important to stress that anyone could achieve material success—as the pursuit of happiness was an inalienable right of all equally created people—if they just put their mind to it.<sup>66</sup>

The greater lesson attached to weekly quiz shows concerned how equally people could fulfill the American Dream. At the height of Charles Van Doren’s quiz show celebrity in March

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<sup>65</sup> “The American Dream,” *Commonweal*, February 22, 1957, 523.

<sup>66</sup> The American Dream was as much about conformity as it was about anything else, and conformity covered a wide spectrum of acceptability, with a few notable exclusions.

1957, Wakefield wrote, “The Constitution of the United States...has always been understood to imply that every American has the chance to rise suddenly to the top of the heap from the deepest wilderness of obscurity and make his fortune, name and success. One or two do; millions are comforted by the thought that they might.”<sup>67</sup> Equal opportunity meant the opportunity to succeed had to be plausibly possible for all—women, racial and ethnic minority groups, people of various religious faiths, young and old, working class and elite, the “unpolished gems” and the eggheads alike. The primetime quiz shows featured them all. *The Commonwealth* noted, “The quiz show also reinforces the cherished American belief in democracy and individualism. We affirm, with Jackson and Emerson, the worth of the individual regardless of what or who he is and we rejoice that success for quiz contestants cuts across all class lines.”<sup>68</sup>

Social class was an important aspect in the quiz show narratives, in that the programs were a means for “average citizens” to ascend the social ladder to the only class that really counted—the upper class. By the booming 1950s, Americans were deeply entrenched in the cycle of commerce, where the objective was to work hard and earn money to buy your way up to the next rung through material objects such as bigger houses and yards or fancier cars and clothes. “Keeping up with the Joneses,” a 1950s catch-phrase, epitomized the significance of maintaining social appearances stressed throughout the decade. Eventually, with the proper sustained effort, the citizen would escape the bonds of wage slavery altogether by reaching financial independence. On the quiz shows, contestants who fulfilled their American Dream of material success had much clearer paths to upward mobility.

Contestants reached these moments of upward mobility consequence, like all American Dream attainers, because of an earnest work ethic. Since the colonial times of Puritan New

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<sup>67</sup> Wakefield, “The Fabulous Sweat Box,” 269.

<sup>68</sup> “The American Dream,” 523.

England, diligent self-reliance had been the primary means to earning rewards. In the 1950s, the work ethic one needed to attain the American Dream was manifested in the pursuit of information exhibited by the winning contestants. Despite the fact that quiz show sponsors “handed out” money to contestants, whose “best preparation for the moment of greatness is simply to be alert and ready for the call,” the underlying message remained: there is no such thing as “easy money.”<sup>69</sup> Contestants devoted years—sometimes their entire lifetimes—to learning. The fortunate studied at elite schools and colleges; everyone else was more or less a self-taught expert. All, however, dedicated their time and efforts to committing the finer details of various subjects to memory. Their difficult mental work paid many of them well.

The True Quiz programs, in general, “were part of television’s attempts in the 1950s to gain respectability and, at the same time, a wider audience,” by exalting the fruits of an equal-opportunity liberal education.<sup>70</sup> In the industrial convergence from wartime production to production of domestic consumerables, more people were attending college than ever before, in part due to the GI Bill but also because the relative wealth of the country allowed many teenagers to delay the final transition to adulthood by enrolling in post-secondary educational programs. As the U.S. government funneled more and more money into math, science, and technical programs at colleges and universities in continued efforts to survive the Cold War by outsmarting the Soviets, television fulfilled its civic obligations to the capitalist cause by appearing to become a promotional vehicle for education itself. In the case of the quiz shows, realism and dramatic narratives were a means to inspire viewers to new educational heights. Quiz show contestants served as perfect linkages between fortune and intellect, symbolic

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Olaf Hoerschelmann, “Beyond the Tailfin: Education and the Politics of Knowledge on Big Money Quiz Shows.” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 24.2 (2000): 178.

representations that prompted viewers to measure their own life experiences against what they saw on their television screens.

In the era of television as “enlightenment,” as Hoerschelmann observes, “The frequent appearances of educators or highly educated contestants on big money quiz shows and the centrality that these shows gave to high culture and academic knowledge is one of the articulations of the enlightenment project of operation frontal lobes.”<sup>71</sup> Sylvester “Pat” Weaver had devised NBC’s “Operation Frontal Lobes” in the early 1950s as a project with tandem covert purposes. First, the plan intended to incorporate socially positive messages into regular television programming content as a means to fulfill minimum FCC public interest regulations. Second, it intended to raise the respectability of the network in the eyes of the public by incorporating “cultural programming” into its broadcast lineup, which would reciprocally stir audiences to demand an increase in similar fare and ultimately validate television as a serious, artistic medium.<sup>72</sup>

The primetime television quiz shows became part of the project, in that “elite cultural capital becomes desirable for the common people (television viewers) who might not desire educational capital, but who certainly desire and appreciate financial capital.”<sup>73</sup> Education, a critical weapon in the nation’s Cold War arsenal, was the link between how much a contestant knew and how much money the contestant won. According to Hoerschelmann, the significance of prioritizing contestants’ education was in its equalizing ability. Education “pulled people up by their bootstraps.” “The appeal of the ‘cop who knew Shakespeare’ or ‘the cobbler who knew

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<sup>71</sup> For in-depth descriptions of NBC’s “Operation Frontal Lobes,” see Hoerschelmann, “Beyond the Tailfin” and *Rules of the Game*, as well as McCarthy, *The Citizen Machine*.

<sup>72</sup> Hoerschelmann, “Beyond the Tailfin,” 186. Originally intended to mean airing broadcasts of opera, ballet, and other fine arts and educational programs, “cultural programming” eventually came to mean the “television spectacular,” an amalgamation of entertainment forms that had little to do with educational values.

<sup>73</sup> Hoerschelmann, *Rules of the Game*, 80-81.

opera' to a significant degree stems from acknowledging the contradiction between their class and the cultural capital with which they deal."<sup>74</sup> While the incongruities of class and knowledge were capable of piquing viewers' interests, the more serious messages associated with the quiz shows involved worries about national longevity in the precarious Cold War. Smart people, in essence, were the key to success in the battle to win men's minds. The country needed them wherever they could get them. As Charles Van Doren described:

Education was supposed to fill you with facts; if you had the facts ready at the right time you made a lot of money; therefore education could be considered important and "practical" because it could bring in a lot of money. And if people thought it important, then wouldn't the "level" of education in this country rise?<sup>75</sup>

The most recognizable television quiz show contestant, Charles Van Doren, became a symbolic representation of American intelligence as a whole, yet no one mistook the teaching profession for a get-rich-quick career move.<sup>76</sup> The significance of well-adjusted educators and solid foundational learning lie in education's equalizing potential—as a surefire method for securing a strong foothold in larger social competitions. Also, the belief in forward social progression relied heavily on middle-class conceptions of upward mobility in a capitalist culture: hard work and devoted faith in one's own capabilities would carry one forward to success. The underlying presumption was that proper education could also be recognized as a conclusive path to other domestic Cold War accomplishments, namely material wealth.

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>75</sup> Charles Van Doren, "Junk Wins TV Quiz Shows," *Life*, September 23, 1957, 140.

<sup>76</sup> Van Doren's symbolism of American intelligence flourished despite the fact that Charles's parents were anti-McCarthy, left-leaning intellectuals. In fact, Mark Van Doren (as well as Mark's older brother Carl) was named on John Foster Dulles's list of "communists, fellow-travelers, etc." All of the Van Dorens' written works were ordered removed from State Department libraries worldwide by 1953, just three years before Charles applied to be a *Twenty-One* contestant. For a full description, see Barnouw, *Image Empire*, 12-13.

### 1.3 CELEBRITIES AND THEIR CONSUMERS

“Unlike overnight public idols of the past, [the “new American elite”] don’t fly the Atlantic solo, have classical features and luminous eyes, or wear a coonskin cap. He, or she, can be a bare-kneed, 7-year-old school child or a bespectacled great-grandmother, truck driver or postman, naval officer or Episcopal clergyman...the one thing they have in common is an exceptional, sometimes exasperating knowledge,” noted *Newsweek* in March 1957.<sup>77</sup> Many 1950s news articles—and several scholars since—have discussed the ways in which quiz show contestants routinely became instant celebrities.<sup>78</sup> Winning contestants were materialized representations of quiz shows’ ulterior themes: They were embodiments of financial success borne from earnest work. They were also associated with a specific quiz program, a specific sponsor, and a specific network.

The producers designed contestants to mesh with the broadcasting network’s brand identity. CBS preferred its “unpolished gems,” the contestants who were hard-working, self-educated, and on the bottom half of the social class scale. They were also most likely to remind CBS viewers of themselves. NBC, meanwhile, flaunted its refinement. Contestants on *Twenty-One* were required to possess a diverse range of knowledge; successful candidates typically included lawyers, doctors, teachers or students, researchers, college administrators, business executives, and other professionals. They were exemplars of “the college-educated man,” a

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<sup>77</sup> “Getting Rich on TV,” 63.

<sup>78</sup> Most scholarship about the popularity of mid-twentieth-century quiz shows considers the contestants as important audience draws and acknowledges the significance of audience-contestant identification, including how these relationships were cultivated in other print and visual media outlets. For particularly provocative discussions of the transformation from quiz show contestant to media celebrity, see Anderson, *Television Fraud*; Barnouw, *The Golden Web*; Boddy, *Fifties Television*; DeLong, *Quiz Craze*; Joseph Stone and Tim Yohn, *Prime Time and Misdemeanors: Investigating the 1950s TV Quiz Scandal—A D.A.’s Account* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992); and Meyer Weinberg, *TV In America: The Morality of Hard Cash* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962).

combination of the cultured intellect of an “egghead” and the everyday disposition of a “regular fellow.”<sup>79</sup> Under producers’ guidelines, the only defining requirement for *Twenty-One* winners was someone who could dazzle viewers and keep them coming back for more.

To regulate viewer response, producers marketed successful quiz show contestants across media as personae—or characters. Popular contestants who won life-altering amounts of money were instantaneously transformed into awkward and overwhelmed, yet gracious and deserving, debutant celebrities worthy of newspaper and magazine features and photo ops and requests for public appearances, if only for a brief time, until the next audience idol could be drawn into the media spotlight. While most of the primetime contestants were plausibly ordinary—often fallible—all utilized a strong mental work ethic needed to organize and store trivia, and the courage to test their knowledge in front of millions of other Americans. They were exemplars of everyday people, with the emphasis on the regularity of their lives so that viewers could imagine themselves partaking in similar situations. Whereas the transient “charity cases” of programs such as *Queen for a Day* and *The Big Payoff* would not receive sustained national attention, the weekly returning contestants on *The \$64,000 Question* and *Twenty-One* were frequently given special-interest consideration on newspaper and magazine society pages.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to fulfilling scripted roles on the quiz shows, these characters were promoted in popular print media as exceptional individuals, their images functioning in capacities similar to those of actors and professional athletes. Their television successes were blueprints, in effect, for the possibilities awaiting the brazen individuals at home, relegated to watch but yearning for something more—to participate in success, just like the contestants. Leo Lowenthal analyzed that in biographical media stories, “everyone is personally invited to attend the spectacle of an

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<sup>79</sup> Cotler, “The Question About Quiz Shows,” 94.

<sup>80</sup> Anderson, *Television Fraud*, 14-15.

outstanding life”—and that life is outstanding *because* the media judge it so.<sup>81</sup> Through special/human interest stories, viewers—and potential viewers—were granted opportunities to know the characters’ personal histories and to follow their current endeavors. The familiarity with the contestants kept the viewers involved in the dramatic narrative as a whole. The particularly well-liked winners were offered additional spokesperson opportunities, acting roles, commentating/hosting jobs, book deals, lecture circuit engagements, recurring appearances on network programs, and the like. In this way, it took little time for the common contestant to ascend out of cultural mediocrity. Since most of the contestants lived in and around New York City, the New York newspapers reported on contestants’ winnings with a self-congratulatory pride, as the Big Apple was proving to be home to the best and brightest the country had to offer. Because the contestants were associated with a specific quiz program, that program, its sponsor, and its network benefited from the additional media promotion as well.

In early 1957, while media and mass communication theorists, critics, and researchers debated television’s educational value in print media, Charles Van Doren, the young Columbia University English professor who started the quiz craze by winning \$129,000, was someone who proved extremely beneficial to the television industry. His breadth of knowledge, combined with his charismatic demeanor, had made Van Doren likeable, noteworthy, and in the eyes of NBC producers Al Freedman and Dan Enright, a perfect contestant. In short, Van Doren, the young, clean-cut, intelligent, polite, enigmatic literary scion, was the perfect combination of traditional values and modern sensibilities, an exact fit for the marketing strategy of *Twenty-One*.

Richard Tedlow described Van Doren as “a symbol to the nation of the profitability of intellectual achievement,” who “provided evidence that an intellectual could be handsome, that

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<sup>81</sup> Leo Lowenthal, “Biographies in Popular Magazines,” in *Radio Research, 1942-43*, ed. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944), 543.

he could get rich, and that he could be a superstar.”<sup>82</sup> Following Van Doren’s quiz show defeat, his popularity proved so valuable to NBC that the network offered him a \$50,000-per-year contract to be its public affairs and education consultant. Maxene Fabe observed, “Unlike so many quiz show contestants, Charles Van Doren is not forgotten. His ease and grace and gentlemanliness have left an indelible mark. He becomes a frequent guest on the *Steve Allen Show*, a summer guest host on the *Today Show*. He is just too likable, too special, too important an icon to the American dream of success to fade from view.”<sup>83</sup> For roughly two and a half years, Van Doren remained a popular media staple, becoming the best known quiz show contestant of the decade. Repeatedly recognized as a national hero, the celebrated emblem of intellectual rewards and U.S. Cold War educational policies, Van Doren was hailed as America’s “answer...to the shocking launch of the Soviet Sputnik and its implied message that American technological and intellectual superiority had fallen into ‘the dust-bin of history.’”<sup>84</sup> This characterization of Van Doren’s importance in the pantheon of 1950s media heroes is a significant part of the lore surrounding the quiz show scandals that followed in 1959, at the end of what has come to be remembered (albeit erroneously) as America’s decade of innocence.

From late November 1956 to October 1959, Charles Van Doren represented the respectability of NBC as a network through his frequent, recurring appearances as commentator, host, and special feature reporter on multiple current affairs and cultural enrichment programs. But he remained largely linked to quiz show mania. As a quiz show celebrity, Van Doren also remained tied to his role as a corporate promotional vehicle. In the era of Cold War convergence, as American corporations transferred their mass production of wartime materials to the mass

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<sup>82</sup> Richard Tedlow, “Intellect on Television: The Quiz Show Scandal of the 1950s,” *American Quarterly* 28.4 (1976): 485.

<sup>83</sup> Maxene Fabe, *TV Game Shows* (Garden City, N.Y.: Dolphin, 1979), 200.

<sup>84</sup> Richard N. Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988), 45.

production of new postwar “necessities,” it was widely espoused in capitalist circles that an abundance of consumer items was good for everyone who occupied a position along the buying and selling continuum. Television—itsself a mass-produced commodity—was a major vehicle used to promote consumer goods. The quiz shows, in particular, afforded sponsors a unique prospect: “What other programming allows the name of the product to be visible at all times?” questioned the *New York Times Magazine*.<sup>85</sup>

Within three months of *The \$64,000 Question* premiere, the success of the show had propelled Revlon stock from \$12 a share to \$30. After the show’s first year on CBS, the cosmetics manufacturer had gained \$19 million over their previous year’s sales. “From the day the program went on the air, Revlon has been almost swamped by dealer demand for certain products,” asserted Daniel Seligman in the April 1956 issue of *Fortune*.<sup>86</sup> Pharmaceuticals, Inc. also profited from their sponsorship of *Twenty-One*, boosting sales by almost \$11 million in the first three months the program was on the air. The corporate entity that gained the most from the quiz show craze, however, was arguably NBC, which cemented its network association with Van Doren, even after he had worn out his plausibility as a contestant.

The realism offered by the texts of quiz shows promoted a consumer culture through an emphasis on cash prizes and through the use of contestants as exemplars of media celebrities. Charles Van Doren was, and is, the most consistently recognizable image of the quiz shows and the scandal because he fit a particular role in promoting consumer culture that was used in media discourses to emphasize the superiority of intelligence, character, and tradition in an imagined (and masculine) fight against the spread of communism. Van Doren may have been a national symbol of American superiority, but the quiz show trend of incorporating intelligent professional

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<sup>85</sup> Cotler, “The Question About Quiz Shows,” 98.

<sup>86</sup> Daniel Seligman, “Revlon’s Jackpot,” *Fortune*, April 1956, 236.

women among their winners indicates that the producers and sponsors had a distinct idea about who was in their primetime audience and who needed to be included in the consumer base. In the end, in a space where everyone was an expert and anyone could get rich on television, capitalism won.

#### 1.4 CONCLUSION

In terms of their commercial appeals, quiz shows are often dismissed because of their staged misrepresentation, a logic that rationalizes quiz shows cannot, or should not, be considered aesthetically relevant because they were faked. But producers were always blunt about their casting process, which favored larger-than-life personalities in the midst of dramatic intrigue, and the quiz show matches, it turns out, were directed as thoroughly as *Playhouse 90* or any Broadway blockbuster, and therein lies their unexpected value. The big-money primetime quiz shows of the 1950s relied on a realism that had to be truer than other television fictions, and each production decision was made to ensure maximum audience effect. The contestants had to be plausibly capable of having acquired the information necessary to win, and beyond that, they had to reflect the lives of viewers in recognizable ways.

In an effort to legitimize television's worth to the public and to sponsors by associating programming content with intellectualism, quiz show producers intentionally blurred the line between reality and realism via planned efforts to appear realistically inclusive. Because reality was not interesting enough for live television, quiz show producers in the mid-1950s selected characters from their applicant pools, based on criteria of plausibility, and used theatrical methods to stage matches to increase the very drama they believed would attract viewers, who

were (and are) useful to the television industry solely in terms of their consistent consumption practices. Identification between audience members and contestants was enabled by media constructions of contestants as average people, both through the coached stage mannerisms contestants performed for the cameras and through nationally mediated stories about the feats and follies of the contestants in magazines and newspapers and on television. Celebratory biographical stories about average citizens who got rich quick because of their memory retention performed the ideological function of sustaining an “eagerness and confidence that the social ladder may be scaled on a mass basis.”<sup>87</sup> Producers’ decisions ultimately provided the appearance of a “leveling of expertise” and promoted an “ordinary-as-exceptional” message—but to capitalist ends, namely, to sell consumer products. Rooted in an aesthetic of realism, the careful—and widespread—orchestration of the television quiz shows in the mid- to late-1950s were productions of reality that best served the interests of capitalist industries by promoting a standard-yet-individualized *American* consumer culture that stood in symbolic opposition to U.S. Cold War conceptions of assimilating, threatening, global communism.

The producers attempted to justify the realism they employed by pointing to the fact that members of the general public were winning money, the sponsors were making money, post-war business was booming, and all was as it should be. As such, realism in the early television quiz shows is inherently tied to the ritualized cultivation of consumers, and, via the cult of celebrity surrounding quiz show contestants—primarily Charles Van Doren—mass consumer culture became conflated with intelligence, tradition, and superiority, themes that are bound up in a much larger Cold War discourse about East vs. West. The reasonable—and relevant—concerns

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<sup>87</sup> Lowenthal, “Biographies,” 514.

about television's responsibilities to its public raised in the early part of the decade proved immaterial; the audience also simply enjoyed being entertained.

The industry-standardized production decisions employed on the primetime television quiz shows would have long-lasting effects on the infrastructure of the television industry, on federal law, and on the lives of contestants—most publicly, Charles Van Doren—when the profit motives behind the producers' orchestrations were linked to widespread dishonesty. This realization ultimately disrupted the relationships between broadcasters and their government regulators and between the public and its interests.

## 2.0 “LAYING SIEGE TO THAT ENIGMATIC AND GLITTERING PRIZE, THE FEMALE CONSUMER”<sup>1</sup>: PRIMETIME TELEVISION QUIZ SHOWS AND 1950S CONSUMER APPEAL

*In 1954, she stood five-feet-four-inches tall, weighed 132 pounds, preferred clean-shaven men, thought husbands drank too much, and wanted the word “obey” removed from traditional matrimonial vows. Who was she?*<sup>2</sup> This question may not have been asked directly on any primetime television quiz show in the mid-1950s, but it was the basis of the most vexing query then on the minds of marketers, advertisers, and the big corporations they represented. “She,” in short, was the “typical American woman,” the highly coveted demographic relentlessly pursued for her much-publicized influence on household and other family purchases, and she had the business world wondering, “What Makes Women Buy?”<sup>3</sup> In 1955, the year that *The \$64,000 Question* premiered as a summer replacement program on primetime CBS, Americans spent \$262 billion—or the equivalent of more than \$2 trillion in 2009 dollars—on consumer items.<sup>4</sup> With the post-war economic boom fueling consumerist fevers, corporations were pointedly

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Burck, “What Makes Women Buy?,” *Fortune*, August 1956, 93.

<sup>2</sup> These characteristics of “the typical American woman” were detailed in *The 1954 Pocket Almanac* (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1954) and reprinted in abridged version in “Meet the Typical American—Male and Female,” *Reader’s Digest*, February 1954, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Burck, “What Makes Women Buy?,” 93-94, 173-79. Incidentally, *What Makes Women Buy* is also the title of Janet L. Wolff’s marketing trade book, published in 1958 as part of the *McGraw-Hill Series in Advertising and Selling*. Wolff’s book is used in this chapter to reference the growing trend away from marketing to “housewives.”

<sup>4</sup> Dollar figures for 1955 consumer expenditures are quoted from Burck, while the corresponding 2009 value is estimated by <http://measuringworth.com>.

intensifying their marketing efforts and “laying siege to that enigmatic and glittering prize, the female consumer.”

For those corporations with sizeable advertising expense budgets, television, the fastest-growing mass medium of the mid-twentieth century, was uniquely situated to combine the visual elements of print advertising with the more personalized aural persuasions of radio appeals to pitch mass-produced goods and corporate brand images to some of the biggest mass audiences known up to that time. As financial sponsors of individual shows, corporate executives influenced creative control over comedy, drama, variety, news, and contest program content to varying degrees, with their decisions justified by their “duty” to distribute family-viewing-ready material to women and children, the two largest (and, presumably, most easily influenced) portions of the overall television audience.<sup>5</sup> Their reward, according to prevailing marketing formulas, came in the form of female consumers authorizing purchase of the advertised product or, at least, associating positively with the sponsoring brand.

Cold War representations of nuclear families and happy housewives abounded in many of the televised primetime entertainment programs of the 1950s. Such vehicles for idealized suburban consumerism and tastefulness have certainly influenced scholars’ understanding of how female audience members were addressed during this containment era. For instance, at the 1993 Museum of Broadcast Communications exhibition, “From *My Little Margie* to *Murphy*

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<sup>5</sup> Erik Barnouw exceptionally documents several instances in which a television program sponsor or network censor altered a script or otherwise changed program content prior to broadcast. See *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, 1933-1953*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) and *The Image Empire: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, from 1953*, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). Media critics have historically cautioned newspapers, book publishers, movie makers, theater productions, radio broadcasters, telephone carriers, and many others about the dangers of corrupting the mild sensibilities of women and children. See Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986). For an historical consideration of the development of mass-marketed advertising, see Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

*Brown: Women's Lives on the Small Screen*," curator Mary Ann Watson echoed Stephanie Coontz in reminding attendees that *Leave It to Beaver* was not a "documentary" of 1950s' life, despite ensuing efforts to characterize it as such. Watson added, however, "to understand that for countless viewers the lovely woman wearing pearls and a crisp apron represented an ideal of the way things ought to be is to gain some true perspective on a certain time in our history."<sup>6</sup> While many television viewers perhaps did (and do) venerate June Cleaver and her white middle-class domesticity, Watson's assertion that June's fictional lifestyle was perceived as "ideal" remains within a popular discourse about the "nifty fifties," a misconstrued nostalgia that began in the early 1970s and gained strength and steam throughout the Reagan years.<sup>7</sup> In fact, 1950s marketing research indicated that "housewife" was not a demographic category in which most American women wanted to be included.<sup>8</sup> Watson makes a valid point that television programs' value "is not that they document precisely how we lived, but how we thought about human relationships." This chapter will show that quiz shows were not only more popular than *Ward and June*, *Lucy and Desi*, and *Ozzie and Harriet* but also truer to advertisers' concepts of the female consumer.

The primetime quiz shows of the 1950s offer a striking contrast to the aproned female consumer stereotypes often associated with the decade. Women-as-consumers were not

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Ann Watson's comments were included in "Images of Women," the introductory piece of "From *My Little Margie* to *Murphy Brown*: Women's Lives on the Small Screen," *Television Quarterly* 27.2 (1994): 4-5. Watson refers specifically to Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the surge of fifties nostalgia coincided with Richard Nixon's presidency. Early 1970s' popular magazines that featured cover stories about the return of fifties sensibilities include: Jonathan Rodgers, "Back to the '50s," *Newsweek*, October 16, 1972, 78-82; and "The Nifty Fifties," *Life*, June 16, 1972, 39-42. Ronald Reagan, another fifties spokesperson, continued the reshaping of cultural memory throughout the 1980s. See especially Carol Stabile, "'The Typhoid Marys of the Left': Gender, Race, and the Broadcast Blacklist," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* (forthcoming 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Janet L. Wolff, *What Makes Women Buy: A Guide to Understanding and Influencing the New Woman of Today*, *McGraw-Hill Series in Advertising and Selling* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958). See especially "The Term 'Housewife' No Longer Carries Prestige," 15-18.

addressed as strictly domestic creatures relegated to the private sphere; instead, quiz shows provided consistently complex images of women as intelligent, independent, well-educated professionals. Quiz show contestants Joyce Brothers, Patty Duke, Barbara Hall, Nelle Hurley, Catherine Kreitzer, Rose Leibbrand, Gloria Lockerman, Ruth Miller, Joyce Myron, Vivienne Nearing, Myrtle Power, Marilyn Southern, Elfrida von Nardroff, and others disrupt longstanding stereotypes about early U.S. television and 1950s' appeals to female consumers. At a time when forty-one percent of all college graduates in the U.S. were women and twenty-one million women held jobs, their primetime quiz show images reflected a social reality that challenged the visual representations of women often associated with 1950s television (and beyond).

Scholars have endeavored to capture a more accurate picture of 1950s society, one that recognizes the vast disparity between the Cleavers' mythical suburban perfection and the real, lived experiences of most Americans.<sup>9</sup> Remarkable research has been done on the role of women as television viewers and as consumers. Most of this research focuses on middle-class domesticity or on ethnic and racial representations of working-class women.<sup>10</sup> The primetime

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<sup>9</sup> The complexity of the 1950s is contextualized by remarkable scholarship in a variety of subject areas, including Cold War-era history, feminist theory, and genre studies, to name but a few. See especially Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Dan Wakefield, *New York in the Fifties* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992) and "Robert Redford: His 50's, Then and Now; 'Quiz Show' Takes Two Guys Back to a More Innocent America," *New York Times Magazine*, August 21, 1994, 26-29; as well as Stephen J. Whitfield, "The 1950s: The Era of No Hard Feelings," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 74 (1975): 289-307.

<sup>10</sup> The specific relationship between television and women—as celebrities, as viewers, and as consumers—has been developed by a number of scholars. See particularly Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Nina Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); Andrea L. Press, *Women Watching Television* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Lynn C. Spangler, *Television Women from Lucy to Friends: Fifty Years of Sitcoms and Feminism* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003); Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, eds., *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); and Ella Taylor, *Prime Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). Georganne Scheiner reads feminist possibilities within the text of *Queen for a Day*, but her analysis considers primarily working-class, racial,

quiz shows by contrast primarily promoted a white professional upward mobility—although they arguably *did* incorporate a smattering of ethnic and racial representations into their narratives—but are largely discounted or ignored for a number of reasons. Because the network quiz shows were telecast live, relatively few kinescoped episodes remain available for viewing, and the ones that continue to circulate most prominently in the public consciousness focus almost exclusively on the sponsor/producer-engineered Herbert Stempel–Charles Van Doren rivalry that has come to epitomize the quiz show genre in that era. Furthermore, because most of the contests seen in 1950s quiz shows were prefabricated, there is a tendency to write them off as a collective discredited anomaly. Yet, the fact that they were fictions should prompt a closer inspection of the narratives the producers presented as examples of real life.

Scholarship about 1950s quiz shows considers the economic, industrial, legal, and historical contexts of the national media scandal that ensued in 1959 upon the realization that the majority of quiz show contestants had been pre-supplied with questions and/or answers by the shows' producers, yet only limited consideration has been granted to the social information conveyed through contestant selection or how this information was designed to appeal to wider audience interests for advertising and marketing purposes.<sup>11</sup> To these ends, this chapter builds on

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and ethnic representations of women; their role as “entertainment for the middle class housewife”; and the panacea that was 1950s’ consumerism. See her “Would You Like to be Queen for a Day?: Finding a Working Class Voice in American Television of the 1950s,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 23.4 (2003): 375-86. Television’s structural format, which relied on advertising revenue, has long been linked to female consumers. For analyses of this aspect, see Mary Beth Haralovich, “Sit-coms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker,” in *Private Screenings*, 111-41; John Fiske, “Everyday Quizzes Everyday Life,” in *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 133-47; and Eileen R. Meehan, “Heads of Household and Ladies of the House: Gender, Genre, and Broadcast Ratings, 1929-1990,” in *Ruthless Criticism*, ed. William Solomon and Robert McChesney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 204-21. Game shows’ celebration of merchandise, through the rewards of consumer goods, is further discussed in Morris B. Holbrook, *Daytime Television Gameshows and the Celebration of Merchandise: The Price is Right* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Overall, the 1950s quiz shows and the ensuing national scandal have been addressed in a variety of ways. See Kent Anderson, *Television Fraud: The History and Implications of the Quiz Show Scandals* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978); Barnouw, *The Golden Web* and *The Image Empire*; William Boddy, *Fifties Television:*

work at the nexus of early television, gender, and consumerism by returning to original quiz show broadcasts, marketing trade publications, and contemporary mass media discourses—particularly those circulated in *Fortune*, *Life*, the *New York Times*, and other major periodicals—that emphasize the media’s fascination both with the importance of women to the 1950s’ U.S. economy and with TV quiz show contestants as a burgeoning manifestation of media celebrity. Against a background of conventional domestic characterizations of women as housewives, mothers, and servants suffused throughout most fictional serial programming, career-minded women astonished national television quiz show audiences with their courage and command of traditionally masculine fields of knowledge, such as politics, science, and sports. At the same time, well-spoken and well-groomed male contestants, including Charles Van Doren, the most-often evoked quiz show contestant of the 1950s, stirred viewers’ interest and/or compassion despite their marked unmanly pursuit of “sissy” subject areas and lifestyles.<sup>12</sup> My research

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*The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Thomas A. DeLong, *Quiz Craze: America’s Infatuation with Game Shows* (New York: Praeger, 1991); Richard N. Goodwin, “Investigating the Quiz Shows,” in *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988), 43-65; Olaf Hoerschelmann, *Rules of the Game: Quiz Shows and American Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), “Beyond the Tailfin: Education and the Politics of Knowledge on Big Money Quiz Shows,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 24.2 (2000): 177-94, and “A Scandalous Genre: A Cultural History of Quiz Shows in American Broadcasting” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1997); Walter Karp, “The Quiz Show Scandal,” in *American Vistas: 1877 to the Present*, ed. Leonard Dinnerstein and Kenneth T. Jackson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 317-34; Jeff Kisseloff, *The Box: An Oral History of Television, 1920-1961* (New York: Viking, 1995); Jason Mittell, “Before the Scandals—Genre Historiography and the Cultural History of the Quiz Show” and “Conclusion: Some Reflections on Reality Television,” in *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29-55, 196-201; Michael R. Real, “Historical/Ethical Interpretation: Reconstructing the Quiz Show Scandal,” in *Exploring Media Culture: A Guide* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996), 208-36; Joseph Stone and Tim Yohn, *Prime Time and Misdemeanors: Investigating the 1950s TV Quiz Scandal—A D.A.’s Account* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Richard S. Tedlow, “Intellect on Television: The Quiz Show Scandal of the 1950s,” *American Quarterly* 28.4 (1976): 483-95; and Meyer Weinberg, *TV In America: The Morality of Hard Cash* (New York: Ballantine, 1962). The complete congressional investigation of quiz show fraud is recorded in U.S. House of Representatives, *Investigation of Television Quiz Shows, Hearings*, 86th Congress, 1st Session, 1959, *Special Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight of the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), hereafter cited as *Hearings*.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Wylie, “Jettisoning the Dough,” *Saturday Review*, July 13, 1957, 21.

suggests that both female and male contestants were utilized in strategic efforts to draw well-educated women into network television commodity audiences.

This chapter questions stereotypical understandings of the role of gender in television programming during the 1950s. First, the ideal female consumer, as she was perceived by national media in the 1950s, supplies the context for the primetime quiz show female contestants, who are understood to be calculated selections made by program producers to appeal to network markets. The chapter then turns to male contestants, particularly the iconic Charles Van Doren, to grasp conceptions of gender and consumerism at work in *Twenty-One* and *The \$64,000 Question*. Finally, in investigating these and other images presented by the primetime quiz shows as indications of how producers and advertisers conceptualized the consumers they sought to address, I reflect on the extent of their success by considering historical audience responses to programs and their sponsors.

## 2.1 THE IDEALIZED FEMALE CONSUMER

In the imaginations of 1950s advertisers and marketers, the ideal female consumer was a pointillist composite of the twenty- and thirty-something, white, middle-class female masses who lived in the magical frontiers of suburbia, advertising's sacred land, where time-saving electric appliances, second cars, and family vacations transformed from longed-for luxuries into the commonplace of household necessity.<sup>13</sup> Each household was an individual unit, an individual

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<sup>13</sup> See Daniel Seligman, "The Amazing Advertising Business," *Fortune*, September 1956, 107-10+. Also, between August and December 1953, *Fortune* published a five-part series on the expanding consumer market in the U.S. Individual articles include Gilbert Burck and Sanford Parker, "The Changing American Market," August 1953, 98-103+; "A New Kind of Car Market," September 1953, 98-102+; "The Fabulous Market for Food," October 1953,

purchase, with women overwhelmingly in charge of family finances. If advertisers were going to sell to her, they had to be able to anticipate what she wanted to buy and why.

Janet L. Wolff was one among many 1950s business gurus who offered her expertise in consumer analysis in a “practical handbook for all men and women who have women customers—advertisers, manufacturers, copywriters, salesmen, buyers, designers, editors, retailers.”<sup>14</sup> In her 1958 *What Makes Women Buy*, Wolff advised the business world that the traditional Progressive Era conceptualizations of women consumers were not applicable to the modern woman of the 1950s. In particular, the labels of “housewife” and “mother” had become problematic in an increasingly complex society. While the prevailing Cold War conservative ideology credited women with a “natural superiority” over men, that same superiority was used as a means to exclude women from men’s opportunities.<sup>15</sup> In effect, women did not need to go beyond their front or back yards because they were already “better than” men; proving it by competing with men for jobs or social recognition was unnecessary, or so the logic went. Wolff manifestly contradicted such logic, and her assessment points to the unspoken issues of social class embedded within it.

The word “housewife” no longer brings to mind the picture of a motherly woman bustling about in her big kitchen preparing all sorts of wonderful things to eat, or the picture of a refined lady on the settee daintily embroidering a dresser scarf while quietly presiding over her children.

Today the term “housewife,” especially in the upper- and middle-income groups, carries little prestige, little glamour. It is thought of as an occupation that uses few of the techniques or abilities learned in school and often does not require full-time attention. Almost every woman feels that if she does not do things in addition to keeping house and

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135-39+; “The Lush New Suburban Market,” November 1953, 128-31+; and “The Wonderful, Ordinary Luxury Market,” December 1953, 117-19+. The authors also wrote a three-year follow-up to this series in “What a Country!,” October 1956, 127-30+.

<sup>14</sup> Wolff, *What Makes Women Buy*, x. On the business influences of women as consumers, see also Estelle Hamburger, *It’s a Woman’s Business* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1939). For a general overview of the marketing appeals made to women throughout the twentieth century, see Daniel Delis Hill, *Advertising to the American Woman 1900-1999* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Eugenia Kaledin, *Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Company, 1984).

raising a family, she either lacks the proper amount of ambition or needs the stimulation of outside influences.<sup>16</sup>

Eugenia Kaledin likewise points to a contradiction in women's roles as mothers throughout the decade. "On the surface the 1950s seemed to suggest a decade of glorification of motherhood, but in fact mothering was so denigrated that women who gave their serious energies to it for any period of time were considered unfit to do anything else."<sup>17</sup> Advertisers might successfully use a "housewife" appeal to working-class women who dreamed of the day they could afford to stop working in a waged economy, but middle- and upper-class women who had the benefit of a well-rounded education would be much harder to contain in a domestic setting, particularly because, for much of their lives, they had been prepared by their parents and social institutions for something better.

The parents of modern women have also contributed to the derogatory feeling about housewives by encouraging their daughters to lead Cinderella lives. Mothers and fathers often direct girls toward education and preparing for a career. They sometimes treat them as though they are above household tasks and act as though homemaking duties are dull and degrading.<sup>18</sup>

With these public perceptions of "housewife" and "mother" consistently confronting middle-class American women throughout the 1950s, they entered the waged economy in record numbers. As a reflection of their entry into the labor force, from June through September 1956, *Fortune* magazine featured a four-part series that examined the consequences of women and business for the post-war U.S. economy. Individual articles in the series appraised women as business executives, as working mothers, as consumer decision-makers, and as investors and

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<sup>16</sup> Wolff, *What Makes Women Buy*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Kaledin, *Mothers and More*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> Wolff, *What Makes Women Buy*, 16.

property owners.<sup>19</sup> These reports, based on census data, labor statistics, surveys, and interviews, indicated that a third of all women above the age of fourteen, including thirty percent of all married women, worked outside their homes. As one of every three non-farm laborers in the U.S., women comprised a sizeable portion of the workforce. In fact, the fastest-growing segment of the national working population between 1940 and 1955 was women over the age of 45, whose representation in the workforce increased 170 percent. While fewer than 40,000 women earned an annual salary of \$10,000 or more and only a handful of women held positions of power in the country's major companies, some 3.4 million women identified themselves as employees in "business and professional" fields. The majority of those women fulfilled "gender-appropriate" roles as teachers and nurses, but a growing number were also operating their own small businesses and starting careers as accountants, editors and reporters, lawyers and judges, physicians and surgeons, and architects. More significantly, of those comfortably middle-class women whose husbands earned more than \$10,000 per year, 21.1 percent still looked for independent gratification in the work world. By 1955, women in the U.S. owned \$100 billion in common and preferred stock, some \$88 billion in savings accounts and government bonds, and more than \$50 billion of life insurance. Women were further involved in family financial management, either solely or in joint partnership with their husbands, in sixty-nine percent of U.S. households. Armed with this information, big business spent hundreds of millions of dollars on market research in the mid-1950s in attempts to project female consumer spending habits.

In her chapter, "What Puts Women in the Buying Frame of Mind?," Wolff analyzed the most effective selling appeals advertisers could make to five different female consumer "types,"

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<sup>19</sup> Quotes and statistics used in this paragraph are taken directly from the *Fortune* series articles: Katharine Hamill, "Women as Bosses," *Fortune*, June 1956, 105-08, 213-20; Daniel Bell, "The Great Back-to-Work Movement," *Fortune*, July 1956, 90-93, 170-72; Gilbert Burck, "What Makes Women Buy?," *Fortune*, August 1956, 93-94, 173-79; and Katharine Hamill, "Women as Investors," *Fortune*, September 1956, 148-51, 189.

with each type roughly coinciding with a woman's life stages, beginning with adolescence.<sup>20</sup> The one type that was more overlooked—and therefore more “untapped”—than the others was working women. “The interest of all working wives in various products and services could be heightened by simply including working wives in the sales story—something which is seldom done.”<sup>21</sup> Wolff further suggested which “characters” women would likely notice and potentially heed:

Since virtually no woman, full-time housewife or not, considers the job of housewife a glamorous occupation, she's not likely to identify herself with the prototype of this role, for it makes her seem a drudge and a commonplace figure. She does not like to be talked to as a pure housewife, but rather as a busy woman with many activities. She also is less inclined to accept the housewifely-motherly type—like Aunt Mary and Aunt Sue—as a strong authority. She is more likely to listen to a specialist or a male authority or identify herself with an active, modern woman who is both capable and feminine.<sup>22</sup>

Specialists and capable women typically sprang from the same wells of the nation's colleges and universities. Education had always been considered necessary for the success of democracy; what to teach women, however, was tricky terrain, since they were not supposed to amount to much in the business world of men. Even the majority of schools dedicated solely to women's education in the 1950s had relatively diminutive goals for their students, yet the widespread public acceptance of specialists as dominant authority was in part due to expanding educational opportunities, most noticeably those for women.<sup>23</sup> In most instances, courses were

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<sup>20</sup> Wolff, *What Makes Women Buy*, 263-94. Scholars interested in media marketing to Tweens would greatly benefit from the historical configuration of that audience segment that Wolff provides.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>23</sup> See the “U.S. Schools: They Face A Crisis Special Issue,” *Life*, October 16, 1950. The entire issue is noteworthy, as it addresses such issues as segregation and the correlation between social class and available educational opportunities. For the purposes of this chapter, see “Girls in College: How to Teach Them Is a Matter of Dispute,” 139-42, and “Gulf Park By-the-Sea: A Junior College Teaches Its Girls to be Feminine Rather than Feminist,” 159-64. Even the cover of this issue provides a visual clue to one of the decade's primary conflicts between the competing aims of Cold War capitalism and education. On it, Rue Lawrence, a 15-year-old high school student who lived outside of Chicago, was featured in a frilled black and white sleeveless dress, with a styled coif, eye makeup and dark, heavy lipstick, and wearing a baby pearl necklace and polished chain bracelet while working from a

still almost always taught by male professors in higher education settings, leaving men overwhelmingly in charge of the transmission of “official” knowledge. The educational and cultural opportunities women found in those college settings, however, also provided glimpses of other potential realities beyond their homes. Advertisers were no longer selling to a credulous set of women who trusted that a product was the best simply because its ad or salesman said so. Instead, they confronted a nation of women with expanded horizons and an artillery of critical thinking skills. Market researchers had, in fact, determined a correlation between economics and education—the women who were more likely to have disposable incomes to spend on consumer goods were the ones with better educations. These assessments about women in 1950s society were key elements of the very narratives being generated on the primetime quiz shows of that decade, where producers wholeheartedly embraced similar suppositions and actively sought out female contestants who put their extensive educations to use in challenging full-time careers.

## **2.2 VEHICLES FOR CONSUMERISM: 1950S PRIMETIME QUIZ SHOWS**

Cash-and-prizes contest shows had been standard programming fare since the earliest U.S. television broadcasts, but in the mid-1950s, the innocuous radio quiz format made a transformative leap on the nation’s television screens. With an unprecedented boost in potential jackpot winnings funded by Revlon cosmetics, *The \$64,000 Question* became the most popular

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textbook on her desk. Rue’s clutch purse acted as a paperweight on the textbook’s pages. In the background, an out-of-focus young woman ignored the photographer and instead diligently attended to her studies. In only a few years, Rue and her unnamed classmate would become part of the vast female audience whose consumer decisions would determine the successes and failures of the nation’s economy. Rue’s clutch purse and textbook visually prioritized the two halves of the 1950s female economics-and-education conundrum. On the quiz shows, women would triumph at both.

primetime television program in the country within just six weeks of its June 1955 premiere.<sup>24</sup> The show's instant popularity swiftly inspired a flurry of high-stakes imitations, as TV producers, sponsors, and networks vied for audience ratings and consumer dollars. By the end of the following summer, the Pharmaceuticals, Inc.–financed *Twenty-One* debuted on NBC, and the era of big-money television quiz shows was in full swing. In particular, *The \$64,000 Question* and *Twenty-One* became two of the most-watched television programs of the decade. More than fifty million viewers regularly tuned in each week to witness contestants wager the depths of their knowledge against bank vaults of encyclopedic trivia. Included in those viewers was a specific segment of the audience to whom marketers, advertisers, and program producers turned their full attention by year-end in 1956: the well-educated and ambitious women who had been featured in *Fortune* and *Life* magazine as model American consumers.<sup>25</sup>

Women who worked, fulfilling dual roles as wage-earners and consumer decision-makers, became an important ingredient in the booming television industry's recipe for success. As astute businessmen, executives at Revlon; Pharmaceuticals, Inc.; and the networks knew how important women were to the U.S. economy, and they also knew that women comprised half of their total viewing audiences.<sup>26</sup> John Fiske has argued that daytime game shows clearly address women as consumers, but in order to be effective, their timeslot mandates that they reach the consumer women who are home during the day.<sup>27</sup> While daytime quiz programs, like *Queen for a Day*, could easily reach housewives, they were inaccessible, in the mid-1950s (without VCRs and DVRs), to women who worked full-time outside the home. Primetime quiz programs, on the

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<sup>24</sup> Radio's *Take It or Leave It*, on which *The \$64,000 Question* was based, offered a \$64 top cash prize.

<sup>25</sup> See "The American Woman—Her Achievements and Troubles Special Issue," *Life*, December 24, 1956.

<sup>26</sup> As early as the 1930s, Herta Herzog, as a researcher for Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research, examined audience responses to radio quiz programs in "Professor Quiz—A Gratification Study," in *Radio and the Printed Page: An Introduction to the Study of Radio and Its Role in the Communication of Ideas*, ed. Paul F. Lazarsfeld (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), 61-93.

<sup>27</sup> Fiske, "Everyday Quizzes Everyday Life."

other hand, could potentially reach such career-minded women, especially if marketed to them: it was no accident that the sponsor of *The \$64,000 Question* was a makeup manufacturer or that the sponsor of *Twenty-One* proffered Geritol, “the cure for tired blood.” Both of these products speak to the demands made on the “new” 1950s woman, who was expected to look good and perform well, both inside and outside of the home.

The producers and sponsors’ contestant choices reveal volumes about whose money they were interested in obtaining. Whereas most fictional programming featured idealized characters, settings, and plots, the primetime television quiz shows of the mid-1950s were designed to incorporate ordinary, real-life Americans and the extraordinariness of their everyday lives into the visual realm of American consciousness.<sup>28</sup> As Richard Tedlow described, “Most early contestants [on *The \$64,000 Question*] were seemingly average folks who harbored a hidden expertise in a subject far removed from their workaday lives...Everyone who had ever accumulated a store of disconnected, useless information could fantasize about transforming it into a pot of gold.”<sup>29</sup> In fact, what was stressed through producers’ discovery of the talented pool of contenders was that any one of them “could be your neighbor.” Weekly proof of the intelligence of Americans helped to provide a sense of hope and confidence in the future of the country, a message that had increased importance in the precarious cultural climate of the Cold War.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the quiz shows’ unspoken emphasis on untainted realism via the appearances

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<sup>28</sup> For an orientation to the conception and development of the “everyday,” see Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Everyday Ideas: Socioliterary Experience Among Antebellum New Englanders* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006). For an analysis of the “democratization of culture in a consumer society,” see Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> Tedlow, “Intellect on Television,” 484.

<sup>30</sup> In-depth considerations of the political climate of Cold War America, as well as the ways in which education was incorporated as a major aspect of both domestic and international propaganda at the time, are found in Martin J. Medhurst and H. W. Brands, ed., *Critical Reflections on the Cold War: Linking Rhetoric and History* (College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, 2000); Martin J. Medhurst, Robert L. Ivie, Philip Wander, and Robert L. Scott, *Cold War Rhetoric: Strategy, Metaphor, and Ideology* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University

of legitimate professionals in live-broadcast competitions reinforced the authenticity of the programs, a facet that producers exploited at will.<sup>31</sup>

When it came to casting contestants, quiz show producers opted for charismatic, outgoing people who were affable in front of a large audience, who had an intriguing personal narrative, and who would reinforce the parent network's blossoming brand identity. Every quiz show had its favorite "types."<sup>32</sup> CBS extended itself as an "everyman" network and generally featured edgier programming, from *See It Now* to Red Skelton and Arthur Godfrey. On *The \$64,000 Question*, contestants were typically careerists, often laborers and civil servants who worked with their bodies for little to average wages: cobblers, aspiring actors, a military serviceman, an explorer, a jockey, a cop. These "deserving" contestants displayed an unwavering work ethic and had still found time to cultivate a passionate, specialized knowledge in a field usually incongruent with the prevailing stereotypes of their working lives. NBC, by contrast, prided itself as broadcasting royalty and consistently scheduled enough weekly dignified cultural programs, such as *Omnibus*, to perpetuate the network's insistence that broadcasting could elevate the crude

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Press, 1997); and Christopher Simpson, ed., *Universities and Empire: Money and Politics in the Social Sciences During the Cold War* (New York: The New Press, 1998). For important considerations of the cultural climate of Cold War America, see especially Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995); Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998); and Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). In addition, for insightful analyses of cultural messages provided through the era's other visual media, most notably film, see Anna Creadick, "Incredible/Shrinking Men: Masculinity and Atomic Anxiety in American Postwar Science-Fiction Film," in *Fear Itself: Enemies Real & Imagined in American Culture*, ed. Nancy Lusignan Schultz (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1999), 285-300; Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Jason Mulvihill, "James Bond's Cold War: Part I," *International Journal of Instructional Media* 28.3 (2001): 225-36 and "The Golden Age of Bond: Creation of a Cold War Popular Hero (1962-1965): Part II," *International Journal of Instructional Media* 28.4 (2001): 337-53; and Michael Rogin, "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies" *Representations* 6 (Spring 1984): 1-36.

<sup>31</sup> On the significance of authenticity, see the canonical piece by Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217-51; and Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

<sup>32</sup> See "Getting Rich on TV," *Newsweek*, February 11, 1957, 63-65, and Jess Stearn, "How to Win a Quiz Show," *American Mercury*, August 1957, 37-41.

tastes of the masses. On *Twenty-One*, contestants' work ethics were transferred to the realm of mental labor. Winners certainly worked hard at their careers, yet most featured contestants held administrative employment, often in education and other professional fields, such as law, market research, medical research, psychology, and social work.

Producers of both of the biggest high-stakes quiz shows did more than just select suitable contestants, however. They ensured that the marketable ones who proved popular with audiences remained on home television screens for as long as it was profitable for the sponsors and networks. As was verified by the congressional testimony of Mert Koplín and Shirley Bernstein<sup>33</sup> of Entertainment Productions, Inc. (EPI) and Dan Enright, Albert Freedman, and Howard Felsher of Barry-Enright Productions, the matches were pre-planned at least seventy-five percent of the time. The winners and losers were predetermined, as were their take-home prize amounts. Equally important to the illusion constructed by quiz show producers was a dramatic, suspenseful narrative to entice viewers to return week after week, as the longevity of a show depended on its ratings and a steady stream of profits it produced for the sponsor.

Plausibility was a critical concern for producers, especially at *Twenty-One*. EPI, which produced *Question* for CBS, had an easier time with this criterion because their contestants had to be experts in only one category, and it was a category of the contestant's choosing. The origin of a contestant's interest in a particular subject became the human-interest grab for the audience. The more unlikely the combination of category to contestant, the more the press noticed the peculiarity and the more the public seemed to talk about it. *Twenty-One*, however, was designed to challenge even "geniuses and near-geniuses."<sup>34</sup> Their plausible contestant pool was considerably more limited. The important consideration for producers and sponsors to keep in

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<sup>33</sup> Shirley was Leonard Bernstein's sister.

<sup>34</sup> Stearn, "How to Win a Quiz Show," 41.

mind when casting the contestants was that a happy audience was a buying audience. As Gordon Cotler analyzed for the *New York Times Magazine*, “The rise of the limited egghead...is ascribed to the higher status education has achieved with the rise in the educational level of the audience. Whether the increasing numbers of college graduates are better educated is beside the point. They are at least in sympathy with the goals of education.”<sup>35</sup> As long as the contestants exalted the same values as the viewing audience, goodwill would be extended to the sponsoring company that paid the show’s expenses.

### 2.2.1 The Female Contestants

Even though Charles Van Doren regularly appears at the center of memories and analyses of the 1950s quiz shows, the more unexpected and perhaps noteworthy stories involve the women who appeared as contestants. The number of women on high-stakes quiz programs was noticeably smaller than the sixty-forty average (in favor of men) on the small-scale giveaway shows. This gender discrepancy was accredited in part to the prevailing mindset of “home-directedness” that encouraged women to obtain a good education, while simultaneously discouraging them from applying what they had learned, unless a husband or a career required it.<sup>36</sup> Further, television, as a visual space, stipulated that women’s brains were best accessorized by beauty. Even on quiz shows, intelligent *and* glamorous women had proven precarious terrain for early television executives to navigate. In the *New York Times Magazine*, C. Robert Jennings reported that, from

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<sup>35</sup> Gordon Cotler, “The Question About Quiz Shows,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 1, 1957, 94.

<sup>36</sup> My summary of the era’s attitude toward intelligent women has been collected from a variety of 1950s printed sources, including Bell, “The Great Back-to-Work Movement”; Hamill, “Women as Bosses”; C. Robert Jennings, “Quiz Shows: The Woman Question,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 9, 1958, 16, 65-67; and Christine Becker, “‘Glamor Girl Classed as TV Show Brain’: The Body and Mind of Faye Emerson,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 38.2 (2004): 242-60. “Home-directedness” is quoted from Jennings, “Quiz Shows: The Woman Question,” 16, as are numerical data on contestant ratios.

June 1955 to February 1958, only three of the eleven jackpot winners and forty-four of the 114 total contestants on *The \$64,000 Question* had been women. While *Question*'s spin-off, *The \$64,000 Challenge*, saw a single woman challenged by nine consecutive men, overall, thirty-one of the 104 contestants were women. Likewise, *Twenty-One* hosted only twenty women in its progression of seventy-three contestants. It was not from lack of trying.

Producers of quiz shows at both networks kept no secrets about which contestants they wanted most. Albert Freedman, the Barry-Enright producer who managed contestant selection for NBC's *Twenty-One*, had consistently stressed in current affairs magazine interviews that "bright, and attractive, women" were his most sought-after prospects. "The ratio of contestants runs about four men to every woman," explained Dan Enright to *Newsweek*, adding, "Ideally, it would be half and half."<sup>37</sup> As various quiz show producers practically begged women to apply at offices up and down Madison Avenue, *New Yorker* columnist John Lardner recognized the significance embodied in "the incongruity of expertness in odd places."<sup>38</sup> For traditionally feminine contestants, gender was underscored in every production decision. In effect, women were granted entrance to media celebrity only through their unexpected mastery of "men's subjects." The female contestants who did appear on primetime quiz shows transmitted personal narratives, accomplishments, and aspirations that were uncharacteristic of evening network sitcoms, the most likely places to find women on television in the 1950s.<sup>39</sup> Whereas the sitcoms of the 1950s propagated the "indestructibility and perpetuity of the family,"<sup>40</sup> the primetime quiz shows instead sought self-sufficient—and usually childless—women with full-time careers. The

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<sup>37</sup> "Ways of a Winner," *Newsweek*, November 4, 1957, 100.

<sup>38</sup> John Lardner, "The Air: Life Around the Booths," *New Yorker*, November 30, 1957, 147.

<sup>39</sup> Press, *Women Watching Television*, 29-35; See also Leibman. For a general summary of women contestants on *Twenty-One* and *The \$64,000 Question*, see Jennings, "Quiz Shows: The Woman Question."

<sup>40</sup> Press, *Women Watching Television*, 33.

winners, and even sometimes the losers, became celebrated media personalities whose lives and endeavors could be followed in mass-market magazines and New York City newspapers.<sup>41</sup>

On *The \$64,000 Question* and its spin-off *The \$64,000 Challenge*, the women were a mismatched collection of ages, races, and social classes, which served as proof that the American Dream was available to all who dared reach for it. A newly licensed psychologist named Joyce Brothers wanted to win the jackpot on *The \$64,000 Question*, reportedly because “she and her intern husband needed the money.” To succeed, she had read and memorized a book about boxing. Her initial win on *Question*—where she was only the second person to ever reach the jackpot—and her follow-up appearance on *Challenge* launched Brothers’ media career. Her self-help book, *10 Days to a Successful Memory*, received repeated mention in the *New York Times*, and Brothers was picked to provide commentary on *Sports Showcase* for New York City’s CBS-affiliated station WATV five nights a week.<sup>42</sup>

Barbara Hall, a *Ziegfeld Follies* chorus girl from the outskirts of Pittsburgh, proved that women could be “bright and beautiful,” as well as popular with audiences. The 24-year-old Hall ostensibly agreed to appear on the program because she believed the primetime exposure would advance her acting career. When she missed the \$128,000 question on Shakespeare because she incorrectly identified the author’s signature, CBS received more than 200 protest letters from the viewing public who demanded to know what a signature had to do with the English language’s greatest playwright. Hall graciously conceded her defeat, even defending the legitimacy of the

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<sup>41</sup> For particular considerations of the instantaneous rise to celebrity enjoyed by several quiz contestants, see Anderson, *Television Fraud*, and Daniel Seligman, “Revlon’s Jackpot,” *Fortune*, April 1956, 136-38, 234-44.

<sup>42</sup> For newspaper coverage of Joyce Brothers’ continuing media successes, see Val Adams, “Quiz Expert Wins Commentator Job,” *New York Times*, May 18, 1956, 51; “Display Ad 1087: 10 Days to a Successful Memory,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1957, BR22; and “Books Today,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1957, 24. Brothers was also a frequent “celebrity spotting” mentioned in Grossinger’s News-Notes ads in the *Times*. Ironically, Brothers eventually landed back on game shows, as a panelist, throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

missed question in a *Newsweek* column.<sup>43</sup> Luckily for the outraged viewers, just two weeks after her misstep, Hall's theatrical desires came to fruition when she returned to the CBS airwaves in the play "The Change in Chester," by Arthur Hailey. Only three months later, Hall received her first Broadway speaking part, in the aptly-titled "One Foot in the Door."<sup>44</sup>

Joyce Myron, an 18-year-old college sophomore, stunned audiences with her proficient recall of the principles of nuclear physics and atomic energy.<sup>45</sup> Even more astonishing were the lengths to which producers and sponsors accommodated her "shocking talents." At the \$64,000 question level, Revlon allowed Myron to run over the program's allotted airtime by eleven seconds, which translated economically to the loss of two commercials, at a cost of \$70,000. Two weeks later, Myron was flown to General Electric's Vallecitos Atomic Laboratory in Pleasanton, California, where she answered the \$96,000 question by giving instructions to lab technicians—in full radiation protective gear. The expenses were large but were also largely justified by the amount of media attention they received—and the names Revlon and CBS were attached to all of them. The production decisions had essentially prepaid for the all the publicity.

Educational feats started at early ages on the *Question/Challenge* franchise shows, where children became some of the most memorable contestants. Robert Strom, an 11-year-old science prodigy, was the biggest money winner of the 1950s, but his female counterparts were equally impressive. Gloria Lockerman, a 12-year-old African-American spelling bee champion from Baltimore, became one of the first child quiz superstars "whose poise and sweetness enchanted everyone." As *Question* host Hal March noted, "Gloria won \$16,000 spelling words I could

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<sup>43</sup> "Who Goofed?," *Newsweek*, July 29, 1957, 82.

<sup>44</sup> Coverage of Barbara Hall's acting engagements is found in "On Television," *New York Times*, July 31, 1957, 47, and in Louis Calta, "TV 'Heavyweight' to Train on Stage," *New York Times*, October 26, 1957, 19.

<sup>45</sup> For accounts of Joyce Myron's highly unconventional winning streak, see "Girl, 18, Wins \$64,000," *New York Times*, August 21, 1957, 55, as well as "Girl at \$96,000 on TV," *New York Times*, September 11, 1957, 67.

hardly pronounce.”<sup>46</sup> An adolescent actress acclaimed for her performances as Helen Keller in “The Miracle Worker” on Broadway, Patty Duke entertained audiences while she won her way to the top prize. Duke’s appearance on the show was just one of many instances in which producers opted to incorporate well-known entertainment celebrities, like actor Vincent Price and bandleader Xavier Cugat, as well as immediate relatives of historically important figures, like Virgil Earp (brother of Wyatt) and Randolph Churchill (brother of Winston) into the quiz show narratives for the sole purpose of drawing in more viewers.

On *Twenty-One*, children and entertainment celebrities were not the most plausible contestants in light of the grueling general knowledge questions on which the show relied. Neither was the program’s studio stage built to house much working-class riff-raff. The contestants, particularly the women, were cultured and well educated, reflecting the images of the female consumers the program most wanted to reach. The first woman to grab the undivided attention of the press for NBC, Barry-Enright Productions, and Geritol was Vivienne Nearing, a well-to-do, Grace Kelly-esque lawyer who handled the Tab Hunter films for Warner Brothers Pictures. Nearing was a statuesque blonde with a pristine, light complexion and bracing blue eyes. Well-educated, studious, and arduously ambitious, Nearing represented an idealized 1950s professional working woman who could handle vital corporate responsibilities while still maintaining a desirable feminine mystique.<sup>47</sup>

Nearing’s husband, Victor, had been one of the unfortunate thirteen contestants who challenged Van Doren during his amazing winning streak. After Victor’s defeat, Nearing

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<sup>46</sup> Hal March, “The \$64,000 and I,” *Saturday Evening Post*, November 30, 1957, 21.

<sup>47</sup> For information about Vivienne Nearing and the chronological promotion of her appearances on *Twenty-One*, see “Van Doren, Woman Tied on Video Quiz,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1957, 63; “Charles Van Doren Tied Again on Quiz by Woman Lawyer,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1957, 59; Sam Falk, “Tomorrow’s Big Quiz Battle—A Contestant Does Some Research,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1957, X11; and “Van Doren Dethroned on TV Quiz by a Woman Who Knows Kings,” *New York Times*, March 12, 1957, 67.

declared her intention to defend her husband's honor by matching her wits against the champion. The Van Doren-Nearing showdown lasted nearly a month and caused so much fervor that even Nearing received a devoted share of local and national media attention. The *New York Times* observed on 19 February 1957 that Van Doren seemed to have "met his match" in Nearing, and the paper provided rather extensive coverage of Nearing's quiz show preparation, including a prominent photo spread in the Sunday edition of the *New York Times* on 10 March 1957. Pictured in relative seclusion both in her daytime office and in her evening-lit domestic sphere, special emphasis was paid to her dedicated study habits and her drive to succeed. The same week, in an issue dated 11 March 1957—the very day that Van Doren's reign ended—*Time* reported that Nearing had achieved the third-highest score, behind only Herb Stempel and Van Doren, on the exhausting preliminary written test administered by *Twenty-One* producers. Furthermore, she met Van Doren's gambling acumen with equal nerve.<sup>48</sup>

Also prominently highlighted was Nearing's crisp, modern fashion sense in combination with her media industry savvy. She had proven she could hold her own as the only female attorney in the legal division at Warner Brothers Pictures. Repeatedly referred to in print media as the "lovely lawyer" with "a hard-candy smile," Nearing proved to be a notable adversary for Van Doren, their genders be damned. The media spectacle surrounding the evenly waged mental battle between a woman and the intellectual giant made television history, as more viewers tuned in to *Twenty-One* than *I Love Lucy* for the first time ever.<sup>49</sup> After several tie matches, orchestrated for dramatic effect and to reduce Van Doren's overall prize winnings, Nearing

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<sup>48</sup> "Challenger," *Time*, March 11, 1957, 51.

<sup>49</sup> Val Adams, "TV-Radio Notes: This Season May Be Last for 'I Love Lucy' Show—Assorted Items," *New York Times*, February 24, 1957, X11.

emerged the victor. Her reign would last exactly one week, but it was an accomplishment that had the nation talking.<sup>50</sup>

For more than five straight months during 1958, Elfrida von Nardroff, from Brooklyn Heights, appeared on *Twenty-One*, setting records for consecutive appearances and prize money winnings on a single quiz program, more than a year after Van Doren's defeat. After twenty-one weeks and a winning streak that had driven her earnings up to \$253,500, von Nardroff lost to a high school teacher in early July 1958, leaving with a total of \$220,500 (of which she received exactly \$43,000 after taxes, due to her unmarried status).<sup>51</sup> With so much time spent on the television screens across the country, von Nardroff had become a staple visual presence on NBC, just as Charles Van Doren had—and the network used the two contestants' similarities to its own advantage. So that viewers would likewise associate the two champions, publicity photos shot for *Twenty-One* captured the images of Van Doren and von Nardroff together on more than one occasion.<sup>52</sup>

Often described in print media articles as a slender, attractive “pixie,” the 32-year-old von Nardroff actually had quite a lot in common with Van Doren, which attracted heavy publicity.<sup>53</sup> Like Van Doren, von Nardroff had first applied to be a contestant on the less

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<sup>50</sup> Articles generally lamented Van Doren's loss, although they wished no ill-will toward Nearing. See “Whither Charley?,” *Time*, March 25, 1957, 50.

<sup>51</sup> Von Nardroff's loss reduced her winnings by \$33,000 and actually dropped her prize total beneath that of Robert Strom, the 11-year-old boy from the Bronx who had won upwards of \$225,000 by appearing on two quiz shows, *The \$64,000 Question* and *The \$64,000 Challenge*. Her success is, therefore, often qualified as the highest prize total “on a single game show.”

<sup>52</sup> Corbis owns a variety of *Twenty-One* publicity photographs in its collections. See [www.corbisimages.com](http://www.corbisimages.com), especially the Rights-Managed Bettman collection images U1159806 and U1159144. Image U1159144 accompanied the von Nardroff interview in *Cosmopolitan*. See Elfrida von Nardroff, “The Bright Woman and Her Problems,” *Cosmopolitan*, September 1959, 45.

<sup>53</sup> See “Those TV Contestants,” *Newsweek*, April 14, 1958, 70-71; “Lady with the Answers,” *Time*, May 12, 1958, 70; “She Wins \$216,500, Record TV Quiz Pot,” *New York Herald Tribune*, May 27, 1958, 2.4; “Woman Wins \$237,500, Tops For Quiz Shows,” *New York Herald Tribune*, June 3, 1958; “Lady With the Answers,” *Newsweek*, June 9, 1958, 78; “New Quiz Champion; \$220,500 to Loser,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1958, 55; “Fallen but Queenly,” *Newsweek*, July 21, 1958, 52; Elfrida von Nardroff and Leslie Lieber, “My Quarter Million Dollar

challenging Barry-Enright Productions show *Tic Tac Dough*, and, like Van Doren, she was asked by a producer to return to the office to complete the much longer, much harder written test for *Twenty-One*. In addition to being close in age (von Nardroff was born the year before Van Doren), Elfrida and Charles were both graduate students at Columbia University at the time of their appearances on *Twenty-One*. Von Nardroff took night courses in psychology while serving as the full-time personnel director for the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants during the day. Also, like Van Doren, von Nardroff expressed a desire to become a teacher, an inspiration she credited to the example set by her parents. As was the case in Van Doren's situation, Elfrida's father was an esteemed professor, also on the Columbia faculty (in physics). Robert von Nardroff, who retired as Professor Emeritus, additionally served as an assistant dean of Columbia College for thirty-two years.<sup>54</sup> Von Nardroff, too, had benefitted from a diverse educational background, but, in contrast to the relatively smooth academic ride Van Doren enjoyed, she "bounced through eight [elementary and secondary] schools" and was suspended from Duke University for a semester before she realized the importance of learning to learn and of experiencing the joys of reading.

The *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, and every major mass-market magazine in the U.S. spotlighted von Nardroff and her quiz show accomplishments throughout spring and summer 1958, making her the second-biggest mass media sensation of all of *Twenty-One*'s contestants. By the time she finally lost on *Twenty-One*, von Nardroff was also clearly being molded to follow in Van Doren's celebrity footsteps. Just after her loss in July 1958, von

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Secret," *New York Herald Tribune*, July 20, 1958, 10.8-9, 26; and von Nardroff, "The Bright Woman and Her Problems," *Cosmopolitan*, September 1959, 42-45.

<sup>54</sup> It seems likely that the von Nardroffs crossed paths with the Van Dorens at some point before the elder von Nardroff retired in 1963, although Elfrida was repeatedly quoted as saying that she did not even know who Charles Van Doren was at the time she appeared on *Twenty-One*. See especially "My Quarter Million Dollar Secret."

Nardroff co-wrote an article for the *New York Herald Tribune* entitled, “My Quarter Million-Dollar Secret.” She characterized herself as a practical, self-sufficient, no-nonsense kind of woman, but denied having an agenda to further the “woman’s cause.” Still, she defied the conventional trappings of wife and mother so valued by non-feminists. Much had been publicized about the countless marriage proposals von Nardroff received from admirers, and columnists, reporters, and other media personalities actually urged her to get married, just so that she could hold on to more of her prize money. She vehemently refused and instead took the outrageous tax penalty so that she could remain the sole steward of her destiny. The complexity von Nardroff displayed was an effective middle ground, designed to appeal to as wide an audience as possible.<sup>55</sup>

The next month, in August 1958, the scandal over contestant rigging erupted in the New York County courts, and quiz shows soon began their exodus from television network programming schedules, leaving former contestants beyond the perimeters of media spotlights. Yet almost a year after *Twenty-One* had faded from the airwaves and just as the congressional investigation of quiz show practices was set to begin, von Nardroff appeared on the September 1959 cover of *Cosmopolitan*, as the feature for their special “Thirst for Knowledge” issue. Instead of being identified as a quiz show winner, von Nardroff was elevated to the status of “Sociologist” and offered her analyses of “intelligent women,” less from the objective perspective of a professional than from the subjectivity of first-hand experience.<sup>56</sup> Between articles about the alarming increase of “college-student crackups” and the distinguishing fashion trends of colleges nationwide, von Nardroff discussed the “inescapable” difficulties inherent in

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<sup>55</sup> For a consideration of the ways in which mass-market magazines of the 1890s simultaneously appealed to both feminist and conservative readers, see Ellen Gruber Garvey, “Reframing the Bicycle: Advertising-Supported Magazines and Scorching Women,” *American Quarterly* 47.1 (1995): 66-101.

<sup>56</sup> The *Cosmopolitan* cover announces her article as “Bright Women Problems by Sociologist Elfrida von Nardroff.”

the “universal prejudice against female intelligence” and staunchly defended a woman’s right to choose a career instead of family ties, as she herself had chosen.<sup>57</sup> With its publication date coinciding with the opening of the congressional investigation, however, this *Cosmopolitan* article appears almost to be a smokescreen intended to divert attention from the television industry revelations about to steal all available headlines. Whether or not von Nardroff’s new professionalism was intended to shield her from the brewing media storm, her appearance at such a critical juncture indicates that producers were still largely in charge of marketing their contestants for public consumption.

In addition to showcasing young professionals, both the *Question/Challenge* franchise and *Twenty-One* featured a number of middle-aged women who were experts on a variety of subjects. On *The \$64,000 Question* in July 1955, Catherine Kreitzer, the bible-expert grandmother who worked in the shipyards, captivated national primetime audiences, cornering a Trendex rating of 43, more than double the normal summer ratings for any primetime program.<sup>58</sup> Myrtle Power, another grandmother who appeared on the CBS program, became so associated with baseball trivia that her name often appeared in *New York Times* display ads for books on the subject. She was also popular enough that producers later asked Power to serve as one of the “champs” on the premiere episode of *The \$64,000 Challenge* to draw back all of her established fans.<sup>59</sup> Ruth Miller, a 50-year-old textbook writer, managed to meet Van Doren point for point throughout much of January 1957, something many of his other competitors had been unable to do. It was only when Van Doren finally outscored Miller to reach the \$99,000 mark that he

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<sup>57</sup> von Nardroff, “The Bright Woman and Her Problems,” 42-45.

<sup>58</sup> Trendex statistics for Catherine Kreitzer’s \$32,000 appearance are quoted from Val Adams, “A.F.T.R.A. Ratifies Hearings Clause,” *New York Times*, August 11, 1955, 43.

<sup>59</sup> In display ads in 1956, the *Fireside Book of Baseball* prominently boasted that it contained all of the questions and answers fielded by Myrtle Power. See, for example, “Display Ad 168,” *New York Times*, December 4, 1956, 37. For a summary of Power’s invitation to *The \$64,000 Challenge*, see Val Adams, “Sonny Fox in Line for TV Quiz Post,” *New York Times*, April 2, 1956, 47.

catapulted to national fame. An early standout losing contestant on *Twenty-One*, Rose Leibbrand, a retired Army major and director of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women, explained to viewers how she once escaped capture by bandits along the Yangtze River.<sup>60</sup> Women's knowledge and bravado knew no age limits—a fact the audience unexpectedly witnessed first-hand when Nelle Hurley, a clinical psychologist who fared unfavorably in her *Twenty-One* match against popular contestant David Mayer, took momentary command of the NBC airwaves after her defeat to criticize the program for its focus on minutia that “can be found out by looking them up in an encyclopedia.” Hurley added that “knowing such answers offhand is apt to be a matter of mere luck or mere mnemonics.”<sup>61</sup> As her spirited outburst showed, the thing about the neighborly people appearing live on the television screen is that they did not always do what the producers or sponsors expected them to do. It was up to viewers to stay tuned if they wanted to be caught by surprise.

Visually, many of the women contestants on the primetime quiz shows came equipped with distinct class indicators of cultivated taste. Fashionable attire, tasteful jewelry, and respectable comportments were combined with such delicate refinements as parlor game acumen, years of personalized piano and painting lessons, and intimate familiarity with world geography, opera, and classical literature. All were signs that denoted gendered, leisurely lives. These women chosen for display in quiz show consumer narratives were easily recognizable depictions that served two broad and equally valuable purposes. First, they were selected to appeal particularly to similarly reared viewers, intelligent and career-minded women who were otherwise grossly unrepresented in the majority of television programming fare. As self-

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<sup>60</sup> Information about Rose Leibbrand is supplied from my own observations of her *Twenty-One* appearance against Herbert Stempel on 14 November 1956. A copy of the match is available for viewing in The Collection at The Paley Center for Media, New York.

<sup>61</sup> Lardner, “The Air: Life Around the Booths,” 147.

sufficient wage earners, professional women constituted a crucial component in the consumer sphere. In efforts to attract and maintain their loyalty to sponsor products, their occupational efforts and extensive preparation for the business world were symbolically rewarded through the achievements of Brothers, Duke, Hall, Kreitzer, Lockerman, Myron, Nearing, Power, von Nardroff, and others. These popular contestants served as reflections of changing social settings and constituted indisputable proof that women were not simply wasting their lives or their brains at home. In fact, these contestants were financially rewarded for *knowing*. Further, their appearances noiselessly validated the respectability of family planning as an option to enable women to pursue worthwhile and satisfying careers, as opposed to jobs.

For those young (and not-so-young) women who did not orbit in professional women's circles, such depictions of successful women served a second function: to provide an idealized upwardly mobile middle-class model of female autonomy to which women could aspire. As Wolff noted in her advertising trade handbook, "class status is determined by values and attitudes, as well as income."<sup>62</sup> The women featured as quiz show contestants were daring and self-determinate. They took charge of their lives, their careers, and their financial futures—and prospered because of their initiative. The significance of featuring well-educated information-minded professional women on the quiz shows manifests from the fact that their primetime visual representations reached an incredible number of people. At last, they were part of a sales story.

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<sup>62</sup> Wolff, *What Makes Women Buy*, xi.

### 2.2.2 The Male Contestants

The majority of the male quiz show contestants chosen for 1950s primetime consumption were arguably selected to appeal to women as well. Not all of them were quite matinee idol material, but they were charming and approachable, with traits that ingratiated them to viewing audiences. Maintaining the CBS brand identity of “everyday” Americans, the men who vied for the top cash prize on *The \$64,000 Question* were often honest, hard-working types whose area of expertise was unexpectedly out of character. There were the one-of-a-kind oddities, like Peter Freuchen, a 70-year-old Danish explorer who had lost his leg to frostbite on a Hudson Bay excursion yet excelled in “strange nautical objects.”<sup>63</sup> Viewers, however, were more likely to see a continuity among the categories chosen by contestants. As experts in high-brow subject areas, male contestants were symbolically feminized by their selected knowledge interests: in most television programming fare, their choices were more likely subjects with which women would be engaged. On the quiz shows, however, male contestants held appeal as unmistakably heterosexual men, just ones whose masculinity was softened by their sensitivity to cultural interests and their ability to be conversant in a “woman’s sphere” of familiarity.<sup>64</sup>

Gino Prato, the first quiz show contestant to rise to popular culture celebrity, was a Bronx cobbler who specialized in Italian opera. His familiarity with compositions, titles, and characters earned him \$32,000 and unforeseen additional perks, such as a goodwill ambassadorship for a shoe heel/sole manufacturer at an annual salary of \$10,000, two eighth-row season pass seats from the Metropolitan Opera Association, and free round-trip airline tickets to Italy, courtesy of

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<sup>63</sup> See “Explorer is 5th to Win \$64,000,” *New York Times*, July 4, 1956, 37.

<sup>64</sup> For analysis of media representations of American masculinity, see Brenton J. Malin, *American Masculinity Under Clinton: Popular Media and the Nineties “Crisis of Masculinity”* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

a travel agent.<sup>65</sup> The first contestant to make it all the way to \$64,000, Marine Captain Richard McCutchen, was a distinguished two-war veteran. Despite his extensive combat experiences, his favorite hobby was “food and gourmet cooking.” To win the jackpot, McCutchen successfully answered a seven-part question about the courses served at a 1939 royal banquet at Buckingham Palace.<sup>66</sup> Bill Pearson, a jockey who had appeared (as himself) in the Columbia Pictures feature film *Boots Malone* prior to winning the \$64,000 prize, had successfully identified six famous paintings: “He was asked to name their titles, the artists and one person with whom the artist had studied.” Newspaper accounts of his win highlighted the fact that Pearson credited his earlier motion picture experience as the original spark of his interest in art.<sup>67</sup>

Michael della Rocca, yet another New York-area shoemaker conversant in the category of opera, managed to match Prato’s winning total—and then invited Prato to be his “expert adviser” in the isolation booth as della Rocca went on to answer the \$64,000 jackpot question correctly.<sup>68</sup> The tie-in with an established fan favorite brought in more viewers than usual, so much so that the gimmick became a standard configuration in the *Question/Challenge* formula. As a whole, *Challenge* offered *Question* jackpot winners a second chance to turn information into money. Even though the programs’ names remained unchanged throughout the duration of their network broadcasting, EPI producers significantly altered the rules of the game when they voided the trademark \$64,000 prize ceiling in March 1957. Their decision, intended to keep the CBS programs competitive with NBC’s runaway primetime success, was ultimately in response

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<sup>65</sup> Gino Prato was praised on consecutive days in Val Adams, “Tuesday TV Spot Acquired by G.M.,” *New York Times*, August 9, 1955, 51, and Jack Gould, “TV: Father Knows Best,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1955, 51.

<sup>66</sup> Richard McCutchen’s win was recapped by J. P. Shanley in “Marine Wins \$64,000 TV Quiz; Aided by Father in Food Queries,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1955, 1, 71.

<sup>67</sup> The *New York Times* also covered Bill Pearson’s endeavors—both as a jockey and as a quiz show contestant—in such articles as “Jockey Wins \$64,000 In a TV Photo-Finish,” April 18, 1956, 63.

<sup>68</sup> Michael della Rocca received coverage in “Cobbler Sews Up \$64,000 Booty; To Stage Operas With Winnings,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1956, 46.

to Charles Van Doren surpassing the \$100,000 mark on *Twenty-One*. “As for quiz show money, it’s noteworthy that the dosage has been increased from time to time, as with drugs in the outside world, to keep up with adjustments in the public’s appetite,” commented John Lardner.<sup>69</sup>

Teddy Nadler, one of the more widely mentioned (although not always for positive reasons) contestants in 1950s mass media, was the first competitor granted the opportunity to try for more than \$64,000 on *Challenge*. Called the “human almanac,” Nadler was EPI’s answer to all of the publicity heaped upon Van Doren, and Nadler and Van Doren could not have appeared or been discussed much more differently by media outlets.<sup>70</sup> Nadler was self-educated, forced to quit school at the age of 13 to help support his family. He had applied five separate times to be a contestant on *Challenge* before producers even gave him a second thought. Most unlike the professionals on *Twenty-One*, at the time of his first appearance, Nadler worked as a \$70-a-week supply clerk for an Army post in St. Louis and had been in charge of all family shopping expenses for the entirety of his fifteen-year marriage. “He buys the groceries and all the family clothing, even lingerie and stockings for his wife,” reported *Ladies Home Journal*, with a mixed sense of wonder and caution. Whereas style sense was a visual component of NBC’s chosen contestants, Nadler was a “short, dark man in ill-fitting cotton slacks and a loud open-necked sports shirt.”<sup>71</sup>

Nadler, however, seemed to know as much as Van Doren knew. On *Challenge*, Nadler uncharacteristically faced off against experts in three categories at once—ancient history, baseball, and the Civil War. Baseball and the Civil War, incidentally, were two of Van Doren’s

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<sup>69</sup> Lardner, “Life Around the Booths,” 147.

<sup>70</sup> See particularly “Human Almanac,” *Time*, March 18, 1957, 63; “Whither Charley?,” *Time*, March 25, 1957, 50; “Portrait of a Winner,” *Newsweek*, April 15, 1957, 70; and John Lardner, “The Air: The Ear and the Overshoot,” *New Yorker*, August 9, 1958, 70-73.

<sup>71</sup> Betty Hannah Hoffman, “Famous Overnight,” *Ladies Home Journal*, November 1957, 161-64+.

better-known specialties. In an attempt to drum up media notice for Nadler, EPI had Nadler directly challenge Van Doren to a face-off of wits at the end of one of his matches. Strangely, Nadler's dare was not covered by national mass-market magazines; *Variety*, however, took a special interest in it, reporting on the front page of the 13 February 1957 issue that Nadler's on-air challenge had started a series of back-and-forth taunts and accusations between EPI and Barry-Enright, "with a trace of both pressagentry [*sic*] and personal bitterness."<sup>72</sup>

*Twenty-One* producers similarly used quirky "underdogs" on a few occasions to appeal to audience members. Harold Craig, a New York farmer, outwitted and outshone a string of opponents for seventeen weeks in 1957, amassing more than \$100,000 in the process.<sup>73</sup> Even with the money and a newfound interest in running for Republican Representative for his U.S. congressional district, Craig nevertheless returned to his farm to shovel manure and wave at the hundreds of carloads of spectators who drove past his homestead on Sundays for a glimpse of their television hero. The very first continuing winner on *Twenty-One*, Herbert Stempel, the son of a U.S. letter carrier, was billed as an "average guy from Forest Hills, Queens," who had served in his country's military during wartime and was reaping the benefits of the G.I. Bill by attending college classes. For all his seemingly strong character assets, it was also made obvious that winning thousands of dollars on a television quiz show was an extraordinary accomplishment for Stempel, a sentiment that was reinforced by host Jack Barry's comment, "I know how badly you *do* need the money."<sup>74</sup> Producers initially anticipated that the television viewing audience would root for a hard-working man who needed—and could win—a small fortune, but by the time Stempel had amassed \$69,500 over the course of six weeks, it seemed many viewers had lost

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<sup>72</sup> "TV Quiz Shows Start Feuding; Battle of the Van Doren 'Challenge,'" *Variety*, February 13, 1957, 1.

<sup>73</sup> "Ways of a Winner," 100.

<sup>74</sup> *Twenty-One* (NBC, November 28, 1956), The Collection, The Paley Center for Media, New York. Emphasis in original broadcast.

interest. When weekly ratings for *Twenty-One* indicated that Stempel had reached an audience-appeal plateau, producers began to look for a suitable character replacement.

In a matter of serendipitous timing, Charles Van Doren was marshaled onto the *Twenty-One* stage in late November 1956, ultimately ushering in an unprecedented streak of popularity for the NBC primetime program—as well as for himself. The 28 November 1956 broadcast aired nationwide, filtering Van Doren’s erudite image through television screens and into the larger public consciousness of 1950s America, where he remained a weekly primetime visual staple for the subsequent three and a half months. Producers toiled to maintain his popularity by progressively endearing Van Doren to viewers’ watchful eyes. Visually presented, Van Doren was a tall, lanky, clean-shaven young man who dressed the part of a beginning Ivy League university English professor. Easily interjecting witty comments between his wide-ranging recitation of facts, Van Doren was pleasantly charming and unassuming. Traveling in literary and intellectual circles that included Robert Frost, James Thurber, Sinclair Lewis, and Mortimer Adler, to name but a few, the Van Dorens attracted notice in the news, in part, because of their prestigious affiliations. Implicit in the repeated reminders of Van Doren’s association with a well-respected, well-established family of intellectuals was an unmistakable heritage of the New England self-reliance preached by Emerson and Thoreau.<sup>75</sup> Van Doren’s English classes became quite popular with Columbia undergraduates, and newspaper photographers followed him in and out of the ivied halls.

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<sup>75</sup> “Remarkable Van Dorens,” *Time*, February 11, 1957, 46. Media articles that promoted Van Doren’s genuine intelligence, sensational recall, and highly respectable family ties include “A Notable American Family and a Question of TV Ethics,” *Life*, October 26, 1959, 24-35; Richard F. Shepard, “Van Doren Loses Post with N.B.C.,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1959, 29; Bob Stahl, “A Dillar, A Dollar: A Nine O’clock Scholar Tells How It Feels to Win a Fortune,” *TV Guide*, February 23-March 1, 1957, 4-7; “Van Doren to Sign Pact with N.B.C.,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1957, 66; Charles Van Doren, “TV-Hating Eggheads are Soft-boiled,” *New York Herald Tribune TV Magazine*, December 15, 1957, 12-14; and “The Wizard of Quiz,” *Time*, February 11, 1957, 44-50.

Over the course of a consistently remarkable two-month showing, Van Doren received some two thousand letters per week from parents, teachers, students, and other supportive emulators alike. He was recognized nationally as the inspiration for the public's renewed interest in education and the pursuit of knowledge. *Time* and *TV Guide* prominently featured Van Doren on their front covers, acclaiming the rewards of intellectual stimulation and the potential for television to deliver it, while the *New York Times* began to take notice of Van Doren's additional network programming appearances and private social engagements, assisting in making him the country's symbol of hope for the future. As Richard Goodwin, the special investigator retained by Congress to investigate scandalous charges levied at the quiz show programs, chronicled, "Students at Columbia...put up signs directing visitors to 'the smartest man in the world.'"<sup>76</sup> Even when Van Doren eventually lost his quiz show preeminence to Vivienne Nearing in March 1957, he remained a television personality, appearing sometimes as a guest, sometimes as a host, for a number of NBC radio and television programs, beginning just ten days after his loss and continuing until October 1959, when the congressional investigation of quiz shows began.<sup>77</sup>

Discursively, Van Doren represented a well-balanced American knowledge, a special blend of the traditional high-brow canons of wisdom with the in-the-moment pulses of popular culture. There was a sense that Van Doren—and the primetime quiz show contestants as a whole—was “arriving,” as an urgency underwrote the media reports about his endeavors. Various *Twenty-One* publicity photos of Van Doren positioned him visually in transition as well. When Van Doren surpassed \$100,000 in prize money, the public relations photo session after the

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<sup>76</sup> Goodwin's observation of the behavior of Columbia students is quoted from "Investigating the Quiz Shows" in *Remembering America*, 45.

<sup>77</sup> His first NBC appearance was on NBC Radio's *Conversation* in March 1957. Van Doren's three-year contract with NBC as an "education consultant" was first announced on 10 April 1957 in the *New York Times* ("Van Doren to Sign Pact with N.B.C."). Van Doren's retention was very strategic for the network.

show captured Jack Barry literally lifting Van Doren off of his feet in celebration. Van Doren appears to leave the ground easily, his wide smile and awed expression a result of the dollar amount, with exclamation point, announced on the tote board.<sup>78</sup> In particular, his overall dedication to the pursuit of knowledge was often the focus of his media praise, and his ability to synthesize the tenets of longstanding academic traditions with the changing innovations of the contemporary moment galvanized a constructed image of Van Doren as a cultural symbol of optimum American possibility. Rather than represent the established, mature elite, Van Doren became an emblem of the rising generation that would be primed to perpetuate the nation's values and priorities into the future.

In consistently characterizing Van Doren as a “golden boy,” media reporters helped perpetuate his association with wealth and monetary riches, the descriptive color invoked to connote the glow emanating from his newly bursting treasure chest.<sup>79</sup> For his fans and admirers, Van Doren more prominently became the symbol of honest middle-class rewards. While his parents were well-known intellectuals, Van Doren presumably had to rely on his own abilities to succeed. Embodying the markers of a steadfast work ethic and continued self-sufficiency, Van Doren's successes distilled the persistence and determination that would lead any committed individual to positive results. *Newsweek* quoted Jack Barry as saying, “He is quite a revelation to me. He's a bookworm without appearing to be one. He's charming as well as being erudite. This guy, if you'll pardon the expression, has *real* humility.”<sup>80</sup> He represented the type of man that sensible mothers wanted their sons to grow up to be—or their daughters to grow up to marry. He was the kind of man, in fact, to whom dozens of young women boldly proposed.

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<sup>78</sup> See the Rights-Managed Corbis Bettman collection image U1122992 at [www.corbisimages.com](http://www.corbisimages.com).

<sup>79</sup> Alfred Bester, “Life Among the Giveaway Programs,” *Holiday*, May 1957, 115-16+.

<sup>80</sup> “Know-It-All,” *Newsweek*, January 28, 1957, 60. Emphasis in original.

“Women in America, we are warned, control our wealth, our advertising and our thinking. Things were looking pretty grim for men until we began our counteroffensive early this year with a shrewd flanking movement. The Cinderella of 1957 is a man...Charles Van Doren,” announced Alfred Bester, writing for *Holiday* in May 1957.<sup>81</sup> In spite of his feminized detail retention, Van Doren also stepped outside the bookworm world of libraries and formal education and was relatable to more manly men. Although he displayed a privileged class athleticism, with his own greatest sports accomplishments performed in squash and tennis, Van Doren had coached intramural baseball and basketball teams at St. John’s College. He was as fluent in the members-only vernacular of bridge as he was in the seedier jargon of pool. As a military cadet, he had learned to play poker and soon spent twelve hours a day in competitions, perfecting his skills, which won him \$3,000 in less than a year. Van Doren had even spent a night in a Florida military jail cell after he was picked up by MPs for “over-celebrating V-E Day.” Van Doren’s boldly adventurous spirit had led him to hitchhike 4,000 miles around Europe, and it had always attracted the attention of women, even if they were typically more beauty than brains.<sup>82</sup>

High-end pedigrees, such as Van Doren’s, became the base upon which other *Twenty-One* contestants were built, as the focus of the game and profitable gamesmanship turned to broad knowledge—and the overall recompense of a good education. Following Vivienne Nearing’s defeat of Van Doren, she herself was very quickly dethroned by Hank Bloomgarden, a medical research consultant who frequently promoted the benefits of healthy lungs during his quiz show appearances. “Motivation-research expert” David Mayer proved a favorite with female viewers, as did Paul Bain, a music teacher, and Timothy Horan, a writer. Not only was knowledge the key to financial gain, with college degrees promising to add \$100,000 to workers’

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<sup>81</sup> Bester, “Life Among the Giveaway Programs,” 115.

<sup>82</sup> “The Wizard of Quiz,” 44-50.

lifetime earnings, but it also was an antidote to “organizational man” syndrome and the best guarantee for any degree of autonomy in the workplace. The accelerated mass production of durable goods after World War II had further emphasized the new U.S. “consumer republic,” but it had likewise agitated old fears that consumption ultimately feminized men. Out of necessity, men were forced into “wage slavery” in order to “keep up with the Joneses” in their idyllic suburban neighborhoods, yet male quiz show contestants, on *Twenty-One* in particular, had escaped wage slavery through their pursuit of more self-determined employment.

So as not to ostracize the “forgotten fifteen million” African-American consumers watching television, who contributed “an estimated annual spending capacity of ten billion dollars” to the economy, primetime quiz shows included representations of race on their programs.<sup>83</sup> As noted earlier, Gloria Lockerman fared well on *Question* but opted to play it safe once she reached the \$16,000 mark. *Twenty-One* introduced Clarence Holloway on their program in December 1956 as a worthy opponent for Charles Van Doren. Holloway was a full-time New York City social worker and one of only two African Americans to graduate from Harvard Law School.<sup>84</sup> In accordance with NBC’s implementation of the “Integration without Identification” policy, little attention was drawn verbally to Holloway’s race.<sup>85</sup> Instead, his physical disabilities, including legal blindness that required use of a cane, were as visually prominent as his skin color. Holloway gave Van Doren—who missed more questions than he answered correctly during the match—a run for his money. After two ties, at the end of the episode, mid-match,

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<sup>83</sup> See Murray Forman, “Employment and Blue Pencils: NBC, Race, and Representation, 1926-55,” in *NBC: America’s Network*, ed. Michele Hilmes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 117-34. See especially pp. 120-21, 125.

<sup>84</sup> Holloway’s accomplishments at Harvard were also noted in *Life*, April 26, 1948.

<sup>85</sup> NBC’s “Integration without Identification” policy is detailed in Forman, “Employment and Blue Pencils.”

Holloway held a four-point lead over the champion and looked as though he could be victorious the following week.<sup>86</sup>

*Giant Step*, a quiz show for adolescents, received applications from 1,500 students nationwide each week. Producers whittled that talent pool to a mere two, and rewarded the bright youngsters with the correct answers with four-year, all-expense-paid scholarships to the college or university of their choosing. In early 1957, 11-year-old George Miller, an African-American public school student from Mooresville, North Carolina, accumulated an array of consumer goods, including a movie camera, watch, television set, freezer, microscope, electric trains, and “English bikes,” as well as copies of the United Nations Charters signed by Henry Cabot Lodge and Ralph Bunche, on his way to completing the eighth and final step that earned himself a full ride to Harvard. Additionally, he was rewarded with a year-long European trip to share with his family. On television, education was the levellest of playing fields after all, and it promised the most plunders.<sup>87</sup>

The appearances of Holloway, Lockerman, and Miller were certainly unusual occurrences on primetime quiz shows, but they were not the only instances in which producers introduced race and ethnicity to the American Dream narrative.<sup>88</sup> Dr. Carlos Carballo, a medical researcher from Havana, Cuba, on vacation in the U.S. with his wife, provides another

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<sup>86</sup> *Twenty-One* (NBC, December 26, 1956), The Collection, The Paley Center for Media, New York.

<sup>87</sup> Marguerite Cartwright, “Encounter with a Contest Winner,” *Negro History Bulletin*, February 1957, 109-10. The intersections of realism and race, as evidenced by these quiz show contestants, warrants much more focused concentration than can be devoted here. In light of the U.S. Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that stirred up fears and hatred in too many portions of the country and the racial and ethnic grumblings that seemed to persist in general, inclusion of African Americans—as well as other members of minority groups—in primetime network quiz show narratives merits additional research.

<sup>88</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the historical depictions of race, gender, and class in early American visual culture, see Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) and Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). For a particularly interesting analysis of Western stereotypes of Jewish culture, see Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

interesting case study for visual representations of race, ethnicity, and gender on 1950s quiz shows. In early November 1956, *Twenty-One* producers at Barry-Enright Productions were “seeking to locate a quiz contestant to inform him that his elimination on a quiz show had been in error and that he could return to try again.”<sup>89</sup> In Carballo’s first appearance, Herb Stempel had provided an incorrect answer to a World War II question, yet host Jack Barry accepted it as correct, whereby Stempel defeated Carballo. NBC was soon flooded with protest calls, cables, and letters from viewers demanding that producers remedy their mistake. As an act of good faith, NBC invited the challenger back for another match, which he also lost, but not before charming the studio audience into fits of snickering and guffaws.<sup>90</sup> His entertainment value was priceless, and the mistake proved ultimately beneficial to producers.

### **2.2.3 Audience Responses to Sponsors**

On the quiz shows, the same corporations who produced helpful home-remedy products that made women look and feel good also bestowed monetary riches on hard-working individuals. Their corporate benevolence knew no bounds. Viewers responded to the images offered by the primetime quiz shows through purchasing products from the program sponsors, whose marketing efforts overwhelmingly met with positive results. During the inaugural season of *The \$64,000 Question*, the same year that women reportedly spent \$116 million on skin-care products alone, Revlon’s sales rose fifty-four percent to \$52 million, and the company’s net earnings increased

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<sup>89</sup> Val Adams, “Stars of ‘Met’ to Offer Excerpts From 5 Operas on Sullivan Show,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1956, 59.

<sup>90</sup> Carballo’s good-faith, second-chance match against Stempel was aired 14 November 1956. *Twenty-One* (NBC, November 14, 1956), The Collection, The Paley Center for Media, New York.

200 percent to more than \$3.5 million.<sup>91</sup> Hal March, emcee of the CBS program, often had to ask viewers to be patient if their local stores were sold out of Revlon's products; their factories simply could not keep up with public demand. "The upsurge...of Revlon...demonstrates that one can sell an abundance of lipstick, nail enamel, powder, and hair spray, and indeed overturn the whole cosmetics industry if one sponsors a television show called *The \$64,000 Question*," noted Daniel Seligman for *Fortune* in April 1956.<sup>92</sup>

Pharmaceuticals, Inc., makers of Geritol, Sominex and other sleep aids, and an assortment of over-the-counter cures for various physical complaints, saw a robust increase in sales as well. Within the first three months of *Twenty-One*'s primetime debut, Americans purchased nearly \$10.8 million worth of Geritol, boosting annual company sales above the \$25 million mark overall. This consumer response, however, should be assessed in context: the quiz shows of the mid-1950s were more staged than impromptu, with contestants carefully filtered through lengthy application exams and then through a battery of interviewers before facing their true test of audience appeal on live television. Beneath the glitzy celebration of American intelligence lay a much deeper interest in salesmanship and the good old-fashioned American dollar. As an anonymous cosmetics company executive was quoted as saying, "We don't sell lipstick...we buy customers."<sup>93</sup>

The primetime quiz shows of the 1950s can be seen as doubly enticing for sponsors interested in buying customers—in that they created televisual spaces where women could

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<sup>91</sup> Trushay Lotion advertisement, *McCall's*, March 1956.

<sup>92</sup> Seligman, "Revlon's Jackpot," 136.

<sup>93</sup> Percentages for Revlon's sales and earnings are quoted from Seligman, "Revlon's Jackpot," 136. Revlon's weekly expenditures as program sponsor totaled \$70,000 per week, a price that was considered an industry bargain. In addition, according to Seligman, contestants averaged only \$13,500 in prize-winnings out of that weekly total. For additional references to primary documents regarding Revlon's sponsorship of *The \$64,000 Question*, see Anderson, *Television Fraud*. Figures for Pharmaceuticals, Inc. sales are quoted from Stone and Yohn, *Prime Time and Misdemeanors*, 181.

exhibit independent and intelligent traits but still be in the service of consumer capitalism. Quiz show realism was intended to attract audience members who would then measure themselves against the contestants, and images of intelligent professional women would be enticing for a much wider range of women viewers than the simplicity of the characters found in stereotypical suburban spaces.<sup>94</sup> The producers hoped to inspire as many women as possible to emulate these contestants by purchasing the sponsors' product(s).

While makeup and health remedies are relatively inexpensive commodities, quiz show sponsors directly addressed women-as-consumers through their derivative promotion of intelligence and the monetary rewards seemingly assured by a good education. Both Nearing and von Nardroff were routinely photographed for magazine and newspaper articles amidst volumes and volumes of books, which they studied diligently at every free moment. Through such representations, women's upward mobility was linked to being smart. The likeable, popular female contestants endorsed by sponsors displayed modern sensibilities, poise, and other inscriptions of refinement as well as the wherewithal, in most cases, to hold promising full-time careers. Despite the fact that, when interviewed, the women who appeared as quiz show contestants shunned virtually all connections between their successes and any desire to forward feminism, several television viewers responded to the proof of equality that their images nonetheless conveyed.

Producers, who manipulated the line between necessary plausibility and reality to their sponsors' advantage, chose to conceptualize women consumers as intelligent, daring, ambitious, independent thinkers. Certainly, these characteristics could—and did—apply to a far greater number of women than the 3.4 million who worked in business and professional fields; however,

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<sup>94</sup> Herzog, "Why Do People Like a Program?," 67.

the primetime quiz show decision-makers maximized the opportunities provided by program timeslots, content, and consumer-oriented inclinations to draw in a segment of the population who had been so underrepresented in American mass media that even modern scholarship has largely overlooked their presence. In total, big-money primetime quiz show winners were not representations of women confined to the domestic sphere or to typically working-class lifestyles. Instead, these women dedicated themselves to careers and study, and rather effortlessly mastered each. Similarly, men were portrayed as passionate-yet-soft-spoken experts on subjects unrelated to masculine domains. Undoubtedly, quiz show winners provided millions of Americans with successful role models to emulate, as evidenced by the number of inspired fan letters that contestants received from viewers across the country.

The primetime quiz shows of the 1950s served as crossover sites between public and private lives—the contestants who competed each week were successful but otherwise average hard-working Americans. In selecting the contestants, the producers and sponsors of 1950s television quiz shows incorporated images of new social realities taking shape in the era of prosperous post-war convergence. Recognizing the contributions and accomplishments of a wide range of social types, the primetime quiz shows effectively operated to bring reflections of Americans to millions of households nationwide. More significantly, the visual representations provided by the quiz shows attest to corporate efforts to find the most effective mode of address to sell to women. In particular, by highlighting the validity of women's intellectual capacity and men's cultured sensitivity, as well as by rewarding contestants with cash prizes and widely circulated press coverage, the primetime quiz shows vaulted appeals directly at intelligent women.

Overall, the largely female public addressed by 1950s quiz shows meaningfully included independent, intellectual women. The intentional integration of educated women among quiz show winners suggests that producers and sponsors had a very different understanding of female consumers—an understanding at odds with the representations of women then being produced by the 1950s culture industry. This understanding of the female consumer was also reflected in the construction of Charles Van Doren as a marketing tool that provided an alternative image to dominant Cold War representations of macho, militarized, and anti-intellectual masculinity. In weighing aspects of sponsorship, contestant selection, and media valorization of intelligence and celebrity, this chapter maintains that 1950s quiz show contestants were selected to appeal to a specific segment of well-educated, ambitious women who were largely ignored by the television industry, especially in terms of program content and visual representation, and yet remained important as consumers to advertisers.

### 3.0 WILL THE REAL CHARLES VAN DOREN PLEASE STAND UP?:

#### THE CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION OF A NATIONAL MEDIA IMAGE

On the TV screen, he appeared lanky, pleasant, smooth in dress and manner but never slick, confident but with an engaging way of understating himself. The long, hard questions would come at him and his eyes would roll up, squeeze shut, his forehead furrow and perspire, his teeth gnaw at his lower lip. Breathing heavily, he seemed to coax information out of some corner of his mind by talking to himself in a kind of stream-of-consciousness. Like a good American, he fought hard, taking advantage of every rule...Like a good American, he won without crowing. And, like a good American, he kept on winning, drowning corporation lawyers or ex-college presidents with equal ease on questions ranging from naming the four islands of the Balearic Islands to explaining the process of photosynthesis to naming the three baseball players who each amassed more than 3,500 hits. Charles Van Doren was “the new All-American boy,” the magazines declared, and to millions he was that indeed.<sup>1</sup>

Once the 10:30 p.m. On Air signs illuminated around the NBC Rockefeller Center studio on 28 November 1956, *Twenty-One* emcee Jack Barry took the stage, along with the night’s two contestants, and the show began. The reigning champion, former G.I. Herbert Stempel, had a genius IQ to go with his hard-working underdog persona and deferential demeanor. His challengers faced an unlikely task in defeating the six-week winner, who seemed so unbeatable that the quiz show’s producers, Jack Barry and Dan Enright, ran two display ads in the *New York Times* that asked, simply, “Can You Stump Stempel?,” with a phone number to call if you dared.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Erik F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade—and After: America, 1945-1960* (New York: Vintage, 1960), 316-17.

<sup>2</sup> “Can You Stump Stempel?” (Display Ad 150) *New York Times*, November 19, 1956, 50; “Can You Stump Stempel?” (Display Ad 228) *New York Times*, November 20, 1956, 58.

A tall, thin, 30-year-old graduate student named Charles Van Doren had emerged from an NBC dressing room to venture a try that crisp autumn evening. Wearing a light-colored suit jacket with a white collared shirt and dark tie, the well-spoken Van Doren was introduced as an English teacher at Columbia University who had studied at Cambridge, written three books and was working on his fourth, and played piano in chamber music groups. *Twenty-One* host Jack Barry further clarified for the television audience that Charles Van Doren was not just your average egghead—in fact, he came from a long line of extraordinary intellectuals that included his father, Mark Van Doren, the Pulitzer Prize–winning poet; his mother, Dorothy Van Doren, the novelist; and his uncle, Carl Van Doren, the Pulitzer Prize–winning historical biographer of Benjamin Franklin. Jack Barry said to the young English teacher that evening, “You have every reason in the world to be mighty proud of your name and your family,” but Charles Van Doren was a name that would become muddied and complicated for the television industry in just less than three years’ time.<sup>3</sup>

In early November 1959, Van Doren found himself in front of the cameras again, but the sweltering, steady lights of the television studio had been replaced with the quick flashbulb bursts of newspaper photographers eager to capture a still image of the man at the media center of a congressional storm. As a result of two legal investigations—one local and one national—into television quiz show practices, Van Doren admitted he had been “involved, deeply involved, in a deception.” He had received the questions, and often the answers, in advance from one of the

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<sup>3</sup> *Twenty-One* (NBC, November 28, 1956), The Collection, The Paley Center for Media, New York.

quiz program's producers, and his entire fourteen-week appearance on *Twenty-One* had been choreographed and rehearsed. Nothing had been spontaneous.<sup>4</sup>

Between his first NBC appearance and his subpoenaed congressional testimony, however, Charles Van Doren had become a celebrity, a bona fide media darling. He appeared in color on front covers of magazines. He hosted radio programs and television specials. He even received offers from Hollywood directors to appear in feature films. Newspaper columns all over the country hailed him as an inspirational hero, someone school children should look up to, an emblem of American success. As the irrefutable evidence of manipulation in quiz show programs became cause for public alarm in fall 1959, magazines and newspapers commented endlessly on the ethics of the television industry and the moral character of those drawn to its charmed siren song. Van Doren's name and image were most often associated with the quiz shows again in print media, although from that point forward they were emblematic primarily of personal and professional failures.

The *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, the *New York Times* historical database, and *Variety* are triangulated references that provide access to the Charles Van Doren narrative created and disseminated by print media in the late 1950s from national, local, and industry-oriented perspectives. In total, Van Doren was the primary subject of no fewer than forty-five national magazine articles between 1957 and 1962, while references to his name and quiz show accomplishments appeared in more than one hundred others. The *New York Times* ran some 250 articles and advertisements featuring Van Doren during the same timeframe, and *Variety* kept careful track of his effect on television ratings as well as the potential fallout the television

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, *Investigation of Television Quiz Shows, Hearings*, 86th Congress, 1st Session, 1959, *Special Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight of the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), hereafter cited as *Hearings*, 623-46.

industry faced following his congressional testimony. Using these resources, this chapter recreates the historical trajectories along which print media steered the Van Doren persona into the public realm. While media could not control individual reader's thoughts, opinions, and feelings toward Van Doren, the quiz shows, or the television industry in general, print media could shape the parameters of their own discourses and select what information was ultimately recorded by their typefaces. When analyzed in their totality, significant patterns arise in the when, where, why, and how of Van Doren media reports between 1957 and 1962, a timeframe that begins with Van Doren's rise to national celebrity and ends with his one-year suspended sentence for pleading guilty to perjury in a New York County court, an occasion that mass media symbolized as the final end of the scandalous quiz show era. A sizeable concentration of reports that focused on Van Doren's unprecedented winning streak appeared in the first few months of 1957, while the largest volume of articles began in November 1959 following his national confession. Between these two events, mass media had a fluctuating, sometimes tenuous, relationship with the Columbia English scholar.

More than anything else, Charles Van Doren seems to have been an effective tool for selling millions of copies of magazines and newspapers, a critical but muted factor in television histories. It particularly paid the mass-market magazines well to promote the trends du jour. The dollar amounts being given away by programs and their sponsors had created a quiz craze, and based on audience ratings, a large portion of American television sets were tuned in each week to watch Van Doren win or lose. Those same television viewers were a vast potential market for any number of commercial appeals that could be found alongside articles about the most talked-about man in the U.S. The publicity and promotion of programs and their contestants, especially Van Doren, reciprocally benefitted those in the television industry, including Time, Inc., which

owned majority interests in three Western-market television stations and was actively negotiating a \$17 million purchase of three more high-traffic stations in large Midwestern cities in December 1956, just two months before the magazine featured Van Doren on its cover.<sup>5</sup> In cyclical fashion, what was good for one medium was equally beneficial to its other media partners.

Print media had as much to do with making Van Doren a celebrity as NBC or its producers and sponsors did, yet most accounts of the quiz show scandal begin and end with the 1959 congressional hearings and the television industry, condensing the events leading up to and following the inquiry to inconsequential periphery details. Charles Van Doren, however, would not likely have been the intersection at which all roads converged without the pronounced attention devoted to him across media throughout 1957 and 1958. These early print media reports have been underutilized when considering our cultural memory of the 1959 quiz show scandal and its meaning in relationship to Cold War America. Not only do these media openly talk about and tolerate the common showmanship strategies of quiz show producers but they also construct Charles Van Doren as a discursive site where the tensions surrounding public understandings of education, knowledge, national identity, and free enterprise clearly surfaced. The public, having consumed the media representations of Van Doren, framed their individual responses to the scandal in similar themes.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Time (Inc.) Marches On In; Dickers Bitner \$17,000,000 Deal,” *Variety*, December 19, 1956, 31; and George Rosen, “Luce’s Three-Quarter Time,” *Variety*, January 16, 1957, 25, 48.

<sup>6</sup> Chapter 4, “A Jury of Peers: At Home with Charles Van Doren,” analyzes the public responses to the scandal in depth.

### 3.1 CELESTIAL ASCENDENCE, JANUARY-MARCH 1957

Despite the hype of his stellar intellectual heritage, Charles Van Doren did not best Herb Stempel on 28 November 1956. Instead, the two tied, and both were ushered back the following Wednesday night for another dramatic round of multipart brain busters. Print media took no notice of the now-historic second-week match as it unfolded, nor did they report that the Ivy League instructor finally outscored the City College student and walked out of the isolation booth with \$20,000, almost five times his annual salary. In fact, magazines and newspapers showed little interest in Van Doren until late January 1957, more than halfway through his unprecedented *Twenty-One* run, when another streak of ties, this time with Ruth Miller, a 50-year-old textbook writer from Manhattan, boosted his prize winnings to \$99,000. It was only when Van Doren acquired impressive monetary wealth that periodicals took notice of the wealth of knowledge that had gotten him there, and even then, the more impressive news was that anyone could acquire an unlimited amount of money for paying attention to his textbooks. Also noteworthy was the fact that Van Doren's appearances had propelled NBC, for the first time in postwar broadcasting, within reach of topping CBS's *I Love Lucy* in audience shares.

Between January and March 1957, Van Doren was the subject of fifteen national mass-market magazine articles that repeated a steady summary of his unusual predicament. This initial two-month honeymoon phase showered adoration upon Van Doren for his ability to succeed under pressure. Adjectives such as genius, hero, and scholar swirled around every mention of his name, while the best measure of his pop culture celebrity was perhaps his regular appearance as

the punch line in radio and television stand-up routines.<sup>7</sup> *Life*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* each made it a point to include some mention of Van Doren or quiz shows in general in their weekly issues. In their distribution of inverted-pyramid details, media coverage unequivocally led off with reports of Van Doren's winnings as groundbreaking national news. Never before had an American won more than \$100,000 on a television show.<sup>8</sup> To erase any skepticism or bewilderment about how one person could know all the things Van Doren seemingly knew, journalists tirelessly justified his showings as the natural product of his education, family upbringing, and personality. Having provided the background explanation for Van Doren's success as a blueprint, mass-market periodicals fanned the desires of quiz show contestant wannabes by dissecting the rules of the television games and offering pieces of mobilizing information to those willing to endure the harsh screening process.

The first flurry of articles about Van Doren blissfully sensationalized the television quiz craze and his role in it. *New York Times* television critic Jack Gould marked the beginning of Van Doren's print narrative by noting for readers on 20 January 1957 that *Twenty-One* was one of only a few bright spots in the midseason primetime television lineup, due largely to Van Doren's appearances.<sup>9</sup> After his next match the following evening, Van Doren cracked the \$100,000 prize ceiling, and a media blitz flowed forth. *Newsweek* was first to introduce a national magazine public to his biographical details in its 28 January 1957 issue. In a two-column TV-Radio tidbit entitled, "Know-It-All," *Newsweek* staff writers reported on Van Doren's unconventional educational background and the rare conditions of his home life

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<sup>7</sup> Reference to Van Doren's popular incorporation into stand-up comedy routines was noted in "The American Dream," *Commonweal*, February 22, 1957, 523.

<sup>8</sup> By January 1957, five contestants on *The Big Surprise* had reached that show's top prize of \$100,000, but no one had ever won more than that total.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Gould, "Television Notebook: Season at Halfway Mark Shows Signs of Life," *New York Times*, January 20, 1957, X11.

amongst the intellectual elite as the fodder for his success at answering quiz show questions. In his first two months of appearances on *Twenty-One*, Van Doren had been able to recall the correct answers to some fifty questions in “36 categories ranging from Babe Ruth to operatic music” and “theater to thallophyta,” including the members of George Washington’s first cabinet, all six U.S. Vice Presidents who later were elected President, and when crinoline skirts were first introduced to Madagascar.<sup>10</sup>

By the middle of February 1957, both of Henry Luce’s major current affairs periodicals, *Life* and *Time*, featured Charles Van Doren’s story prominently in their pages. *Life*, in its trademark pictorial style, ran a two-page feature about Van Doren’s limitless quiz show accomplishments. Actual copy consisted only of a two-paragraph blurb recording Van Doren’s official and unofficial educational accreditations, with the remainder of the space dedicated to visual proof of Van Doren’s exceptional versatility. The most prominent photograph in the spread captured Van Doren at his Columbia University lectern. Behind him on the chalkboard were written the names of Greece’s heavy intellectual hitters—Socrates, Lucretius, Erasmus, Plato. According to the caption, Van Doren hoped his quiz show appearances would make “scholars seem less remote to the public,” and to accentuate his humanity, the other photographs visually connected Van Doren to his *Twenty-One* isolation booth, his father and brother at their Connecticut country home, and his private bachelor life in his \$70-per-month city apartment, where he strummed guitar or edited book proofs or answered his 20,000 pieces of fan mail.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “Know-It-All,” *Newsweek*, January 28, 1957, 60. Descriptions of Van Doren’s breadth of knowledge were common; the answers mentioned here were printed in “Know-It-All”; “A Teacher’s Big Take,” *Life*, February 11, 1957, 53-54; and Simeon Stylites, “Income Tax Blues,” *Christian Century*, May 1, 1957, 558. The *New York Times* also frequently recorded in their Tuesday editions the questions asked on *Twenty-One* and the answers, both given and correct, in a recap of the Monday night matches.

<sup>11</sup> “A Teacher’s Big Take,” 53-54.

*Time* gave Van Doren even more promotion. Its 11 February 1957 color cover, with its now-iconic close-up of Van Doren wearing his *Twenty-One* headphones, christened him with the magical moniker “Wizard of Quiz.” Had “Charles Van Doren” been exalted to the status of a high-stakes quiz show category, careful readers of the *Time* feature could have confidently provided the names, in chronological order, of every school he ever attended and the specific curriculum he pursued at each, at what age he learned to read and who taught him how, how many books he read per week while working toward his Ph.D., what branch of the military he served in, with which humorist he had held a two-and-a-half-year apprenticeship as an assistant editor, what prestigious award his father and uncle had each won and in what years, where his aunt worked, and who were the most frequent houseguests at his family’s Greenwich Village brownstone.<sup>12</sup>

More stunning than his educational background and heritage, however, was Van Doren’s personality, a perfectly blended trifecta of the “universal erudition of a Renaissance man with the nerve and cunning of a riverboat gambler and the showmanship of a born actor,” the very stuff that made entertainingly good television.<sup>13</sup> Van Doren’s encyclopedic memory, described in the *New York Times Magazine* as “a broad, highly cultivated field with rows of information laid out horizontally, rather than a stack of cards to be penetrated difficultly from the top,” was touted as reason enough for viewers to tune their sets to *Twenty-One*, calculatngly moved in early January to Monday nights at 9 p.m. on the NBC schedule, in direct competition for Trendex ratings with the CBS powerhouse *I Love Lucy*.<sup>14</sup> The intensified exposure Van Doren received across mass

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<sup>12</sup> See “The Wizard of Quiz,” *Time*, February 11, 1957, 44-50; and “The Remarkable Van Dorens,” *Time*, February 11, 1957, 46.

<sup>13</sup> “The Wizard of Quiz,” 44.

<sup>14</sup> Charlotte Devree, “\$150,000 etc. Question—The Quiz Mind,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 17, 1957, 62.

media outlets doubled as free publicity for the show, which in turn benefitted its network, producers, and sponsor.

Van Doren may not have owned a television set, yet he was one of the biggest audience draws NBC had in its inventory. When Van Doren made his second appearance on the *Steve Allen Show* in early February 1957, NBC won its Sunday night ratings contest against CBS's *The Ed Sullivan Show* for just the second time in history. The only other occurrence had been when Elvis Presley appeared as Allen's special guest, and for countless parents with teenaged children, Van Doren represented a welcome, "health-restoring antidote to Presley."<sup>15</sup> Van Doren proved so wildly popular with the television industry and its audience alike that he even graced the cover of *TV Guide*.<sup>16</sup>

*Variety* reported as early as 16 January 1957 that NBC's decision to move *Twenty-One* to Monday nights had proved beneficial to the network, which had earned a 16.5 score for the 9 p.m. timeslot, more than double the share of any NBC program previously aired against *I Love Lucy*. By the end of the month, *Twenty-One* had pulled within four points of Monday night's top show and threatened to beat it.<sup>17</sup> "If the show's ratings keeps climbing, especially if it tops Lucy, it could become a property worth \$1,000,000 or more" to the show's producers, predicted *Time*.<sup>18</sup> The ratings system was so paramount in the success or failure of any program, that television critic Jack Gould of the *New York Times* ran articles on 27 February and 3 March

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<sup>15</sup> "The Wizard of Quiz," 44. Ruth Miller, the opponent Van Doren defeated to reach the \$99,000 plateau that first drew the attention of national magazines, was also quoted as saying, "He is the teen-ager's parents' answer to Elvis Presley," in "Getting Rich on TV," *Newsweek*, March 25, 1957, 63.

<sup>16</sup> Bob Stahl, "A Dillar, A Dollar: A Nine O'clock Scholar Tells How It Feels to Win a Fortune," *TV Guide*, February 23–March 1, 1957, 4-7.

<sup>17</sup> "'Can Do' Out, '21' In as 'Lucy' Competition; Revlon Gets a Release," *Variety*, December 19, 1956, 24; "'Twenty-One's' Fat Wed. Rating, But New 'Truth' Entry Trails Competish," *Variety*, December 26, 1956, 23, 31; "The Trendex Scorecard," *Variety*, January 16, 1957, 29; and "TV's Points of Big Return; NBC's Surge vs. Key CBS Shows," *Variety*, February 6, 1957, 1, 70.

<sup>18</sup> "The Wizard of Quiz," 45.

1957, both railing against the absurdity of the Trendex system that only measured audience viewership during the first seven calendar days of a month and released its top ten rankings based on incomplete assessments. Gould claimed that *Twenty-One* was in fact “at least the second most popular program on the air,” as it “swamped ‘I Love Lucy’ on Monday [25 February 1957] and is crowding Ed Sullivan for the top spot,” but it would not appear on any Trendex report as such because the show had been preempted the first Monday night in February for a special screening of “Mayerling” and would be preempted the first Monday night in March for a similar special showing of “Romeo and Juliet,” thereby missing the assessment period altogether for two consecutive months.<sup>19</sup>

Van Doren was given the credit, not only for the viewing audience increases for which he was directly responsible but also for breathing life back into a number of other network quiz programs that had been headed toward cancellation. The quiz business was proving too valuable an investment for serious sponsors to ignore. At an average cost of \$35,000 per week, a full thirty percent less than the outlay required by variety, comedy, or dramatic programs, quiz shows offered their sponsors high returns. Manufacturers of common consumer goods were assured that the eighteen network quiz programs on the air in March 1957 received correspondence from a steady stream of 65,000 contestant hopefuls each week. Of those aspirants, only about 150 made it in front of the cameras, past the scrutiny of producers who knew they were accountable to their sponsors. While studio audience attendance—and the right smile—might be enough to land a spot on a small-scale giveaway such as *The Price Is Right* or *Name That Tune*, the high stakes awarded by *Twenty-One*, *The \$64,000 Question*, *The \$64,000 Challenge*, *Giant Step*, and *The*

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<sup>19</sup> Jack Gould, “TV: Triumph of Trendex; Industry Regards the Rating System as Gospel Despite Its Limitations,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1957, 55; and “Confusing Ratings: Failure of Show to Land in ‘Top Ten’ Pinpoints Absurdity of System,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1957, X11.

*Big Surprise* required a more rigorous approach to weeding through applicants. Preliminary questionnaires and exams, telephone and in-person interviews, and hot seat trials to test an applicant's "knowledge and personality potential" were standard procedure at both NBC and CBS. An executive with *The Big Surprise* openly admitted his show's contestant selection process: "We choose as though we were casting for a show. A dramatic show and a quiz are very much alike. Both have a cast, a dramatic situation, and a point where the audience begins to expect something."<sup>20</sup> Presumably, it was up to the producers to find the right personalities to make it worthwhile for viewers to watch.

The magazines unanimously concurred that "personalities," especially Van Doren's, made the quiz shows interesting. Memorable "memory champions" utilized their "magpie minds" to combine an agony-and-ecstasy blend of anxiety coursing through their time on air with a final big-money payout.<sup>21</sup> In Van Doren's case, reporters seemed drawn to his methodology for arriving at his final answers:

Even if they grow blasé or hostile toward Van Doren as an unbeatable contestant, it is difficult to imagine viewers tiring of the fascinating, suspense-taut spectacle of his highly trained mind at work. Breathing heavily, Charlie coaxes elusive answers out of odd corners of his brains by talking to himself, muttering little associated fragments of knowledge. Like a boxer staying down for a count of nine, he takes all the time he can possibly get ("Let's skip that part, please, and come back to it")...Some viewers get the feeling that he knows most of the answers immediately and simply makes the audience squirm for the money he gets. But Charlie and those who know him best insist that it is actually his technique of ferreting out the answers ("You can see him making the thinking connections").<sup>22</sup>

Ironically, Van Doren's indecisiveness about his educational tract and his willingness to follow "any and every direction" had paid off well in the isolation booth, but there were ripples

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<sup>20</sup> "Getting Rich on TV," 63-64.

<sup>21</sup> "Memory champions" and "magpie minds" are phrases used by Devree in "\$150,000 etc. Question—The Quiz Mind."

<sup>22</sup> "The Wizard of Quiz," 45.

of tension in this new marriage between brainpower and television treasure, as journalists interpreted Van Doren's cultural significance in divergent ways. "Just by being himself, he has enabled a giveaway program, the crassest of lowbrow entertainments, to whip up a dotting mass audience for a new kind of TV idol—of all things, an egghead," commented a *Time* staff writer. From this perspective, which was repeated often in mass-market media and subsequent memories of the quiz show scandal overall, the audience marveled at Van Doren and wanted to emulate his intelligence. From a contradictory perspective, however, reporters believed the audience enjoyed seeing Van Doren's respectability on the line because it represented a leveling of the playing field. Dan Wakefield, writing for *The Nation*—the periodical at which Van Doren's father, mother, and uncle had all been editors—observed, "The mass audience is treated to seeing the intellectual lured from his 'ivory tower' by cash and entered in the rat race with everyone else."<sup>23</sup>

For many of Van Doren's intellectual contemporaries, the bigger irony of his quiz show success was that the data Van Doren supplied as answers to difficult questions were "mere accessories in the handling of ideas and the development of taste and reasoning."<sup>24</sup> The connections between facts led to knowledge; facts by themselves were relatively useless. Van Doren's own education had concentrated on distinguishing this difference, and it was the philosophy reinforced by his family, including "two names in the front rank of American scholarship and letters," and their circle of friends.<sup>25</sup>

By winter 1957, father and son Van Doren shared a Morningside Heights English Department office, and it was on the campus at Columbia that the incongruities between the

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<sup>23</sup> Dan Wakefield, "The Fabulous Sweat Box," *Nation*, March 30, 1957, 271.

<sup>24</sup> "The Wizard of Quiz," 45.

<sup>25</sup> "Know-It-All," 60.

frenzy of Charles Van Doren's television feats and the austereness of his chosen profession were most apparent. The majority of the university's tenured faculty seemed wholly oblivious to Van Doren's winning streak, while the star-struck student body hailed him as the university's most cherished hero "since Sid Luckman was tossing passes at Baker Field." *Time* reported that "students decorate[d] the blackboard with such questions as 'For \$52,000, what did Plato mean by Justice?'" and that the graduate English Department information desk posted a warning to inquirers: "Only Charles Van Doren Knows All the Answers."<sup>26</sup> In memoirs, former Columbia students and colleagues would recall specially planned trips to local taverns on cold Monday winter nights, just to watch their campus compatriot Van Doren on screen.<sup>27</sup>

It was his appeal with youths and those young-at-heart that made Van Doren a unique find for quiz show producers. Other quiz programs had tried to create brand recognition between contestants, shows, and sponsors, and CBS, in particular, succeeded to some degree with their \$64,000 *Question/Challenge* franchise, but no other contestant could boast of such a wide range of knowledge. The obvious limitation of *The \$64,000 Question/Challenge* was that contestants answered questions in only one specific category. On *Twenty-One*, by contrast, producers had a cache of more than 100 different subjects to choose from, and all were "fair game" in every match. Van Doren was the first *Twenty-One* contestant of interest because he unassumingly combined a traditional privileged-class intellectualism with a familiarity in middle-class pop

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<sup>26</sup> "The Wizard of Quiz," 49.

<sup>27</sup> See Joseph Epstein, "Redford's Van Doren & Mine," *Commentary* 98 (1994): 40-46; Morris Freedman, "The Fall of Charlie Van Doren," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 73.1 (1997): 157-65; Jeffrey Hart, "'Van Doren' and 'Redford,'" *National Review*, November 7, 1994, 78-80 (Hart was the Columbia instructor who assumed teaching responsibilities for Van Doren's English literature, 1616-1789, course upon the university's announcement of Van Doren's resignation. See "Faculty Members Assigned to 3 Van Doren Courses," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, November 10, 1959, Columbia University Archives); and Dan Wakefield, "Robert Redford: His 50's, Then and Now; 'Quiz Show' Takes Two Guys Back to a More Innocent America," *New York Times Magazine*, August 21, 1994, 26-29. Wakefield wrote an article for *The Nation* in March 1957 that critiqued the commercialism of quiz shows. In his 1994 article, however, he claimed he was a regular among many tavern-goers rooting for Van Doren.

culture reference points. Van Doren knew statistics about modern professional sports and could name show tunes or Hollywood starlets as quickly as he could rattle off the names and fates of Henry VIII's six wives.<sup>28</sup> No other contestant before him had so seamlessly transcended the realm of pop culture to become one of its own icons-of-the-moment. NBC executives would not have the same public relations success again with any other contestant, although they gave an equivalent effort throughout spring and summer 1958 with Elfrida von Nardroff, the last big-money winner on *Twenty-One* before scandal tainted the television quizzes for good.

For all its shimmering reflections of wealth, happiness, and fulfillment, the looking glass had always had its obvious cracks. The disparity between the quest for knowledge and the retention of information was the diplomatic forefront concern in mass-market magazines, but more specialized periodicals, such as *The Commonwealth*, *The Nation*, *The Reporter*, and *Senior Scholastic*, articulating themselves to the Charles Van Doren media train, approached the subjects of education, quiz shows, and the television industry with a more journalistically critical eye toward the cultural implications of glorifying wealth and fame and how easily they could be bestowed randomly upon anyone. Less than two weeks after *Time* featured Van Doren on its cover and hailed him as the new face of the American intellectual elite, *The Commonwealth* rebutted with an editorial that led off its 22 February 1957 issue. Directly refuting more popular media claims that Van Doren had ignited a “cultural renaissance” or any type of “new respect for learning,” editors of *The Commonwealth* shrewdly recognized Van Doren as the newest incarnation of Horatio Alger, the mythical popular hero who, “through luck and pluck,” fulfilled

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<sup>28</sup> In his first televised match on 28 November 1956, Van Doren correctly answered questions that asked him to name the Best Supporting Actress winner who starred in *On the Waterfront* and to name all the wives of Henry VIII and describe their fates. See *Twenty-One* (NBC, November 28, 1956), The Collection, The Paley Center for Media, New York.

the American Dream by becoming a material success, simply by being in the right place at the right time.<sup>29</sup>

“The pattern of the quiz show,” observed the writer, was to promote the actualization moment of rags-to-riches narratives, and in front of the eyes of fifty million weekly viewers, Charles Van Doren had accumulated \$129,000 (even though tax codes would whittle his take-home total to just under \$30,000). “Americans have always venerated the fact, and the quiz show has merely underlined this aspect of our culture. Further, these facts are materially useful: they earn money for those who know them. In the American tradition, they are respected for this material value, not in any sense as knowledge for the sake of knowledge.”<sup>30</sup> *Senior Scholastic* echoed a lament for the eroded belief in hard work as its own reward along the path of upward mobility, as opposed to the lottery-like, get-rich-quick approach proffered by quiz shows.<sup>31</sup> Wakefield also agreed: “Into the vacated myth of quick success, the jackpot quiz shows came with an answer. They came to an audience hungry for glory, excitement, surprises and reassurance that the man in the anonymous street might still suddenly rise to a place in the golden sun.”<sup>32</sup> The more liberal magazines warned that, despite all the praise heaped upon Van Doren and the television quiz shows for reigniting the pursuit of American education, the underlying attraction for viewers remained the material rewards. Steven Benedict, a U.S. Information Agency officer and former St. John’s College classmate of Van Doren, prophesied, “He’s almost a Greek tragic hero, a vast commercial property being used by Geritol. He has strong opinions about the debasement of values by commercialism, but he can’t condemn

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<sup>29</sup> “The American Dream,” 525.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> “Quiz Masters,” *Senior Scholastic*, February 22, 1957, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Wakefield, “The Fabulous Sweat Box,” 269.

commercialism now. He's under a Faustian pact with the devil."<sup>33</sup> Thematically, Van Doren had already been living the kind of "good life" many Americans only dreamed about, and his participation in the sale of the American Dream myth so that women would buy iron supplements or sleep aids was not particularly noble.

The media public may have been preoccupied with Van Doren's upward economic mobility, but they responded equally to his humility and rather inconspicuous consumption. Reportedly, Van Doren had no plans to alter his lifestyle, unlike other winners whose lives had been turned upside down by newfound fame and fortune. Instead, he intended to stay in his four-room Greenwich Village apartment and continue teaching full-time for the paltry sum of \$4,400 a year. Reports of Van Doren's commitment to education, despite the absurd wages paid by the profession, and his contentment with a modest lifestyle, despite a new fortune, helped to launch the young literary scion to the status of national folk hero.

When Van Doren misidentified the King of Belgium's name and finally lost on 11 March 1957 to Warner Brothers Pictures attorney Vivienne Nearing, who appeared on the quiz show to "recoup the family honor" against the man who had defeated her husband just weeks before, Charles Van Doren did not retire from either NBC programming or the media limelight.<sup>34</sup> According to the *New York Times*, quiz show producers Barry-Enright Productions, Inc. were already developing a television panel program for Van Doren as early as 4 March 1957, the week before Nearing usurped him.<sup>35</sup> By 8 March, just days before his winning streak came to an end, Van Doren had contracted a headlining appearance in the revitalization of NBC Radio's *Conversation*, a program "devoted to the art of good talk" and moderated by longtime family

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<sup>33</sup> "The Wizard of Quiz," 49.

<sup>34</sup> "Challenger," *Time*, March 11, 1957, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Val Adams, "Spike Jones Signs for New TV Show," *New York Times*, March 4, 1957, 47.

friend—and former *Information Please* quiz show panelist—Clifton Fadiman, the very humorist with whom Van Doren had apprenticed. Ten days after his defeat, Van Doren bantered with “Uncle Kip” about “What Makes an Educated Man?” It was a far cry from his usual drama-filled short-answer quiz show appearances, which seemed to please the critics at the more high-brow periodicals.<sup>36</sup>

Van Doren’s usual weekly television presence, described by *Chicago American* television critic Janet Kern as “visits the whole family eagerly anticipates,” was so sorely missed by mass-market media outlets that had come to rely on Van Doren minutia to fill column inches that *Time* bemoaned, “Whither Charley?” just two weeks after his dethronement.<sup>37</sup> The magazine’s query came despite an announcement made on the heels of Van Doren’s defeat by executives at Entertainment Productions, Inc. (EPI) that the *Question/Challenge* franchise would no longer limit their contestants to \$64,000 in winnings. The cap had been multiplied four-fold, to \$256,000, in a blatant attempt to compete with the media hype surrounding *Twenty-One*. Some attention was showered upon Teddy Nadler, the hard-luck “human almanac” given the first opportunity to strike it rich under the new *Question/Challenge* guidelines, but even more media reports turned to speculations on Van Doren’s future television career possibilities, which seemed almost certain once Van Doren retained Music Corporation of America (MCA), widely regarded as the most powerful talent agency in the country, to negotiate his entertainment business interests.

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<sup>36</sup> Van Doren’s scheduled appearance on *Conversation* was noted in “Whither Charley?,” *Time*, March 25, 1957, 50. Television critics commended his contribution to that particular program in “Looking and Listening,” *Senior Scholastic*, April 5, 1957, 31.

<sup>37</sup> Janet Kern was quoted in “The Wizard of Quiz,” 44. See also “Whither Charley?,” 50.

### 3.2 A CONFLICTED NARRATIVE, APRIL 1957-AUGUST 1958

April 1957 was a key turning point in the Charles Van Doren media narrative. It marked the beginning of a transitional time in which Van Doren, newly freed from his weekly nerve-racking *Twenty-One* appearances, worked hard to regain his respectability as an intellectual and shed his identity as a big-money quiz show winner. Hoping to find a balance between education and entertainment through the assignments he fulfilled at NBC, Van Doren at first treaded lightly around the controversial issues of intelligence versus memory, teaching versus television, and education versus crass commercialism. Although he seemed intent on remaining in the television industry, he was not willing to be crated in the quiz show box that mass media had crafted for him. Within six months, he openly criticized the quiz shows for their shortcomings, most directly in a 23 September 1957 *Life* article he authored entitled, “Junk Wins TV Quiz Shows.” Since print media were partially responsible for Van Doren’s national fame, they were forced to face a monster of their own making. Twenty-four of the forty-two national periodical quiz show articles published between April 1957 and August 1958 still centered on Van Doren. Some outlets stayed the course, praising Van Doren’s continued dedication to education in numerous capacities and fondly remembering him as the starting point, where the glorious quiz craze began. Other outlets took return swipes at Van Doren via name-calling: ham, snob, and “partisan Democrat” replaced the adjectives genius, hero, and scholar in the more bitter printed columns. A standoffish relationship between Van Doren and the media endured for a year in the background scenery of the quiz craze, until contestant rigging was exposed on the daytime quiz show *Dotto* in August 1958 and the bottom fell out of network television’s quiz-crazed world.

### 3.2.1 A Boy No More, April-July 1957

Once he was out of the isolation booth for good, Charles Van Doren became a complicated individual for mass media. Whether by design or coincidence, the “all-American boy” decided to do a little growing up once he was supplanted in the press as the current quiz show human interest feature. April 1957 was a particularly busy month for the college instructor, who dove back into Columbia campus life, reportedly with renewed vigor and purpose, despite ever-pressing demands from reporters for interviews and from friends as well as strangers for financial handouts. The *New York Times*, with more inches to fill on a perpetual daily basis than magazines, utilized Van Doren’s proximity and Big Apple citizenship to report on his social engagements and whereabouts with a fawning admiration typically reserved for the city’s A-listers. The *Times* was also able to out-scoop the competition by reporting the major updates in Van Doren’s life and career before the national weeklies or monthlies could get to press. Van Doren’s participation as an academic judge at Barnard College’s fifty-fifth annual Greek Games, which pitted the sophomores against the freshmen in athletic, dance, lyric, music, and costume competitions, was as newsworthy to the paper’s regular readers as was the 9 April NBC announcement at the annual National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters convention in Chicago that the network was negotiating terms of an exclusive contract with Van Doren.<sup>38</sup>

The arrangement reached between NBC and Van Doren’s agency, MCA, could have been easily predicted by anyone paying attention to the fact that NBC overlords David and Robert Sarnoff had made two incredibly important MCA hires in winter 1956-57, when the Charles Van

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<sup>38</sup> “Freshmen Score in Barnard Event,” *New York Times*, April 7, 1957, 69; and “Van Doren to Sign Pact With N.B.C.,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1957, 66.

Doren media hoopla began. MCA president Lew Wasserman, recognized by October 1957 as the third most powerful person in the television industry, was quietly appointed behind the scenes to revitalize the floundering NBC programming schedule, while Robert Kintner, the ex-ABC president and a former Wasserman client, was tapped to be the very public head of the network.<sup>39</sup> Wasserman was given the credit for knowing how to “merge the Hollywood star system and popular narrative, and bring it to NBC,” while Kintner closely fostered a respectability in television news reporting that had previously eluded the network. Together, at the behest of “General” David Sarnoff himself, Wasserman and Kintner engineered a total NBC makeover for the sole purpose of seriously competing against CBS in all programming aspects. Charles Van Doren was certainly part of their plan.

Given the close association between MCA and NBC, it is not difficult to imagine that they worked cooperatively on the acquisition and use of Van Doren’s media celebrity to the ultimate advantage of the network. Robert Sarnoff had come to rely so comprehensively on Wasserman’s direction that the MCA New York representative, David Werblin, appeared almost to be an NBC employee.<sup>40</sup> When the still-vague details of Van Doren’s three-year contract were finally publicized, Van Doren was the new \$50,000-per-year consultant for “public affairs and education” at NBC. His salary, however, would inconspicuously come from the network’s publicity and promotions budget rather than from its pool of resources for on-air talent, even

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<sup>39</sup> The relationship between NBC and MCA is documented in detail in Douglas Gomery, “Talent Raids and Package Deals: NBC Loses Its Leadership in the 1950s,” in *NBC: America’s Network*, ed. Michele Hilmes. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 153-68. See especially pp. 161-65.

<sup>40</sup> Gomery, “Talent Raids,” 161-65.

though Van Doren's contract also included provisions for his appearances on programs "from time to time."<sup>41</sup>

The week after NBC's announcement, Van Doren's latest book, *Lincoln's Commando*, was released by Harper's to wide critical acclaim, while the unexpected news that the "committed bachelor" had married his recently hired personal secretary, Geraldine Bernstein, during a Caribbean weekend getaway broke hearts across the country. The positive spin on Van Doren's unavailability presented by the magazines and newspapers was that his new marital status meant he could keep an additional \$20,000 or so of his *Twenty-One* prizewinnings.<sup>42</sup> With a new lucrative NBC contract, a new book, and a new wife, Van Doren's ongoing personal and professional accomplishments shifted into mass-market media focus. His employment with NBC took center stage, especially since no one—including Van Doren—could say for sure what his job responsibilities would entail. NBC contemplated an array of program positions for him, from emcee of a news quiz show to regular quiz panelist to special feature correspondent. It would take several more months for the network to find the right fit.

Van Doren, meanwhile, openly and adamantly proclaimed that he did not want to answer another quiz question for the rest of his life.<sup>43</sup> Rather than focus on entertainment for entertainment's sake, Van Doren repeated his desire to utilize television as an educational tool. "It seems to me television is the greatest of all ways of letting everybody know the best that has

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<sup>41</sup> Television critic Robert Lewis Shayon claimed that Van Doren's salary would appear in the network's cost accounting via its publicity and promotions budget in "What Would You Do?," *Saturday Review*, June 8, 1957, 25. Reports of Van Doren's program appearances contract clause was reported first in Richard A. Shepard, "Godfrey to Drop Wednesday Show," *New York Times*, April 13, 1957, 39.

<sup>42</sup> See "People," *Time*, April 22, 1957, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,821107-1,00.html>; Edith Evans Asbury, "Van Doren Wins Bride in Tropics," *New York Times*, April 18, 1957, 31; and "Van Dorens Fly Here," *New York Times*, April 22, 1957, 49.

<sup>43</sup> Alfred Bester, "Life Among the Giveaway Programs," *Holiday*, May 1957, 114-15.

been thought and said in their time and in other times.”<sup>44</sup> His personal intentions struck upon a sore spot that had chafed at broadcasters and their critics alike since the Federal Communications Commission wrote the Blue Book in 1934: What did “public interest, convenience, and necessity” really mean, and what role should education play in broadcasting? Van Doren, like Blue Book contributor Dallas Smythe, envisioned television’s vast potential to eliminate access to knowledge based on class, creed, gender, and race, which assuredly was in the “public interest.”<sup>45</sup> In order for such a goal to come to fruition, however, broadcasting “convenience and necessity” would need to be severed from its corporate profit-centered agenda—or education would have to become more commercially viable, as appeared to be the case with the quiz shows.

Van Doren’s sentiment about television’s potential was not shared by the intellectuals who were greatly offended by the maddening conflation of knowledge and information and blamed Van Doren directly for the sweeping trend. Robert Lewis Shayon, television and radio critic for *Saturday Review*, criticized him harshly: “Mr. Van Doren had no business appearing on ‘Twenty-One’ in the first place—as a loyal intellectual, that is. As a businessman, yes; as a private enterpriser, a get-rich-quicker, of course; but as an upholder of the sacred tradition of the humanities in the country, decidedly no.”<sup>46</sup> Shayon’s condemnation raised some of the same specters illuminated during Van Doren’s rise to fame by Wakefield and other writers for the more liberal periodicals. Commercialism again clashed with traditionalism in Van Doren’s education-as-entertainment-for-financial-gain narrative. College professors had begun to

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<sup>44</sup>Quoted in “Looking and Listening,” 31.

<sup>45</sup> As the FCC’s chief economist from 1943 to 1948, Dallas Smythe conducted broadcast policy and regulation studies and contributed to the “Blue Book,” which specifies that broadcasters must adhere to prescribed civic responsibilities to enrich the citizens who owned the airwaves over which networks broadcast. He grew disgruntled as he saw broadcasting slip farther and farther from any educational purposes and left the FCC to pursue a university teaching career.

<sup>46</sup> Shayon, “What Would You Do?,” 25.

complain that a certain breed of students now only enrolled in their literature or ancient history classes to have better chances at appearing on a quiz show.<sup>47</sup> Education was becoming a mockery, and the root of the problem was Van Doren's compliance in a "high blood-pressure advertising game."<sup>48</sup>

Philip Wylie, author of the perennially controversial *Generation of Vipers*, and other concerned citizens unswervingly defended Van Doren in rebuttals to Shayon and his likeminded detractors. In one regard, Van Doren's overwhelming popularity with the American public indicated forward progression on the national culture scale. Wylie wrote, "I still believe Charlie has opened the way for other eggheads (whom Mr. Shayon would regard as the real McCoy) to endear themselves through television to that mass public which tends today to regard them as sissies and possibly as Commies."<sup>49</sup> Van Doren was outstanding public relations for academics. His televisual presence was demystifying intellectuals for the "average" American and humanizing an entire cloistered segment of the population that had, for much of the 1950s, been viewed as suspect. In another regard, information—and one's ability to use it—was exclusive neither to education nor entertainment. In a letter to the editor of *Saturday Review*, Cornelia Steinberg of Whittier, California, posed: "[Shayon's] proposition that a 'loyal intellectual' has no business appearing on a quiz program seems to me rather infantile. Loyal to what, if I may ask? It is about time that intellectuals took their proverbial heads out of the proverbial sand. Intellectuals of the world, unite!"<sup>50</sup>

What ultimately made Van Doren so different than the two dozen other dues-paying university professors on the rolls of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists

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<sup>47</sup> See Wakefield, "The Fabulous Sweat Box," 273; and "The American Dream," 525.

<sup>48</sup> Shayon, "What Would You Do?," 25.

<sup>49</sup> Philip Wylie, "Jettisoning the Dough," *Saturday Review*, July 13, 1957, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Cornelia Steinberg, "Intellectuals, Unite!," *Saturday Review*, July 13, 1957, 21.

(AFTRA) was solely that his television career began on a quiz show.<sup>51</sup> The subtextual concern about Van Doren's alleged prostituted profits in this education-entertainment exchange prompted several writers to expose some quiz show forensic accounting. Jack Gould reported in the *New York Times* that when all was said and done, Van Doren's weekly winnings amounted to \$9,214, perhaps the biggest steal in commercial television history.<sup>52</sup> True, it was still more than double the amount he could expect to receive every two-term academic year at Columbia, but it was small change compared to the salaries of Lucille Ball, Milton Berle, Jackie Gleason, or Arthur Godfrey and a much farther cry from the riches war-chested by Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, and Carnegies—or even Luces, Paleys, and Sarnoffs, for that matter. If money was the real issue at the heart of the discord, several writers were eager to highlight the fact that the Internal Revenue Service was actually the biggest winner in quiz show history. Big-money recipients were required to pay upwards of eighty percent of their winnings in federal and state taxes. Of the combined \$3.33 million awarded on the top four high-stakes quiz shows by April 1957, the federal government's take was more than \$2.5 million.<sup>53</sup>

At the opposite end of the critics' spectrum, television industry-friendly journalists were positive that Van Doren would choose to stay in show business rather than recede into a classroom, no matter how ivied its walls. Loyal entertainment enthusiasts scoffed at Van Doren's college commitments, which seemed so insignificant and "low road" compared to the glamour and glory offered by television. Alfred Bester, writing for *Holiday*, quoted fabler Aesop when

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<sup>51</sup> Bernard Stengren, "Class Conscious: New TV Ties Supersede Those of Old School as Professors Rush on Air," *New York Times*, July 28, 1957, X11.

<sup>52</sup> Jack Gould, "TV Notebook: Further Words About Housecleaning in Commercials—Quiz Show Finances," *New York Times Magazine*, March 17, 1957, X13.

<sup>53</sup> Richard F. Shepard, "News and Notes From the TV-Radio World: Some Quick Answers to Various \$64,000 and Similar Questions—Other Items," *New York Times Magazine*, April 14, 1957, X13. Comments about Van Doren's income tax commitments were reported in numerous places. See especially Edith Evans Asbury, "Van Doren Faces Tax Question In Isolation of Academic Cloister," *New York Times*, March 13, 1957, 63; "Getting Rich on TV," 63; Stylites, "Income Tax Blues," 558; and "Whither Charley?," 50.

predicting, “‘Nature will out.’ What comes naturally to Van Doren can’t be cooped up on the campus again.”<sup>54</sup>

Van Doren, for his part in the education-entertainment debate, appeared willing to straddle the imaginary boundary between the two. He stuck to his claim that his primary commitment was to Columbia and his own educational pursuits, but he was not willing to bite the television hand that fed him so handsomely. “My university friends are afraid I’ll be damaged...Many of my friends don’t like television, and feel they’re required not to think or like what’s popularly thought or liked...I had a little of that attitude myself,” admitted Van Doren in his *Holiday* interview. “If I stay in television I’d like to M.C. an educational sort of show...TV’s a challenge I don’t want to turn down.”<sup>55</sup> When he returned to primetime television on 5 May 1957, he did so as a commentator appended to a repeat broadcast of *Call to Freedom*, a ninety-minute filmed documentary about Austrian history. Van Doren was described as “relaxed and informative as he supplied background notes for the program. His role in the telecast was brief but impressive,” analyzed a *New York Times* critic.<sup>56</sup>

Van Doren’s success in his first attempt at commentating was rewarded with recurring appearances on *Wide Wide World*, an informative and culturally enriching ninety-minute Sunday afternoon program hosted by Dave Garroway and sponsored by General Motors Corporation (GM). When GM announced in May 1957 that they planned to renew their sponsorship of the show, they also revealed that throughout the 1957-58 season, Van Doren would contribute segments from historic sites around the country.<sup>57</sup> His upcoming long-term assignment promised

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<sup>54</sup> Bester, “Life Among the Giveaway Programs,” 174.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>56</sup> Jack Gould, “TV: Spotlight on the Puerto Ricans,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1957, 51. The initials “J.P.S.” appear at the bottom of the *Call to Freedom* critique, which indicates that John P. Shanley was likely the actual reviewer.

<sup>57</sup> Val Adams, “N.B.C. Continues Sunday Program,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1957, 35.

to bridge the divide between education and entertainment once and for all, as Van Doren strove to fulfill an entertainingly educational void in television programming. For many people in and out of the television business, however, Van Doren still remained chained to his quiz show roots.

The panel quiz show that Barry-Enright Productions, Inc. had been developing since March, with Van Doren in mind, was inching ever closer to production. By June 1957, the program had a name—*High Low*—and the producers were pitching their concept to potential sponsors. Topping the list of interested backers was Ford Motor Company, but their association with the show led to rather unexpected results.<sup>58</sup> Despite more than a month of advance publicity for a 4 July premiere, Charles Van Doren never appeared on the program. The *New York Times* and *Newsweek* reported that sponsor conflicts between Ford and GM, guarantor of *Wide Wide World*, prohibited Barry and Enright’s “most valuable property” from participating in the panel quiz. In Charles Van Doren’s place, Barry and Enright were forced to enlist his 28-year-old younger brother, John, a Brandeis University professor of American literature and civilization. When introduced by host Jack Barry during the *High Low* premiere, John apologetically clarified his appearance for television viewers expecting to see his older brother: “They were obviously after the name...When Charles couldn’t do it, they tried my father Mark. I was next. I’m really the tag end of the procession.” Living up to the “family reputation for erudition,” however, John correctly recalled “the deaths of eight literary figures from the Big Bad Wolf to the Duchess of Malfi” and even sort of looked and sounded like his brother while doing so.<sup>59</sup>

Richard F. Shepard gave the NBC premiere, which featured John Van Doren alongside fellow panelists Burl Ives and Patricia Medina, a very mixed review in the 5 July 1957 *New York Times*. Calling the questions “long and uninteresting,” the answers “too loquacious,” the stakes

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<sup>58</sup> Val Adams, “Ford Considering ‘High Low’ TV Quiz,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1957, 71.

<sup>59</sup> “They’re the Smart Ones,” *Newsweek*, July 15, 1957, 90-91.

relatively insignificant in quiz show parlance, and the audience's sympathies conflictingly divided "between the polished personalities on the panel and the contestant who, while still necessarily well informed, is more or less a man in the street with whom the viewers might identify themselves," Shepard assessed the program overall as "mildly entertaining" but "too dispersed."<sup>60</sup> Although the program had the potential to be a hit—if the prize money was greatly increased and the pacing of the show was worked out—its current incarnation was simply one more manifestation of the quiz trend to include "big-name" panelists for their short-term audience draw.

Without access to supporting documentation, one is left to wonder about the accuracy of "sponsor conflict" claims. While the two major American automobile manufacturers certainly may have squawked at the prospect of "sharing" Charles Van Doren on NBC airwaves, GM's *Wide Wide World* was on summer hiatus when *High Low* premiered and was not scheduled to begin broadcasting its new season that would feature Van Doren until September. Likewise, Ford was looking only for an eleven-week summer substitute for its regular sponsorship of the Tennessee Ernie Ford program, also on hiatus until September. There does not appear to have been much of a conflicting broadcast overlap between the two programs in question, and neither car company could claim Van Doren would promote "loyal customer" brand identification since any Van Doren fan already knew his sole act of conspicuous consumption was to buy himself a sporty Mercedes convertible with his quiz show winnings.<sup>61</sup> Instead, it seems equally plausible that Charles Van Doren did not want to be involved with *High Low*, as his acquiescence to appear on a quiz show—as a panelist or otherwise—would have flown in the face of nearly every quote he had provided to reporters between April and July 1957 on the subject of quiz shows.

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<sup>60</sup> Richard F. Shepard, "New Jack Barry Quiz Has Debut on N.B.C.," *New York Times*, July 5, 1957, 35.

<sup>61</sup> See "The Wizard of Quiz," 49; and Bester, "Life Among the Giveaway Programs," 174.

Within that span of four months, as he was transformed in the press from the “all-American boy” to a larger-than-life battle site in the contentious showdown between education and the entertainment industry, Van Doren had, in fact, shown his cards, always insisting that knowledge required a pensive contemplation that was antithetical to quiz show production. In retrospect, *High Low* may have been the moment where he definitively chose sides. Regardless of the ulterior explanation, Charles Van Doren’s dissociation from *High Low* serendipitously allowed him to continue building a refined television professionalism as a commentator and further distanced him from the crass commercialism that so offended the “real” intellectuals.

### **3.2.2 Choosing Sides, August-December 1957**

In the latter half of the year, with Charles Van Doren out of the quiz show spotlight, the media ruckus over what he symbolized to the American public quieted somewhat. Only five of the nine national print media articles about quiz shows mentioned Van Doren, and the *New York Times* made only a few sidebar references to him in its columns. A closer inspection of what did get printed, in the context of rising questions about quiz show practices, reveals just how loudly the veritable media silence should be read, however. While reporters and critics had been bickering about intellectualism and entertainment, the two biggest quiz shows on network television had been busy quelling complaints from angry viewers about inconsistencies in acceptable questions and answers and producers’ haphazard application of program rules. Both *Twenty-One* and *The \$64,000 Question* had to define “fairness” for their audiences in summer 1957.<sup>62</sup> To these public relations hiccups, add multiple reports in *Variety* about fraud allegations levied against the

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<sup>62</sup> See “Battle of the Bones,” *Time*, June 3, 1957, 68; and “Who Goofed?,” *Newsweek*, July 29, 1957, 82.

Argentine, Italian, and Mexican versions of *The \$64,000 Question*—all sponsored by Revlon and jointly owned by emcee Hal March and EPI; the legal troubles facing the Chilean version of *Double or Nothing*; and the lingering fallout of a former contestant’s \$103,000 lawsuit against NBC’s *The Big Surprise*.<sup>63</sup> In total, it was a combination that should have prompted closer journalistic inspection, yet the focus in mass-market magazines remained on the fanciful riches bestowed upon contestants with the requisite stage performance skills and likeability factors.

Only *Look* magazine commissioned an investigation of quiz show practices, in “Are TV Quiz Shows Fixed?,” published in its 20 August 1957 issue.<sup>64</sup> David Aldrich concluded that quiz shows were undeniably “controlled or partially controlled” by producers. “The one certainty is that, of all today’s big-money quiz shows...only two come anywhere near being completely spontaneous.” As damning as that sounds from a modern perspective, Aldrich did not find his assessment problematic. Even though *The \$64,000 Question*, *Twenty-One*, and *Treasure Hunt* were categorized as “controlled” programs, Aldrich rationalized that producer controls—in the forms of contestant selection processes and the practice of matching contestants to questions with which they were knowingly familiar—were necessary, and common, undertakings of the most successful shows. *Treasure Hunt* producer Bud Granaff complained, “If a sponsor wants to give away loot, it’s his own business how he does it!” and “readily admits that the question part of his show is often fixed.” Production decisions were unilaterally in the interest of “making it a

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<sup>63</sup> “‘100,000 Peso Question’ In Arg. A Lawyer’s Paradise As Losers Weep and Sue,” *Variety*, September 12, 1956, 27, 32; “Italo Quiz a National Issue; Notary-Judge Dropped From TV Show Accused of Favoring Contestant,” *Variety*, October 17, 1956, 48; “Quiz-Happy Italy,” *Variety*, October 17, 1956, 48; “Federal Trade Commission Eyeing Contestant Rules of TV ‘Big Surprise,’” *Variety*, January 16, 1957, 1; “‘Double or Nothing’ Quiz Stirs Chilean Tempest, Claim Questions Loaded,” *Variety*, January 23, 1957, 32; and “It’s a Tall Job for Quiz Packagers Trying to Keep Contestants in Line,” *Variety*, January 23, 1957, 30, 38.

<sup>64</sup> David Aldrich, “Are TV Quiz Shows Fixed?,” *Look*, August 20, 1957, 45-47.

good game” for the audience’s entertainment, and producers denied using questions as a means to eliminate unlikeable contestants intentionally.<sup>65</sup>

As Aldrich neatly explained away quiz show “trade secrets” as token components of the broadcasting business, he also warned: “A show can be manipulated by the contestants as well as the producers.” The example provided as evidence was Charles Van Doren. Bill Ladd, television editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, contended that Van Doren had told him in an interview two weeks before his loss to Nearing, “a long series of ties, with the stake increasing every week, could ruin my bankroll, and I’ll never let it happen.” In Ladd’s estimation, Van Doren had missed the King of Belgium question, something that should have been “easy for one of Van Doren’s encyclopedic brilliance,” to protect his payout.<sup>66</sup> While Van Doren would directly refute Ladd’s accusation in print the following month, the groundwork for incriminating quiz shows and their contestants as frauds was being laid.

The *New York Times Magazine* would report, “Despite diligent research, nobody has yet turned up evidence that the fix is in on any of the big-money quizzes. It may be reasonably deduced that a producer planning to fix a show would not risk taking contestants into his confidence. With that restriction, the only method of favoring a contestant would be to ask him questions to which he knew the answers,” the very practice willfully discussed in *Look* and elsewhere. By December 1957, however, the head producers at both EPI and Barry-Enright Productions “wearily den[ie]d that they ever know enough about what a contestant knows to weight the questions for or against.”<sup>67</sup> Even with the new rebuffs from producers, it was widely acknowledged and accepted in national magazine articles that the producers and contestants were

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Aldrich, “Are TV Quiz Shows Fixed?,” 45.

<sup>67</sup> Gordon Cotler, “The Question About Quiz Shows,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 1, 1957, 96.

most interested in “putting on a show” for the audience, and that some sleight of hand was surely involved. The consensus was: If the show was entertaining, then their efforts were worthwhile.

*American Mercury* featured five full pages of tips on “How to Win a Quiz Show,” with specific suggestions for each of the biggest audience favorites.<sup>68</sup> The roadmap sketched for aspiring competitors simultaneously intended to make the contestant selection processes transparent so there would be no misunderstanding about who was going to be chosen for each show and why. Decidedly, “personality, appearance and proximity to New York” would get contestant hopefuls in producers’ doors. If those hopefuls could meet the requirements of “steady nerves, happy dispositions, and few inhibitions,” they were on their way to being typecast into a quiz show plotline. The column-long hand-drawn cartoon that visually punctuated the article’s first page provided a key clue about who would fare best in the casting process. The image consisted of a body-length stack of books, with spines labeled history, music, and moles; upon which leaned a shapely figured woman with short hair, horn-rimmed glasses, and a Marilyn Monroe facial beauty mark, dressed in fishnet stockings, garter belt, high heels, and a burlesque showgirl costume. Apparently, even the “brainy type” had to please men’s eyes and still appeal to a wide range of audience tastes. While the triumphs of *The \$64,000 Question* were devoted almost a full page, *Twenty-One* received mention in only two paragraphs at the end of the article and was brushed off as a show “interested only in geniuses or near-geniuses.”<sup>69</sup> Its format and desired participants did not retain the same mass appeal as the shows that featured attractive

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<sup>68</sup> Jess Stearn, “How to Win A Quiz Show,” *American Mercury*, August 1957, 37-41.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

women of average intelligence in a scramble for cash and prizes. *Name That Tune* creator Harry Salter claimed that “airline stewardesses, as a class, make the very best contestants.”<sup>70</sup>

Resurrecting the national media dilemma over the inherent discrepancies between intelligence and quiz shows’ fantastical portrayals of it, John Lardner of the *New Yorker* concluded in November 1957, “The [quiz show] campaign seeks to ‘hoke up’ or disguise—through the use of youth, beauty, vaudeville, or whatever—the element of intelligence in information programs...[T]he producers of these programs concluded long ago that intelligence per se is fundamentally repulsive to the so-called mass audience. Since early times [in radio quiz history]...they’ve taken pains to soften the curse of raw brightness by hiding it under theatrical props.”<sup>71</sup> In weighing in on “The Real Meaning of Intelligence,” *Cosmopolitan* rehashed the clinical differences between a person with a good memory and one with a high intelligence quotient and determined, “Real intelligence...would appear to be independent of factual information.” Writer Richard Gehman recognized that television quiz shows granted “ordinary humans the illusion of superior intelligence...by virtue of the sound showmanship employed in the show’s productions,” but also underscored Van Doren as an exception, the real deal, someone who “had been taught from boyhood to use his mental powers to their fullest level.”<sup>72</sup> Despite his authentic superior intelligence—the one trait upon which mass media and their audiences agreed—Van Doren was still also entrenched in the popular culture industry, and in the theatrical engineering of the big-money quiz show contestants. Calling Van Doren the “matinee idol of quiz-dom,” Gehman recycled the popular iconography already well established

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Stearn, “How to Win a Quiz Show,” 39. Harry Salter was also the son-in-law of radio’s religious revivalist Aimee Semple McPherson.

<sup>71</sup> John Lardner, “The Air: Life Around the Booths,” *New Yorker*, November 30, 1957, 147.

<sup>72</sup> Richard Gehman, “The Real Meaning of Intelligence,” *Cosmopolitan*, September 1957, 31.

in Van Doren's media narrative by reporting that pictures of Van Doren adorned the bedroom walls of the "gum-chewing set," right next to mass-produced autographed photos of Elvis.

Van Doren would directly address the very conflicts between entertainment and education in two articles he authored in the last quarter of the year: "Junk Wins TV Quiz Shows," published by *Life* in late September 1957, and "TV-Hating Eggheads Are Soft-boiled," printed in the *New York Herald Tribune* in December 1957. In both, Van Doren tried to manage his own personal narrative by revisiting his own experience on *Twenty-One* and explaining his ambivalence toward his quiz show success to his critics—and supporters.

In "Junk Wins TV Quiz Shows," Van Doren unpretentiously described his evolution from television outsider to television insider.<sup>73</sup> At first, Van Doren believed television "could hurt people, that it could corrupt them, perhaps. At least it could waste their time" (137). His own experiences in the business, with a great number of people who were working diligently to improve television, informed his newfound respect for the medium. Despite his high hopes for television's future, Van Doren revealed that he, too, struggled with the uncomfortable confluence of "assimilating into [his] career in education this new life [he] had accidentally found in television." He sensed a nagging intuition "that the two did not go together" (138). When he was out in public, teary-eyed teachers greeted him, shook his hand, and thanked him for the respect he had restored to learning.

And it wasn't only the teachers who said this. When I finally lost, editorials appeared in an amazing number of papers all over the country lauding my efforts on *Twenty-One*, pointing out that it was revolutionary for Americans to have an "egghead" for a hero and suggesting that those same Americans who had always distrusted people with knowledge were changing at last.

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<sup>73</sup> Charles Van Doren, "Junk Wins TV Quiz Shows," *Life*, September 23, 1957, 137-40, 145-48. "Junk Wins TV Quiz Shows" is quoted at length here because it was Van Doren's only explicit use of national print media to vocalize his position on the education-entertainment debate, and the contents of this article would both help and hurt Van Doren after his November 1959 congressional testimony.

Six months away from the hullabaloo, six months in which I have had time to think, have led me to believe that these letters, editorials, and personal assurances were probably isolated examples, and that they were in fact quite misleading. In the long run, I decided, the effect of quiz shows on education is rather bad than good.<sup>74</sup>

Van Doren philosophized about the different purposes and conditions of someone who sought knowledge and someone who sought to be a quiz show contestant. The two were practically polar opposites. “Do I mean, then, that the ‘knowledge’ quiz show contestants exhibit is nothing but ‘junk’? I’m afraid my answer is that it is hardly more than junk” (145). For Van Doren, nothing could be “intrinsically less interesting” than rote names, dates, and other facts by themselves. Instead, he resolved, “knowledge must bring joy if it is real.”

To me knowledge also implies civilization. I can’t imagine a wise man being a bore. Yet a contestant could answer every question ever asked on all quiz programs and still be a nincompoop. He could “know everything” and still know nothing, because he knew none of the connections between the things that he “knew.” Knowledge consists largely of making analogies, of seeing similarities, of deducing principles and laws. Knowledge is general statements. Quiz shows are concerned with the particular. They have to be. There isn’t time to argue on the air, and general statements are always disputable. Everything worthwhile is. Any subject about which there is no longer any difference of opinion is, you may be sure, a dull subject.

Thus knowledge is in a way more concerned with the unknown than with the known.<sup>75</sup>

Van Doren’s first-hand familiarity with the worlds of both quiz show contestant and learned scholar led him to conclude:

An educated man, then, and a quiz show contestant are moving rather rapidly in opposite directions. The world of the educated man is full of mysteries. It is foggy and dark, with lots of unlighted passages leading off to no one knows where. The more educated he is the more such passages he discovers...

Opposed to the dim uncertainty of the world of the educated man is the bright little circle of light in which the quiz show contestant basks in his isolation booth. All is certainty there. One need not worry or be distressed. Only those questions are asked which have answers, and then only if the answers are available, on a card held in the

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<sup>74</sup> Van Doren, “Junk Wins TV Quiz Shows,” 140.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-47.

M.C.'s hand. Probably fireflies, flitting about in the spring twilight, are as sure of their little circles of luminescence as the contestant is of his.<sup>76</sup>

The passage subtly indicates the dark secret of the quiz shows: under the bright lights, in plain view, nothing was left to chance.

The contestants were not the only ones sure of their “little circles of luminescence”; so were the producers, sponsors, and networks. The influx of new, and more, quiz shows to the daytime and primetime network schedules was an indication of what the television executives claimed to be audience demand. “The three major networks now devote some seventy-five half-hour periods a week to quiz, game and stunt programs,” bemoaned Gerald Cotler in the *New York Times Magazine* in December 1957. Characterizing quiz show concepts as formulaic, Cotler summarized, “The quiz shows have lately been resorting to gimmicks—which suggests that they may be concerned about holding their huge audiences. But if quizzes have dropped some from their dizzyest heights, they are still well above sea level.” In a competitive industry in which television serials were considered “veterans” if they made it to a third season, quiz shows were “something of a bulwark amid the rough, rapidly shifting seas of TV programming.”<sup>77</sup>

Van Doren likewise backtracked from his negative assessments of the quiz shows and directed a message to the intelligentsia gloating over his television critique in *Life*. As editors at academic journals, such as *College English*, were applauding Van Doren's candid appraisal of the quiz shows' detrimental effects on education, Van Doren was also taking the high-brow set to task.<sup>78</sup> In December, Van Doren authored “TV-Hating Eggheads are Soft-boiled,” which appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune*, a newspaper with a much smaller circulation than *Life*

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>77</sup> Cotler, “The Question About Quiz Shows,” 90.

<sup>78</sup> “News and Ideas,” *College English* 19.5 (1958): 230.

but whose readers were more likely to include the intellectuals too cultured to watch television.<sup>79</sup> Since the article appeared in the Sunday *TV Magazine*, however, the intended audience appears to be the television viewers who perhaps took issue with Van Doren's earlier denunciation of positive quiz show effects. There, on the other side of the television-education coin, Van Doren admonished the intellectuals who considered themselves above the masses and who dismissed television as value-less. He had found entertainment as well as educational possibilities in the ether. Unlike the accommodating reaction his *Life* article was given by university periodicals and journals, Van Doren's newspaper column met a stonewalled silence.

### 3.2.3 Shunned, January-August 1958

Within the course of his first year in the mass media spotlight, Van Doren's public image had fluctuated wildly, from the golden hope for America's future to an ungrateful turncoat. Following the publication of Van Doren's *Life* treatise, he was essentially excised from print media coverage of quiz shows, as Teddy Nadler, Harold Craig, David Mayer, Army Captain Michael O'Rourke, and Elfrida von Nardroff emerged as a new crop of happy, gracious, successful contestants.<sup>80</sup> Much media attention focused on how long the contestants had toiled at study—sometimes years—specifically to reach their quiz show stardom. In contrast to Van Doren's ambivalence toward his association with quiz shows, the newly idolized winners treated

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<sup>79</sup> Charles Van Doren, "TV-Hating Eggheads are Soft-boiled," *New York Herald Tribune TV Magazine*, December 15, 1957, 12-14.

<sup>80</sup> See Betty Hannah Hoffman, "Famous Overnight," *Ladies Home Journal*, November 1957, 161-64+; "Ways of a Winner," *Newsweek*, November 4, 1957, 100; Hal March, "The \$64,000 and I," *Saturday Evening Post*, November 30, 1957, 19-21+; "The Bible Says," *Christian Century*, January 1, 1958, 5; "Those TV Contestants," *Newsweek*, April 14, 1958, 70-71; "The TV Quiz—How Far?," *Newsweek*, May 5, 1958, 107-108; "Lady with the Answers," *Time*, May 12, 1958, 70; "Lady With the Answers," *Newsweek*, June 9, 1958, 78; "The Trouble with Being Elfrida," *Life*, June 23, 1958, 71-74; "Fallen but Queenly," *Newsweek*, July 21, 1958, 52; John Lardner, "The Air: Ear and the Overshoot," *New Yorker*, August 9, 1958, 70-73; and "The People Getters," *Time*, August 25, 1958, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,868759,00.html>.

their television fame and fortunes as the best occurrences of their lives and gave reporters good quotes, which promoted the quiz biz unquestioningly. Throughout the first eight months of 1958, only three national magazine articles—two of which appeared in *Newsweek*—even mentioned Van Doren’s name.<sup>81</sup> Critics at the *New York Times*, meanwhile, hailed Van Doren as educational program host extraordinaire and encouraged their readers to watch him on television whenever possible.<sup>82</sup>

Exactly one year after Van Doren had been reincarnated on television as a professional correspondent, *Newsweek* described the television programming schedule as a “phalanx of game-quiz shows that are rapidly gobbling up daytime TV hours and eating their way into the night.”<sup>83</sup> In 1958, NBC aired six successive quizzes every weekday morning, and on certain nights, viewers could watch six more. CBS broadcast 16 1/2 hours of games each week as well, and ABC trailed far behind but still managed to fill 3 1/2 hours. Ten new quiz shows were scheduled to debut in the summer 1958 season, and thirty more new prospects were circulating among the network programming decision-makers. The United States Postal Service reported a 300 percent increase over their 1957 sales of two-cent postcards and attributed their good fortune to the number of people applying to quiz show producers. The renewed wave of quiz hysteria had even inspired Arthur Godfrey and Ed Sullivan to incorporate giveaways into their decidedly non-giveaway programs. The deluge of quiz shows was attributed to the “soft economy,” their cheap production costs, the safety of assured easy cancellation if the sponsor became dissatisfied, and the incredible potential for big payouts for producers and sponsors. Still trying to entice potential

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<sup>81</sup> See Marvin Barrett, “A Whirl in Mad Fantasy...The Day Mr. Know-It-All Finally Wins It All,” *Newsweek*, May 5, 1958, 108-10; “Questions Missed on 21,” *Look*, August 19, 1958, 78; and “Out of the Booth,” *Newsweek*, August 25, 1958, 58.

<sup>82</sup> John P. Shanley, “‘See It Now’; Documentary Focuses on the Issue of Statehood for Alaska and Hawaii,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1958, 44.

<sup>83</sup> “The TV Quiz—How Far?,” 107.

geniuses into the television studio, producers, like Dan Enright, provided a list of primer study materials, including Shakespeare plays (all of them), the World Almanac, and maps. If contestants could familiarize themselves with literature, history, and geography, they would likely do well enough to take home \$16,000.<sup>84</sup>

Alongside the news article, however, *Newsweek* published a satirical allegory set in the far-off future of 1984 that cleverly explained Van Doren's five-month absence from the press through its veiled references to his comments in *Life*.<sup>85</sup> The farce opens in a contemporary spring 1958, when quiz shows began to dominate network television. "This was before the New York Quizatorium had been built on the site of the old Pennsylvania Station or drive-in quizzerias dotted the suburban landscapes and Games Wonderland was still known as the Radio City Music Hall." By the 1970s, a nuclear physicist had won enough money on quiz shows to purchase Harvard University and revise its curriculum to require such courses as "Music 57—everything you want to know about opera without reference to esthetic worth; Psychology 92—association and other techniques for storing useless information for split-second recall; and Mechanical Engineering 17—the maintenance of IBM question-sorting machines and isolation booths." In 1978, Bo, a young man who had been groomed by his mother from early childhood to succeed in this new quiz show world order, received his Ph.D. in "insignificant dates from Ararat to the present day" and began his career climb by appearing on thirty-four individual television games each week. In the process, Bo acquired all New York City "real estate on the west side of Park Avenue," forty-seven producing oil wells, the S.S. Queen Elizabeth, and one of the "lesser TV networks," as well as the Prometheus statue and ice skating rink of another.

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-108.

<sup>85</sup> Barrett, "Whirl in Mad Fantasy," 108-10.

On his way to becoming U.S. President—a position now filled via election by quiz show—Bo had one last opponent to face. The unlikely anti-hero chosen for the challenge was “a man who identified himself only as the janitor of Columbia University,” none other than Charles Van Doren, the “father of his profession,” who had been deemed a traitor and banished for denouncing quiz shows. “While millions of impressionable souls looked on, [Van Doren] had jumped without warning into camera range during a commercial and shouted wildly: ‘This is wrong! Facts without ideas are nothing! The intellect, not the memory, must come first!’ It had been hideous, unpleasant, and soon forgotten. Van Doren had disappeared.” A quarter-century later, in one last match to determine who would control the most powerful nation in the world, Van Doren reemerged and waged a year-long battle of wits against Bo:

Bo identified all the figures on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel counterclockwise...Van Doren recited the Gospel according to St. John in Esperanto. Bo identified ten isolated chords extracted at random from the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. Van Doren sang the final aria from an unpublished opera by Cimarosa. Bo, in 90 seconds, balanced a watermelon, cantaloupe, grapefruit, orange, plum, and currant one atop the other on an oyster fork. In the same period of time Van Doren forced the entire contents squeezed from a tube of toothpaste back into the container with a blunt spoon.<sup>86</sup>

In the final round, set for 4 July 1985, the IBM question sorter was abandoned and each contestant was left to pose his own last question to the other. Bo, who “wouldn’t think of asking a question [he] didn’t know,” required Van Doren to:

One...Identify and give the dates of 1,250 of the 1,500 contributors to the eleventh edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica...Two: Sketch the deployment of Napoleon’s forces at the battle of Austerlitz. Three: List the batting averages of the Portland Beavers for the playing season of 1935...

When, 90 minutes later the final Beaver was named there was a burst of grudging applause.

Eyes swiveled to Bo, whose face still glittered with imperturbable confidence; then back to Van Doren, who inexplicably was removing his earphones as if the contest were over.

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

“My question is very brief, it can be answered yes or no,” he said gently while the crowded Senate sat transfixed. “Bo?” He turned toward his adversary slowly with a look of great pity and concern. “Are you a happy man?”

Bo’s clear eyes clouded; his firm, finely modeled lips dropped in an expression they had never known—bewilderment. A shudder of uncertainty agitated his massive shoulders. Finally, in a helpless wail, he uttered the dreadful words: “I don’t know.”<sup>87</sup>

In the end, Bo lived happily ever after with a woman who did not know what “metaphysics” means, Van Doren turned down the Presidency job, and America got on as it always had.

The sheer absurdity of Marvin Barrett’s story softened the rough blow from his critique, as the satire highlighted some of the dormant issues lingering around quiz show success as well as around Van Doren. In forefronting the obscurity of high-stakes questions and the relative impossibility of knowing their correct answers, Barrett underscored the utter uselessness of quiz show knowledge and the public’s strange fascination with great magnitudes of such uselessness, which included aimlessly impractical stunts. Random lists of facts had become so important that citizens were willing to turn over their national welfare to the man who had memorized the most. The significance of being recognized as a winner took center stage. In telling this tale, Barrett pointed out that Van Doren had not really pursued the fame that was available to him. In the fiction, Van Doren rejected the prestigious job of President and presumably returned to Morningside Heights to continue being a janitor. In real life, Van Doren had turned down the entertainment industry offers that could have transformed him into a movie or television superstar and as a substitute, he actually wanted to talk about thought-provoking educational subjects in dialogues and discussions with other experts. Further, Van Doren’s final question to

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

Bo, which referenced Van Doren's assertion in *Life* that real knowledge brings joy, pinpointed how joyless and methodic the mass production of quiz show winners had become.

In the first six months of 1958, giveaways had handed out "\$16 million worth of appliances, cars, cameras and bric-a-brac on 22 network shows seen by most of the nation's 43 million TV homes."<sup>88</sup> Standard consolation prizes included fur coats, Cadillacs, and money—always the money. In the quiz show formula, the riches had always been a large part of the audience draw, but not even the dollar figures were enough to keep viewers interested for very long. Dan Enright claimed that the winning payout amounts were secondary to the lure of a good match: "Money has become a cheap commodity. The game's the thing. Ours is a good one."<sup>89</sup> Still, throughout summer 1958, quiz programs continued to amp up the oddity factor of the prizes they offered to their contestants by throwing in such rewards as a "a helicopter, an entry in next year's Kentucky Derby, and a day's receipts (\$3,500) from San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge." In August, *Newsweek* reported that *Bid 'n' Buy* promised to award one winner the entire island of Stroma, off the northern coast of Scotland, population 90.<sup>90</sup> It was an event that prompted the U.S. State Department to launch an investigation to determine the potential for international crisis.<sup>91</sup> Foreign-born members of Scottish clans living in New York were starting to get rowdy, and some Brits, it seemed, were threatening to re-sail up the Delaware River and take back some land they had lost a few centuries earlier.

On the very same page, in the very next column, "Out of the Booth" drew attention to Van Doren's dual obligations to teaching and television while simultaneously exemplifying the

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<sup>88</sup> "The Giveaways," *Time*, July 7, 1958, 66-67.

<sup>89</sup> Cotler, "The Question About Quiz Shows," 93.

<sup>90</sup> "Island Warfare," *Newsweek*, August 25, 1958, 58.

<sup>91</sup> Belton O. Bryan, American Consul General, Foreign Service Dispatch, August 15, 1958; File 911.50/8-1558, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

ambiguity still hovering over Van Doren's media image. In the article's opening sentence, *Newsweek* quoted an adamant plea by Charles Van Doren: "I want to be myself and not appear in an imaginary television booth when people see me." In the next paragraphs, the article announced that Van Doren would "take over as emcee for a still-to-be-announced news quiz show," and that "During the last week of August, he will sit in for Dave Garroway on the 'Today' show." NBC, in preparation for a "public-affairs" program, sent Van Doren to Washington, D.C., to attend Capitol press conferences and congressional hearings, to interview power players in the U.S. government, and to tour the Pentagon. The network's vice president in charge of news judged Van Doren's training period to be worth the expense. "We feel Van Doren has a fine future in special feature reporting."<sup>92</sup> Emcee, correspondent, reporter, host...what was Van Doren going to be? Still, no one seemed to know for sure.

This 25 August 1958 publication of Van Doren's career update at NBC was oddly timed. The timing becomes conspicuous, given the fact that it coincides with former *Twenty-One* contestant Herb Stempel's exploratory meeting with New York County Assistant District Attorney (ADA) Joseph Stone and the discovery of quiz show producer controls beyond the normal contestant and question selections. That same week, a quiz show investigation conducted by the office of the New York County District Attorney (DA) was "knocking the Far East crisis out of the top headlines of most of New York's newspapers."<sup>93</sup> The *New York Times* reported on 28 August that a widening legal inquiry into quiz show practices was in the works at the DA's office, and followed up on 29 August with a clarification that DA Frank Hogan was "skeptical"

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<sup>92</sup> "Out of the Booth," *Newsweek*, August 25, 1958, 58. An additional report about Van Doren's special feature training appeared in "Random Notes in Washington: Summit Letter Writer Is Hired; Eisenhower Recalls Jackson to Handle Khrushchev Correspondence," *New York Times*, August 4, 1958, 10.

<sup>93</sup> Henry Popkin, "The Trouble with the Quiz Shows," *New Republic*, October 13, 1958, 22.

there was any law in the New York statutes against “‘fixing’ a quiz show.”<sup>94</sup> With or without pending legal ramifications, the dazzling façade of the quiz shows had been cracked beyond repair.

### 3.3 TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES, SEPTEMBER 1958-SEPTEMBER 1959

Only one week after *Newsweek* reported on Van Doren’s rising television career, *Time* broke the “Scandal of the Quizzes.”<sup>95</sup> The story had finally leaked out that *Dotto* was “crooked.” Edward Hilgemeier Jr., one among many aspiring actors who made the rounds on the smaller-scale television quiz shows for the camera exposure—and to help make ends meet—had been selected as a stand-by contestant for *Dotto*. In the show’s backstage dressing room one afternoon, Hilgemeier had observed Marie Winn, “Miss Radcliffe, Class of 1958” and current *Dotto* champion, intently studying a notebook.<sup>96</sup> When Winn went on stage for her match, she left the notebook behind, and Hilgemeier promptly snatched it up. The notebook contained the answers to the very questions Winn was being asked at that moment. Hilgemeier had immediately approached the producers at *Dotto* with his discovery, and the producers likewise immediately paid Hilgemeier \$1,500 for his silence. A few days later, Hilgemeier decided that \$1,500 was not enough to keep quiet. He first filed an affidavit with the FCC but was told the agency “had no jurisdiction” over programming content. Next, he went to Colgate-Palmolive, the sponsor of

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<sup>94</sup> Val Adams, “TV-Quiz Inquiry Widened in City,” *New York Times*, August 28, 1958, 29; and “Hogan Skeptical Over TV Charges,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1958, 25.

<sup>95</sup> “Scandal of the Quizzes,” *Time*, September 1, 1958, 38.

<sup>96</sup> Marie Winn was identified as the recognized winner of the title Miss Radcliffe, Class of 1958 in “How Queer the Quiz?,” *Newsweek*, September 8, 1958, 86.

*Dotto*, told executives there what he knew, and the show was dropped without delay. Finally, Hilgemeier went to the DA to file charges of producer tampering.

*Time* commented, “Questions might be tailored by the producers to fit a contestant’s known areas of knowledge or ignorance, but the possibility of more blatant hanky-panky than that seemed remote. Too much money was at stake, too many people were involved, and if one show went sour—so the argument ran—they would all be suspect.”<sup>97</sup> It was an argument that would prove well-founded. At the breaking news, *Variety* warned industry businessmen that lawsuits from disgruntled losing contestants now posed a serious financial threat to producers and, more importantly, to sponsors of quiz programs, while television columnist Harriet Van Horne of the *New York World-Telegram* wished hopefully that the Ringmasters would finally have to fold up their tents under such scrutiny and suspicion.<sup>98</sup>

No one paused to question why Winn had been so lackadaisical about her notebook, if contestant rigging was top secret. No one followed up on the statements made by several former contestants who matter-of-factly acknowledged they had regular “Warm Ups” and “Briefings” with the show’s producers—until the day they did not, which was usually the day they also lost and went home with their accumulated winnings. When interviewed, contestants spoke of their experiences nonchalantly, almost as though they were simply providing an answer to a quiz show question. They expressed no hard feelings toward producers; it had all been great fun. From the producers’ standpoint, as a *Dotto* spokesman would say, “This may be a quiz business to the housewives of America, but to us, it’s the entertainment business. There’s no reason for the public to know what happens behind the scenes. If you buy a \$5.80 seat to a play, why should

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<sup>97</sup> “Scandal of the Quizzes,” 38.

<sup>98</sup> “Question for TV Quiz—Who Has the Answers?,” *Newsweek*, September 5, 1958, 8.

that entitle you to go backstage?”<sup>99</sup> Another anonymous quiz show producer concurred, “It’s none of the public’s business what goes on behind the scenes...These things aren’t contests, they’re shows—pure and simple.”<sup>100</sup> By closing ranks around the production realities of the television business—which they had always admitted, for the most part—producers also tightened the noose around the networks’ necks.

In response to the DA’s inquiries, CBS swiftly conducted its own internal investigation but found no “evidence of irregularities” or “any improper procedures.” Still, *The \$64,000 Question* reverted back to a \$64,000 prize limit, at the suggestion of co-sponsors Revlon and P. Lorillard Company, to refrain from appearing overly focused on the money.<sup>101</sup> NBC, “the network most heavily committed to quiz shows...[which comprised] 18 per cent of its over-all programming time,” chose to downplay the accusations by writing them off as unworthy of special attention. ABC, too, was considerably less concerned than CBS, although ABC’s reasons for ambivalence were clearly rooted in the relative absence of quiz shows from their network programming schedule. As an ABC executive pointed out, “You can’t say anything bad about Westerns. That’s our formula and we’re sticking to it.”<sup>102</sup>

It was not only Hilgemeier who claimed foul against *Dotto*; Charles “Stoney” Jackson, a clergyman from Tennessee who had appeared on *The \$64,000 Challenge*, and Herb Stempel, the *Twenty-One* contestant Van Doren had defeated to become the Wizard of Quiz, also corroborated the growing suspicion of widespread irregularities on several other programs. Jackson’s testimony to the DA, about pre-show producer warm-up sessions that included some of the same questions he was then asked on camera, immediately prompted P. Lorillard Company to drop

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<sup>99</sup> “Scandal of the Quizzes,” 38.

<sup>100</sup> “How Queer the Quiz,” 86.

<sup>101</sup> Val Adams, “C.B.S. Introducing ‘Pursuit’ October 22,” *New York Times*, October 1, 1958, 75.

<sup>102</sup> “How Queer the Quiz,” 86.

*The \$64,000 Challenge*, which was in the midst of jumping networks to NBC.<sup>103</sup> For Stempel's part in the matter, he had been trying for an entire year to get someone to listen to his story. He had confided to two newspaper reporters that his quiz show appearances—including his defeat—had been scripted in advance. The *Journal-American* and the *New York Post* made inquiries at NBC as early as summer 1957, but neither could substantiate Stempel's claims and, therefore, printed no story.<sup>104</sup> In August 1958, however, ADA Stone was eager to hear everything Stempel had to say about producers orchestrating his every outward appearance, from the clothing he wore to his haircut, his facial expressions and vocal stutterings to his well-timed brow-mopping, and about the careful planning of right and wrong answers along a plotline of dollar figures and drama. Finding sufficient cause for a formal investigation into television quiz show practices in general, the DA asked Judge Mitchell Schweitzer to convene a grand jury in September 1958.

In the wake of Stempel's allegation that his loss to Van Doren was part of "an agreement with producers, Barry and Enright," former *Twenty-One* contestants, including Van Doren and Elfrida von Nardroff, indignantly denied receiving any help in any regard during their quiz show appearances and steadfastly called Stempel's charges "very hard to believe."<sup>105</sup> In their own defense, Barry and Enright produced a 55-minute tape recording of Stempel attempting to blackmail Enright for \$50,000 and promptly filed libel suits against two New York newspapers—the *Journal-American* and the *World-Telegram*—for printing Stempel's allegations. Enright admitted to forwarding to Stempel an \$18,500 advance against his future winnings "because at that point the show needed him. We couldn't afford to lose him," but claimed that decision had cost him much more in the way of stress from time and energy spent

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<sup>103</sup> "\$64,000 Answer," *Newsweek*, September 22, 1958, 71.

<sup>104</sup> Anderson, *Television Fraud*, 73.

<sup>105</sup> "How Queer the Quiz," 88.

dealing with an increasingly erratic Stempel.<sup>106</sup> Enright maintained that once Stempel had squandered all of his prizewinnings in scam business deals and his wife's arbitrary spending sprees, Stempel became emotionally unstable and started making outrageous demands of the producer. Enright had interpreted Stempel's behavior as a plea for help and had generously offered to pay for weekly psychiatric care for Stempel.<sup>107</sup> Stempel admitted he had badly invested his money but refuted Enright's accusations of emotional instability and erratic behavior, and vehemently protested the authenticity of Enright's recording, which Stempel claimed was doctored. Barry and Enright also produced a copy of a document, signed by Stempel, that professed he had never received assistance of any kind while appearing on *Twenty-One*. It was a he said-he said exchange throughout September 1958.<sup>108</sup>

As prepared as Barry and Enright had been for problems from Stempel, they were wholly caught off-guard by James Snodgrass, a contestant who had won only \$4,000 before losing a seven-week contest to fan favorite Hank Bloomgarden. Snodgrass told a story very similar to Stempel—a producer had paid Snodgrass's bill to have his teeth whitened for television, had told Snodgrass when to pause and for how long, had given him the questions and answers in advance. Snodgrass also offered the DA something Stempel could not: he had sent three registered letters to himself over the course of his contestant stint, each of which contained his questions and answers, each postmarked before his live appearances. It is peculiar that the *Twenty-One* producers did not anticipate rumblings from Snodgrass, who had already “doublecrossed his

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<sup>106</sup> “If You Ask Questions,” *Newsweek*, September 15, 1958, 62.

<sup>107</sup> “Meeting of Minds,” *Time*, September 15, 1958, 47. Also, Enright never made good on his offer.

<sup>108</sup> For recaps of the accusations traded between Stempel and Enright in national magazines, see Popkin, “Trouble with the Quiz Shows”; “How Queer the Quiz”; “If You Ask Questions”; “Meeting of Minds”; “Quiz Scandal (Contd.),” *Time*, October 6, 1958, 50; and “Telling Tales on ‘21,’” *Newsweek*, October 6, 1958, 52. In the *New York Times*, Val Adams provided daily updates and analyses of the DA's inquiry. See “‘21’ Quiz Program Accuses Accuser,” September 2, 1958, 27; “Record is Played on TV ‘Blackmail,’” September 3, 1958, 67; “Hogan Asks Files of ‘21’ Quiz Show,” September 4, 1958, 55; and “‘Dotto’ Officials Questioned Here,” September 5, 1958, 51.

collaborators by answering a question correctly when he was scheduled to goof.”<sup>109</sup> Their oversight would be their downfall. Once the registered letters were authenticated by the DA’s office, NBC had little choice but to launch its own internal investigation into the matter. Meanwhile, Barry and Enright “asked their bosses at NBC to relieve them of all ‘production responsibilities’” so that they could devote their full-time attention to “disproving the unfounded charges against the integrity of [their] programs.”<sup>110</sup>

Whereas the two other quiz shows accused of rigging were quickly removed from the television airwaves, *Twenty-One* managed to last until mid-October. A *New Republic* editorial bluntly revealed why the show that had gotten the most negative publicity also seemed the strongest: “It had recently been bought by [NBC] for more than two million dollars.”<sup>111</sup> By all appearances, the network, counting on the publicity to stimulate viewer interest, was trying to get as much of its sunken money’s worth as possible out of the show. NBC’s superficial support of the program also lent credence to the claim that contestant riggings were isolated incidents separate from the gamesmanship of the majority of the matches. A “sour public-relations man” at NBC would describe the relationship between the network and *Twenty-One* as “a situation where a husband suspects a wife but loves her so much he doesn’t want to know.”<sup>112</sup> It additionally did not hurt that the network’s professed marital love of *Twenty-One* made the \$2 million cost look more like a price tag and less like a blatant bribe.

Within the month—as *The \$64,000 Question* also met with the executioner’s axe—Barry-Enright Productions Inc. offered up a sacrifice to the angry grand jury gods. They fingered

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<sup>109</sup> “Quiz Scandal (Contd.),” 50.

<sup>110</sup> “Private Eyes,” *Time*, October 13, 1958, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,868902,00.html>.

<sup>111</sup> Popkin, “Trouble with the Quiz Shows,” 22.

<sup>112</sup> “Quizzes,” *Newsweek*, October 19, 1959, 29.

Albert Freedman as the producer who had supervised “the contestants and the questions on ‘Twenty-One’ since November 1956,” which resulted in Freedman’s swift indictment on perjury charges for intentionally lying about supplying questions and answers to Snodgrass.<sup>113</sup> With Freedman released on bail, wildly proclaiming his guiltlessness even as he fled to Mexico, and with Hogan issuing more and more subpoenas for former contestants to appear before the grand jury, national mass media inexplicably went silent on quiz shows and all involved in them.

The *New York Times* was the primary publication to keep readers updated on Van Doren, whose television appearances began multiplying with abandon. In early September, at the start of the DA’s investigation, Van Doren appeared on *Meet the Press* as part of a reporters’ panel. At the beginning of October 1958, just days before he was questioned by the New York County DA, Van Doren joined the regular cast of the *Today* show.<sup>114</sup> He would provide a five-minute cultural segment about poetry, science, and related intellectual interests on a daily basis. And just days after he was questioned by the DA, where he had told a gathering of reporters outside the courthouse that “he had not been given questions or answers before appearing on ‘Twenty-One,’” Van Doren would begin hosting *N.B.C. Kaleidoscope*, an hour-long “public affairs, pictorial journalism, and all fields of entertainment” program that would alternate weeks with *Omnibus*.<sup>115</sup> Again, no media outlet questioned the relationship between the network, Van Doren’s new television schedule, and the DA’s inquiry. In spite of the coincidental timing of Van Doren’s recent broadcasting appointments, his commentating, which included live hosting as well as taped-and-edited segments, was awarded overwhelming praise in the newspaper as “an

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<sup>113</sup> Mildred Murphy, “‘21’ TV Producer Held as Perjurer,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1958, 1.

<sup>114</sup> Val Adams, “News of TV and Radio: Wallace May Resume on ‘Night Beat’ Over Channel 5—Other Items,” *New York Times Magazine*, September 7, 1958, X15.

<sup>115</sup> “Van Doren Questioned; \$129,000 Winner on TV Quiz Says He Got No Help,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1958, 5; and Val Adams, “New N.B.C. Series Will Begin October 19,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1958, 63.

arresting example of responsible TV journalism.”<sup>116</sup> Throughout November, *Times* television critics were left to complain only about having to choose between two or more good programs that aired in the same timeslot.<sup>117</sup> Between all those autumn hours Van Doren had spent cultivating his television presence, he managed also to squeeze in some studious writing. As a final act of academic authority in the last few weeks of 1958, Van Doren detailed the necessary considerations for “Choosing a Dictionary” to readers of *Consumer Reports*, and in February 1959, his latest book, *Letters to Mother*, anthologized personal correspondence between some of the most famous—and infamous—characters on the stage of world history and the women who had given birth to them.<sup>118</sup> In all but one exception, the *Times* coverage of Van Doren between September 1958 and September 1959 did not even mention quiz shows; it was as though he had never been a contestant.<sup>119</sup>

Over the course of nine months, from September 1958 to June 1959, the New York County grand jury heard more than 200 witnesses in fifty-nine sessions of testimony. The overwhelming majority of former contestants denied knowledge of any wrongdoing. A number of others, however, substantiated the allegations of Jackson, Snodgrass, and Stempel, and admitted that they, too, had been given questions and answers in individual rehearsal sessions with producers prior to the contests. To inform the public of such fraudulent actions, the New York County grand jury submitted a 12,000-word presentment that noted television quiz show practices “violated social codes” but did not violate state laws.<sup>120</sup> In an unprecedented action, Judge Schweitzer impounded the presentment, barring jury members and the DA’s office from

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<sup>116</sup> John P. Shanley, “Television: Report on Indians,” *New York Times*, November 17, 1958, 63.

<sup>117</sup> John P. Shanley, “TV Listings Show Sunday Conflict,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1958, 55.

<sup>118</sup> Charles Van Doren, “Choosing a Dictionary,” *Consumer Reports*, December 1958, 668-69. For coverage of the release of *Letters to Mother*, see DeLancey Ferguson, “Dearest Mother,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1959, BR34.

<sup>119</sup> The lone exception is “Van Doren Questioned.”

<sup>120</sup> Stone and Yohn, *Prime-Time and Misdemeanors*, 199.

publicly discussing its contents. In his final decision to deny the presentment in order to spare unprosecutable citizens from irreparable defamation, Schweitzer officially cited the grand jury's lack of authority to report "activities and conduct of private persons engaged in private enterprise," which, Schweitzer reasoned, was what the quiz show practices equated since they did not violate written law.<sup>121</sup> Only *Newsweek* reported on Schweitzer's decision.<sup>122</sup>

In their respective memoirs, ADA Stone and U.S. House of Representatives Special Consultant Richard Goodwin each intimate that Schweitzer's decision was pressured by external factors, namely media executives and their attorneys, and David Marc credits an "inside source" with suggesting that Schweitzer's decision was the result of a threat by David Sarnoff to "move all network operations to Hollywood if New York was going to prove itself a hostile environment for the broadcasting business."<sup>123</sup> Schweitzer, reportedly, did not want to be responsible for the staggering loss of jobs in such an instance, and the presentment seal remained intact without sufficient evidence to challenge its legitimacy. On television, quiz shows had steadily continued to disappear. With fewer and fewer shows, declining viewership of the ones that remained, and relatively no audience fanfare to stir, magazines had no reason to report on quiz shows. All had been quiet for almost a year, until Congress convened hearings in October 1959 as part of a federal investigation of quiz shows.

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>122</sup> "'A Tawdry Hoax,'" *Newsweek*, June 22, 1959, 46.

<sup>123</sup> David Marc, "Scandal and the WASP," *Sight & Sound*, February 1995, 10-13.

### 3.4 SHOOTING THE STAR, OCTOBER 1959-FEBRUARY 1962

Calling Judge Schweitzer’s decision “not only unusual, but suspect,” Special Consultant Goodwin, under the authority of the Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight of the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, helped to open a congressional investigation into quiz show practices in the summer of 1959.<sup>124</sup> The Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee held jurisdiction over the FCC, and, because the quiz shows were broadcast on publicly owned airwaves, allegations of fraudulent content also fell under the committee’s umbrella, regardless of whether or not the shows violated any legal standards. It was simply up to the subcommittee to determine if the FCC had failed to act or if the FCC had no legal standing on which to act. In the unfolding congressional hearings that began in October 1959, several witnesses—who had appeared before the New York County grand jury and denied their involvement—elected to recant their previous testimony. A clear picture of widespread fraud and mass perjury emerged, making Van Doren’s earlier claims of innocence improbable.

The most drastic difference between the fall 1959 hearings and the robust handful of other Legislative Oversight investigations of television industry practices that had been conducted since 1956 was the fact that the 1959 spectacle actually received media coverage beyond the industry trade publications—and a lot of it.<sup>125</sup> More than forty-five articles about the

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<sup>124</sup> Goodwin, *Remembering America*, 46.

<sup>125</sup> *Variety* consistently reported on congressional investigations that could potentially affect the television industry. Some examples include: “Cellar Takes on Kintner, Wishes ABC ‘Prosperity,’” *Variety*, September 26, 1956, 22; Bob Chandler, “Cellar Winds Probe With No Major Net Monopoly Finding, but Trouble Is Still Looming on D. of J. Front,” *Variety*, October 3, 1956, 32, 56; Bob Chandler, “TV Storm Warnings Posted; Justice Dept. to Get Tough,” *Variety*, September 19, 1956, 45, 66; Bob Chandler, “Probe’s Act II More Fizz than Fuss; Stanton Denies Packager ‘Squeeze,’” *Variety*, September 26, 1956, 22, 34; “Control Doesn’t Frighten Stanton,” *Variety*, September 26, 1956, 22; “Craven Wants FCC to Clarify Its Position on Program Balance,” *Variety*, September 19, 1956, 45; “FCC’s Work Load,” *Variety*, September 19, 1956, 45; “‘Horse & Buggy’ Regulations Gotta Go, Celler Warns,” *Variety*, September 19, 1956, 45, 64; “Is ‘Play Marco’ a Lottery?,” *Variety*, November 21, 1956, 23, 38; “Keating & His Cutups,” *Variety*, September 19, 1956, 45; Jack Levy, “Politico Fingers in TV; Even Ike’s Staff Has Owner Stake,”

hearings and their consequences appeared in national magazines between October and November 1959, with another fifteen publications continuing coverage of the investigation's aftermath through April 1960, five months after the proceedings had concluded. Six magazine articles reported the eventual 1962 New York County grand jury perjury convictions of twenty participants. Concurrently between October 1959 and February 1962, the *New York Times* ran some 125 columns about the quiz fallout, eighty-three of which printed in October and November, an average of more than one a day. At first, there was abundant blame to spread around. The producers, the sponsors, the networks, and the government all came under heavy editorial fire. Broadcasters, however, engaged tactical publicity counteroffensives and were opportunely backed up by the President of the United States. Their evasive maneuvers effectively shielded them from excessive damage, which ricocheted instead to the participating contestants, most significantly, Charles Van Doren.

### **3.4.1 Moving Targets, October 1959**

The witnesses who had been most conciliatory with the New York County DA were also the first witnesses greeted at the federal hearings. In syndication, they repeated the same details and presented the same evidence, although some comedic flair had reportedly been added to their delivery, which “played” better with the new audience. Much of what they had to say had already been printed in magazines and newspapers the previous year, yet throughout October 1959, with the new corroborating testimonies of producers Dan Enright, Howard Felsher, Mert

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*Variety*, October 3, 1956, 35, 60; “NBC Sets the Record Straight,” *Variety*, October 10, 1956, 31; “Sarnoff Won’t Take Antitrust Rap Lying Down,” *Variety*, December 19, 1956, 34; and “Sarnoff’s ‘You Can’t Regulate,’” *Variety*, October 3, 1956, 32.

Koplin, and Shirley Bernstein freshly introduced to the record, editorialists treated the proceedings as revelatory.

The majority of the twenty-four magazine articles about the quiz show hearings published in October appeared in the same liberal-leaning periodicals that had criticized the Van Doren quiz craze at its inception in the first months of 1957. As they had surmised years earlier, American materialism was the real culprit all along. When Snodgrass testified, “Mr. Freedman came to the dressing room after the show saying that I had ruined him [by not losing]. The budget had been knocked out of whack”; when *Dotto* contestants referred to themselves as “paid entertainer” and “actress”; and when fired producers, like Howard Felsher of *Tic Tac Dough*, began to explain the logic of the business formula they followed at least seventy-five percent of the time, the combination led writers at *Newsweek* to remark that television “is an industry which confuses the illusion of art with the trickery of the huckster,” and at *The Commonweal* to deduce, “The quiz shows are merely the overt symptoms of the dangerous disease to which the entire T.V. industry is exposed: every man, every idea, every show can be made subservient to one goal—the sale of the advertisers’ product.”<sup>126</sup> *The Nation* reused eerily prophetic quotes from Wakefield’s “The Fabulous Sweat Box”; *The Commonweal* reprinted whole paragraphs of “The American Dream”; and Shayon got the last word in *Saturday Review* on the “higher immorality of the universe of merchandising, which is comparable to an immense galaxy, in which the TV shows represent only a minor solar system.”<sup>127</sup> Pages rapidly filled with observations of

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<sup>126</sup> “Dress Rehearsals Complete with Answers?,” *U.S. News & World Report*, October 19, 1959, 60-62; “TV’s Big Question: What is Morality?,” *Newsweek*, October 26, 1959, 70; and “The Packaged Answer,” *Commonweal*, October 23, 1959, 92.

<sup>127</sup> “Say It Ain’t So,” *Nation*, October 17, 1959, 223; “The Packaged Answer,” 92-93; and Robert Lewis Shayon, “Havoc Up One Sleeve,” *Saturday Review*, October 31, 1959, 25.

commercialism's deleterious effects on the American public, and the blame seeped much deeper than the eddies pooling on the surface.

The networks, the FCC, and the privatization of the nation's broadcasting industry got most of the media attention in October. *The Nation* concisely summarized the unwelcome position in which the network executives found themselves: "Either they were as crooked as the promoters or they were as gullible as the outsiders whom they helped to deceive."<sup>128</sup> Each explanation posed its own problems—the networks had condoned the production practices and their purposes, or the network executives were not capable of managing their workforce and product. Of the two options, the networks could only choose ineptitude if they wanted to remain in control of their own futures.

*The New Republic* revitalized the ages-old conundrum about television's best uses and functions in a modern civilization. The editor lamented that television could be utilized "as an education medium for social good"—as it was in Britain and Canada—and instead it was employed as a \$1.34 billion-a-year advertising vehicle in the U.S.<sup>129</sup> After directly accusing the FCC of being less of a government regulatory agency than a television industry profit enabler, the editor reminded readers, "The ether belongs to you and me. But unlike in other countries the Seven Dwarfs of the FCC parcel it out free to money-grabbers—just as we gave away our rivers, lakes, and forests, 100 years ago." The value of the government's giveaway to broadcasters far exceeded the value of all the prizes awarded on all the quiz shows put together, and still the FCC "has done the industry's bidding and has refused to apply [its powers granted by the Blue Book

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<sup>128</sup> "Say It Ain't So," 223.

<sup>129</sup> "The Weakest Sister," *New Republic*, October 19, 1959, 2; and "Deception on TV," *New Republic*, October 19, 1959, 3-4.

‘public interest’ clause] to improve TV and radio programs.”<sup>130</sup> Several other periodicals also explicitly blamed the FCC for its complicity in the poor ethical standards of the industry.

Trying to downplay the links between privatization and corruption, the networks took the opportunity to get their disdain for the FCC’s ineffectiveness into print as well. Their assertions that the FCC was the body responsible for monitoring and controlling the quizzes found no sympathizers, however. The FCC defended itself by reciting a phrase that had practically become the agency’s unofficial tagline: We have no power. John C. Doerfer, FCC chairman, testified to the subcommittee that “Supreme Court rulings on freedom of expression made it impossible for his agency to intervene until after fraud had been proven.”<sup>131</sup> Broadcasting executives, reminded Doerfer, had been in on the federal suit against the FCC, charging that a government agency’s interference with program content constituted censorship, in violation of the First Amendment. They had, effectively, made sure the FCC held no jurisdiction over their business.

Several media outlets provided extensive coverage of Herb Stempel’s rational, convincing testimony, which had opened the subcommittee hearings.<sup>132</sup> Attendees heard Stempel narrate the events shown in kinescoped matches and watched as he explained away his gestures and stammers as mere stage directions. “I was told by Mr. Enright in advance exactly what the scores would be in every single game,” testified Stempel, leaving subcommittee members to ponder how producers could have known in advance how many points Stempel’s opponents—namely Van Doren—would score.<sup>133</sup>

In response to Stempel’s testimony, NBC representatives instructed Van Doren to contact the subcommittee. Following a five-and-a-half-hour consultation with network advisers, Van

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<sup>130</sup> “The Weakest Sister,” 2.

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in “Quizzes,” 28-29.

<sup>132</sup> *Hearings*, 14-44, 46-59.

<sup>133</sup> *Hearings*, 35, quoted in “Dress Rehearsals Complete with Answers?,” 60.

Doren again publicly declared his innocence in a telegram, as they had requested. He also offered to appear in Washington to repeat his New York grand jury testimony. Taking no chances, NBC summarily “relieved Van Doren from all work assignments,” until the federal investigation had been completed and the issue resolved. In other words: NBC was waiting to see what Van Doren would say to the subcommittee before they decided whether or not to keep him. The subcommittee had little choice but to call bluff and subpoenaed Van Doren to hear his side of the story. When federal marshals arrived to serve the subpoena, however, Van Doren was nowhere to be found. The intrigue made good speculative copy for reporters, who wondered aloud about what Van Doren would say to the congressmen, should he ever be located. Several held out hope that Van Doren would verify he had been “as honest as a Boy Scout”—a claim still loudly being made by *Question/Challenge* contestants Joyce Brothers, Myrtle Power, and Teddy Nadler—even as other former contestants and at least six producers testified about contestant help sessions and sponsors’ direct selection of winners and losers.<sup>134</sup>

Reports of Van Doren’s telegram to Congress, his subsequent suspension from NBC, and his upcoming appearance before the subcommittee made the rounds at national periodicals, but even as Van Doren held a press conference to acknowledge receipt of the subpoena, most October magazine articles continued to contemplate the issues beneath the investigation’s surface rather than relive the popular culture icon’s happier times in the media spotlight. It was the usual flank of mass-market magazines—*Newsweek*, *Life*, and *Time*—that refocused visual attention on Charles Van Doren through their accentuated use of photo stills. Instead of casting

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<sup>134</sup> See “The Ordeal of the TV ‘Hero,’” *Newsweek*, November 2, 1959, 24; as well as *Hearings*, in which Mert Koplín and Shirley Bernstein of EPI testified about Charles Revson’s explicit involvement in contestant outcomes. Accounts of their testimony and of Revson’s vehement denials were widely reported. See, for example, “Out of the Backwash of the TV Scandals...The Question: How Far for the Fast Buck?,” *Newsweek*, November 16, 1959, 66-68; and “Television...America’s Fallen Idol?,” *Senior Scholastic*, November 16, 1959, 17-18, 38-41.

him as an all-out scoundrel, however, the articles resituated him within the context of his intellectually rich life among a well-respected literary empire.<sup>135</sup>

*Life* magazine ran a cover story on 26 October, one week before Van Doren's congressional appearance, about the effects of the scandal on a "distinguished American family."<sup>136</sup> Included in the twelve-page special photojournalism feature about the ongoing quiz show investigation were spreads on the legacy of the Van Doren critics-poets-scholars, the history of Charles' ascension both in the television business and at Columbia, opposing-view editorials about who or what was to blame, and what the nation's television viewers thought about the quiz show deceit.<sup>137</sup> A column by U.S. Representative Steven Derounian (D-N.Y.), a member of the Legislative Oversight Committee, remarked on Van Doren's probable involvement: "a contestant can scarcely accept \$5,000 in advance, as the program's producer says Van Doren did, without having some assurance that he will stay on the show for a while and win at least \$5,000."<sup>138</sup> The logic of the arrangements was comprehensible at last. Still, the audience was scarcely in agreement over what to think about it. Characterizations of "A Letdown," "Foolish," "It Isn't Right," "It Rocks Confidence," "I Couldn't Believe," and "I'm Infuriated" met equally with "So What?," "I Feel Sorry," "I Suspected," "I'd Rather Not Know," and "I'm Not Sure." Even those who found outright fault in the producers' and contestants' participation, however, were "not mad or anything," did not "want the fixers to be punished,"

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<sup>135</sup> "Quizzes," 28-29; and "TV's Big Question: What is Morality?," 70-71.

<sup>136</sup> Quoted from Table of Contents, *Life*, October 26, 1959, 2.

<sup>137</sup> See "A Notable American Family and a Question of TV Ethics," *Life*, October 26, 1959, 24-35.

<sup>138</sup> Steven Derounian, "Quiz-Prober Raps Winners, TV Brass," *Life*, October 26, 1959, 34.

and “would watch the shows anyway.”<sup>139</sup> No one, it seemed, took the television “hoax” that seriously, and the quiz show program format retained its entertainment value.

Throughout October, the *New York Times* devoted the majority of its column inches about the investigation to comments and reports about Van Doren as well. After Stempel’s testimony made the front page of the 7 October 1959 edition, seventeen of the subsequent twenty-two columns about the congressional investigation published that month prominently featured updates of Van Doren’s whereabouts. On 23 October, when Van Doren voluntarily went to the DA’s office to make “substantial changes” to his grand jury testimony, *Times* reporters arrived in time to see a teary-eyed and visibly upset Van Doren exiting the office and Hank Bloomgarden about to enter. While DA Hogan and ADA Stone made no official statements to the press about the contents of Van Doren’s newly sworn revised statement, the encounter was ample unofficial verification of Van Doren’s involvement in the quiz fix. As Hogan said, “The fact that they came here permits you to draw certain conclusions.”<sup>140</sup>

The editor of *The Reporter* cautioned against buying into the sensationalism bandied about in popular magazines and newspapers, rationalizing, “The blunt truth of the matter is that the difference between a ‘crooked’ and an ‘honest’ quiz show was probably never more than a matter of degree.” It was also the only periodical to point out that *Time* magazine had published in its 22 April 1957 issue, in an article “not presented as an exposé but as a matter-of-fact report,” that quiz show producers admitted to having a foolproof way to have “‘70% or 80% control of what happens.’ The technique is simple: ‘To keep a contestant winning, all you have to do is figure out how not to hit a question he doesn’t know. That’s the basis of all quiz

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<sup>139</sup> “As TV Scandal Stirs the Whole Nation, Views of the Viewers at One Quiz Show,” *Life*, October 26, 1959, 32-33.

<sup>140</sup> Jack Roth, “Van Doren, Bloomgarden Admit Getting TV Answers,” *New York Times*, October 29, 1959, 1, 26.

shows.”<sup>141</sup> Reminding readers that the truth about the programs had not been a secret, *The Reporter* editorialized about the growing popular media fixation on Charles Van Doren: “it is only too possible that this commotion will dissipate itself into a hunt for scapegoats, rather than provoke the kind of self-scrutiny that is called for.”<sup>142</sup> It was a premonition for which Van Doren had to prepare.

### 3.4.2 Taking Aim, November 1959

As the second session of the congressional hearings into quiz show practices began on 2 November 1959, the media had already decided that Van Doren would be the headline story; he had helped sell millions of dailies, weeklies, and monthlies in the past, and their circulations would likely increase all the more, with the new disclosures that his grand jury testimony had been significantly less than accurate. Russell Baker, in a “Special to the *New York Times*,” described the scene in Washington for readers:

Mr. Van Doren, the idol of quiz watchers, had apparently lost none of the appeal that makes for top TV audience ratings. Crowds began assembling outside the cavernous House caucus room by 7 A. M. and three hours later, when he appeared in the witness chair, they were standing three deep across the rear of the room.

No fewer than seventeen photographers joined the scramble to get his picture. One hundred and twenty reporters, representing papers around the globe, crowded the front of the room. About thirty persons with Capitol influence occupied a special bleacher section behind the committee table.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Quoted in “Quizlings,” *Reporter*, October 29, 1959, 2. The original article is “The \$60 Million Question,” *Time*, April 22, 1957, 70.

<sup>142</sup> “Quizlings,” 2.

<sup>143</sup> Russell Baker, “Van Doren Still Draws a Crowd; Chamber Jammed to Hear Him,” *New York Times*, November 3, 1959, 23.

After Van Doren's testimony, by contrast, Reverend Stoney Jackson "could barely fill all the available sitting space when he came on in the afternoon. The newsmen stayed away in hordes."<sup>144</sup> In part, that was because Van Doren had already given them enough to write about.

Van Doren's lengthy, remorseful statement, which was released by the Associated Press (AP) in time to make the front pages of newspapers across the country on Election Day, 3 November, sketched a timeline of how he became involved in fourteen rigged episodes of *Twenty-One*, and the events that had transpired since then that culminated in his appearance before the subcommittee. Van Doren began, "I would give almost anything I have to reverse the course of my life in the last 3 years. I cannot take back one word or action; the past does not change for anyone."<sup>145</sup> Van Doren admitted that Albert Freedman had supplied the questions—and sometimes the answers—prior to airtime. Freedman had also coached Van Doren's mannerisms and had instructed him to request specified point values in each round—all to produce dramatic entertainment for television viewers. Van Doren carefully explained his reasons for participating in the fraud, citing Freedman's assurances that Van Doren was "doing a great service to the intellectual life, to teachers and to education in general, by increasing public respect for the work of the mind."<sup>146</sup> Although Van Doren had always been "deeply troubled by the arrangement," he had rationalized that "all the trappings of modern publicity" bestowed upon him as a result of his quiz show accomplishments would allow him to "make up for it after it was over."<sup>147</sup> When allegations of rigging had become public in late August 1958, however, Van Doren was "horror-struck." He felt obligated to the thousands and thousands of teachers, students, and schoolchildren who "expressed their faith in [him], their hope for the future, their

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<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Hearings*, 624.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 625.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 626.

dedication to knowledge and education.” Freedman and Enright further guaranteed Van Doren that he had “nothing to fear” because no one would admit their involvement. As a result, Van Doren decided to deny receiving assistance on *Twenty-One* in a statement he made on-air during a *Today* show broadcast in August 1958 as well as to the New York County grand jury in January 1959. In fact, until three weeks before his subcommittee appearance, Van Doren had not admitted his involvement to anyone, not even his lawyer. “I was beginning to realize what I should have known before,” reflected Van Doren, “that the truth is always the best way, indeed it is the only way, to promote and protect faith. And the truth is the only thing with which a man can live.”<sup>148</sup> Van Doren further acknowledged, “Since Friday, October 16, when I finally came to a full understanding of what I had done and what I must do, I have taken a number of steps toward trying to make up for it. I have a long way to go.”<sup>149</sup>

Through his statement, Van Doren attempted to atone for his actions, whereas the other contestants simply gave testimony. Some had been angry, some regretful, but no one else actually said they were sorry. The producers, in fact, claimed that in the television industry, there was really nothing wrong with what they had done. It was all just business, and none of them had thought to question the standard operating procedures.

Van Doren’s admission ended the subcommittee’s investigation into *Twenty-One* and had two near-instantaneous results: Columbia University’s Board of Trustees voted the same afternoon to accept Van Doren’s resignation from the faculty, effective immediately, and NBC very hypocritically fired him the next morning. Van Doren’s punishments added fuel to the media fire, providing concrete yet contentious actions for journalists to report. To navigate the course of ensuing events, the *New York Times* provided daily immediacy. On the morning after

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<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 629.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 624.

Van Doren's testimony, the newspaper included ten separate articles about the 2 November hearings, all but one of which pinpointed Van Doren as the eye of the storm.

The front-page headline on 3 November 1959 announced, "Van Doren Admits Lying, Says TV Quiz Was Fixed; Loses His Columbia Post." It was buttressed by the subheading, "Coaching Bared; Teacher Fears He Has Done Disservice to All in Education," and the article included a photograph taken the previous day of Van Doren sitting at the House witness table. The full text of Van Doren's statement and testimony spread across all eight columns over two consecutive pages. Reporters commented on the "largest crowds ever" to gather in the House caucus room, which had a seating capacity of 500. More than 600 people were crammed into that room that day to see and hear Van Doren, and "several hundred more lined the corridors."<sup>150</sup> Still, it was New York Representative Derounian, the sole subcommittee grumbler, who made the "Quotation of the Day": "I don't think an adult of your intelligence ought to be commended for telling the truth," he had said in response to Van Doren's statement.<sup>151</sup> Summaries of Van Doren's 1958 denials before the New York County investigators and the irrationality of NBC's \$50,000-a-year contract for an "unspecified job" led a *Times* reporter to conclude it was all a "Symptom of a Sickness," the "disease in the radio and television world that frequently permits things to be represented not quite as they are."<sup>152</sup>

The sorest stinger of all, however, was released by the AP: "Charles Van Doren could have avoided today's ordeal before a House subcommittee...by keeping quiet last month, a

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<sup>150</sup> William M. Blair, "Van Doren Admits Lying, Says TV Quiz Was Fixed; Loses His Columbia Post," *New York Times*, November 3, 1959, 1, 20.

<sup>151</sup> "Quotation of the Day," *New York Times*, November 3, 1959, 22. The quote was reprinted from Blair, "Van Doren Admits Lying," 20.

<sup>152</sup> "Symptom of a Sickness," *New York Times*, November 3, 1959, 30.

committee member [William L. Springer, R-Ill.] said today,” reported the wire.<sup>153</sup> “The committee had no intention of calling him until the quiz show winner telegraphed an offer to repeat earlier claims of innocence...and then dropped from sight,” revealed Springer. The subcommittee’s version of events included the extension of an initial, friendly “invitation,” since the subcommittee “intended to call only voluntary witnesses.” Van Doren, however, did not reply. Only then did the subcommittee find it necessary to issue the subpoena, since his version of events flagrantly contradicted the testimonies of Stempel, Enright, and Freedman.

The subject of the 7 October telegram had been addressed at length during Van Doren’s one-hour, thirty-five-minute appearance on the witness stand. Van Doren revealed that, in a “conference that lasted from 7 P.M. to 12:30 A.M.,” two NBC vice presidents—those in charge of TV programs and talent negotiations—told him “if I did not immediately send a telegram to the committee demanding to be heard, I would be suspended.”<sup>154</sup> Van Doren had asked the men not to make him send the message, but they insisted his failure to do so would be a breach of his contract.<sup>155</sup> The finer details of that crucial conference remain known only to those who were present, but the pattern of its occurrence indicates that NBC executives were making strategic decisions about the network’s public image future. All along, the network had been using Van Doren as a publicity pawn—from his scripted television history-making appearances on *Twenty-One* to his immediate contract by the network, to his conveniently timed commentating and hosting appearances (all of which, incidentally, were reduced solely to his *Today* show segments in print media). Van Doren had helped generate enough goodwill toward NBC that the network was able to bounce back from CBS’s talent raids and the brink of programming disaster to

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<sup>153</sup> “Van Doren Telegram Led to His Subpoena,” *New York Times*, November 3, 1959, 22.

<sup>154</sup> *Hearings*, 635. Additionally reported in Blair, “Van Doren Admits Lying,” 20.

<sup>155</sup> *Hearings*, 636.

rematerialize as a viable television competitor. Only *The Nation* distinguished the connection: “What emerges in the Van Doren case is that the National Broadcasting Company permitted the victim to continue his disavowals after it was perfectly clear to the entire country that he was guilty, and extracted from him the telegram which led the Committee on Legislative Oversight to subpoena him. As long as he lied, NBC continued to pay him \$1,000 a week; as soon as he told the truth, they tore up his contract.”<sup>156</sup> In this final strategic move by NBC to force Van Doren into the media spotlight, he would also become the only public face of the quiz show fraud.

Whereas the socially conscious periodicals had pecked at the roadside carrion of the quiz show carcass throughout October to get to the meaty innards of corporate greed, corruption, and government collusion, at the certification of Van Doren’s involvement, the tenor and focus of the advertising-funded mass-market magazines that took narrative command in November changed the menu entirely. Rather than condemning networks and their executives for mishandling the quiz show debacle, media attention concentrated on how the networks planned to correct their past mistakes. Under threats from the FCC, which promised to introduce new network licensing requirements and stricter control of all programming if the broadcasting industry did not “clean its own nest,” together, the networks dumped \$20 million of problematic quiz shows implicated in producer controls—although thirteen less problematic “quiz-panel-contest” shows continued to air, collecting a total of roughly \$60 million in sponsor fees.<sup>157</sup>

CBS President Frank Stanton unveiled a new network policy of transparency. Program producers were now required to overlay labels on all edited segments, all prompted audience applause, and all canned laughter, and to include disclaimers that informed audiences of pre-interview preparations, even on current affairs shows, such as *Person to Person*. Stanton’s

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<sup>156</sup> “The Uses of Scandal,” *Nation*, November 14, 1959, 341.

<sup>157</sup> “The Ordeal of the TV ‘Hero,’” 23-24.

overcautious precautions prompted the producers of *Person to Person* to quit in protest and Edward R. Murrow, the program's host and interviewer, to comment, "My conscience is clear. His seems to be bothering him."<sup>158</sup> So encompassing were Stanton's avowed transparency changes that Marie Torre, television critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, wryly observed, "They may soon have to use real bullets on Westerns."<sup>159</sup>

NBC, meanwhile, announced "it had set up its own internal 'police force' [of ex-FBI agents] to ferret out 'deceptive practices,'" and that, incredibly, "NBC's own police had uncovered evidence of deception on *Treasure Hunt*, a currently popular daytime quiz." The deception was a kick-back scheme in which producers cast the contestants who agreed to pay "a 'cut' of the winnings." NBC President Kintner testified that the producers had been immediately fired. "Such action, television executives said, shows that the television industry can police itself, and does not need regulation by the Government."<sup>160</sup> No longer were the structural inadequacies of the network-government-advertising triangulation of the broadcasting industry worth talking about, when the networks were cleaning house. More significantly, "Both networks suggested that it might help if Congress would pass a law to make the rigging of television contests a federal crime."<sup>161</sup> The broadcasters claimed to need the government's leadership and support so that their own cooperation and compliance would be most effective. With network executives managing their involvement and accountability within the media quiz show narrative, attention was again dispersed to Van Doren.

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<sup>158</sup> "The Ordeal of the TV 'Hero,'" 23-24; and "Purity Kick," *Time*, November 2, 1959, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,892835,00.html>.

<sup>159</sup> "Television...America's Fallen Idol?," 41.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>161</sup> "Effect of the TV Scandals," *U.S. News & World Report*, November 16, 1959, 41-45.

“There was no doubt...that Van Doren remained the hero of this drama—the hero in the Greek sense, doomed for tragedy by forces larger than himself,” commented *Newsweek*, harkening back to a prediction from Van Doren’s former college classmate in the 11 February 1957 *Time* issue.<sup>162</sup> Van Doren’s decision to mislead the New York County grand jury was particularly problematic, given his upbringing, which was now used as a reason why he “should have known better.” Comparisons between Van Doren and “Shoeless” Joe Jackson of the 1919 World Series Chicago Black Sox infamy had begun in mid-October.<sup>163</sup> After Van Doren’s testimony, President Eisenhower joined the chorus and repeated the phrase, “Say it ain’t so, Joe,” in press conferences and interviews, where he spoke of the “universal” bewilderment of American citizens who did not understand why someone would intentionally deceive them.<sup>164</sup> By transmuting the media images of Shoeless Joe with Van Doren, the nationally approved narrative went from a saga about the continual ineffectiveness of the U.S. broadcasting system to a cautionary tale about a solitary event. The lesson to be learned: if it looks too good to be true than it probably is not true. After all, even the grandest of heroes could be bought for the right price.

The thematic emphasis on the responsibility of the individual (as opposed to the responsibility of the collective) became the primary focus of journalists in November, although they had not yet singled out Van Doren, exactly. His confession, according to the consensus in newspaper editorials around the country, showed Van Doren’s own conscience had been and

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<sup>162</sup> “The Ordeal of the TV ‘Hero,’” 23. The original quote by Steven Benedict is from “The Wizard of Quiz,” *Time*, February 11, 1957, 49.

<sup>163</sup> See “Say It Ain’t So,” 223; and “Say It Ain’t So, Charles!,” *America*, October 24, 1959, 98. “Say it ain’t so, Joe,” was a phrase reportedly uttered by a child to the biggest baseball phenom of the early twentieth century, after it was revealed that the Chicago White Sox players agreed to lose the World Series intentionally in exchange for payment from bookmakers.

<sup>164</sup> The irony of an American president saying this seems to have been lost on reporters. See “News and Entertainment Industries Have ‘A Terrific Responsibility,’” *U.S. News & World Report*, November 16, 1959, 45.

would continue to be his worst tormentor, and no further external judgment need be cast upon him. Even the two New York newspapers that had been sued for libel by Barry-Enright Productions, Inc. in 1958 agreed on this point. According to the *World-Telegram and Sun*, “no great public good would be served by hounding [Van Doren] any further,” and the *Journal-American* explained, “It is a moral principle that expiation is more important than punishment; it is an American principle not to kick a man when he is down.”<sup>165</sup>

Discursively, each contestant remained one unit of a still-larger mass. The *New Yorker* editor analyzed, “The mysterious and awful thing about the television quiz scandals is not that the jaded souls who ran the show were hoaxers but that dozens, and perhaps hundreds, of contestants, all of whom must have applied in the simplicity of good faith, were successfully enrolled in the hoax.”<sup>166</sup> *Time* added, “A more disturbing note on U.S. morals, 1959: of 150 quiz witnesses who appeared before the New York County grand jury and swore before God (or on their affirmations) to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, no less than 100, said District Attorney Frank Hogan, had lied.”<sup>167</sup>

*Newsweek* posed the issue as a matter of audience interpretation of greater social dilemmas:

As the quiz scandal billowed and confessions spilled over the front pages, the question of TV’s morality seemed less significant than the larger question of morality in general. Had the twentieth century’s frantic pursuit of the fast buck finally compromised our traditional honesty? Was there no longer a sharp demarcation between right and wrong? What price glory?

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<sup>165</sup> Reprinted in “Excerpts From Editorial Comments in the Nation on Van Doren’s Testimony,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1959, 29.

<sup>166</sup> “The Talk of the Town: News and Comments,” *New Yorker*, October 24, 1959, 33-34.

<sup>167</sup> “The Tarnished Image,” *Time*, November 16, 1959, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,811464,00.html>.

Anybody, or almost anybody, it seemed, could be lured to compromise—and what was worse, many Americans who might be expected to be deeply concerned hardly seemed to care...

In the end, the crux of the problem lay within the conscience of each man.<sup>168</sup>

The reduction of the problem to individual accountability indicated there was an emotional depth to the story that the congressional investigation could not reach. Not every journalist at every periodical was easily convinced the public should be left simply to put themselves in contestants' places, however, as affinity for the participants glossed over the larger structural issues at stake. *The Reporter* attempted to distinguish between print media's investment in the quiz scandal and the public's investment:

Newspapers and magazines, which have found themselves getting a smaller share of advertising budgets over the past decade or so, have not been noticeably reluctant to publicize TV's embarrassments about rigged quiz shows. For many of them the drama has been that of a rival mass medium on trial...

But to most Americans, we suspect, the absorbing drama has been not that of a system on trial but that of self-identification with the more or less pathetic heroes whom the system has projected on our imaginations.<sup>169</sup>

"There should be less interest in Mr. Van Doren and more in the behavior of the institutions which dealt with him and which will still affect our lives after he has returned to obscurity," insisted the editor of *The Nation*.<sup>170</sup> While Van Doren retreated into the seclusion of his Greenwich Village home to avoid the questions and answers for which he was still being sought, heated debates were ongoing about his quiz participation and what it symbolized.

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<sup>168</sup> "Out of the Backwash of the TV Scandals," 66-68.

<sup>169</sup> "But for the Grace of God...?," *Reporter*, November 12, 1959, 4-6.

<sup>170</sup> "The Uses of Scandal," *Nation*, November 14, 1959, 341-42.

### 3.4.3 Bull's Eye, December 1959-February 1962

By the end of November 1959, the networks were engaged in a full-scale public relations campaign to divert media attention from the television industry's most glaring faults. On one flank, they attacked their print media rivals. Magazines and newspapers were left to defend themselves against broadcasters' claims that "TV critics are 'paid by one advertising medium to destroy another,'" or so said NBC's Dave Garroway during a broadcast of the *Today* show in early December.<sup>171</sup> Newspaper critics and *Time*—which had been singled out by CBS President Frank Stanton as the biggest and most complicit offender—would respond directly to the charges, but no mass-market magazine other than *Time* even mentioned the quiz show scandal until another year later. On another flank, in an interesting public relations-inspired move, the networks downplayed the severity of quiz show fixing by actually encouraging critics to comment on the violence and relative immorality of the bulk of the networks' standard programming fare, even while they had no intention of changing that trend, either. The minor, superficial safeguards employed by the networks continued to make the news, and the networks continued to show how well they had things under control.

From December 1959 forward, all focus of the quiz show incident was placed squarely on Van Doren, who bore the public brunt of the humility and shame for everyone involved. Judging from the six magazine articles published in December 1959, the "Van Doren case" or the "Van Doren affair," as the entire quiz show scandal had come to be called, was nothing more than "a personal tragedy."<sup>172</sup> As 1960 began, Van Doren's commendable television journalism

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<sup>171</sup> "A Question of Freedom," *Time*, December 7, 1959, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,811533,00.html>.

<sup>172</sup> See John Lawrence, "Van Doren's Paradise Lost," *Catholic World*, January 1960, 236-40.

contributions long forgotten, media narratives repositioned him as an educator who was corrupt, and as 1960 ended, he—along with Ruth Miller, Vivienne Nearing, Elfrida von Nardroff, and seventeen other quiz show conspirators—was being charged with second-degree perjury in New York County.<sup>173</sup> The convictions would come more than year later, and they would close the book on the quiz show scandal, sealing the fates of the characters between its pages forever.

Some articles published in October and November had mentioned reports of public outrage after Van Doren's statement to the subcommittee, but the source of those reports remains unclear. While local newspapers may have contributed to the sense of an incensed general populace, the most likely origin of commentary about an outraged public was broadcasters, who had a vested interest in redirecting blame from themselves. National magazines did not characterize the public as an angry mob; in fact, they had spent effort showing how blasé the public's reaction had been.<sup>174</sup>

Likewise, the *New York Times* never directly observed angry occurrences aimed at Van Doren, and the published letters to the editor indicated the public condemned the broadcasting business for its shady transactions as well as Columbia for not paying Van Doren what he was actually worth. At Columbia, students loudly protested Van Doren's dismissal from the faculty with a petition signed by roughly one fourth of the entire undergraduate student body.<sup>175</sup> More than 1,000 students, some from other nearby colleges, organized at a bonfire pep rally in the Van Am quad.<sup>176</sup> The students, it seemed, had easily parsed out the distinction between Van Doren, the quiz show contestant, and Van Doren, the English teacher. They firmly stood behind Van

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<sup>173</sup> "Torture—The Real Thing," *Newsweek*, October 31, 1960, 81.

<sup>174</sup> See particularly "As TV Scandal Stirs the Whole Nation," 32-33, and "Out of the Backwash," 62.

<sup>175</sup> Students, "We Object. Petition for the Reinstatement of Charles Van Doren," November 4, 1959, *Central Files* General Alphabetical Correspondence Sti 1959-1960, Box 264, Folder 15, Columbia University Archives.

<sup>176</sup> See "Columbia Rally for Van Doren Draws Many Opposing Return," *New York Times*, November 6, 1959, 17; and "Students Rally on Van Doren and Dartmouth," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 6, 1959.

Doren's educational capabilities and felt they were the ones being punished the most by his absence. The Columbia administrators, most publicly President Grayson Kirk, refused to reconsider the Board's decision and recited the official university position, that Van Doren had compromised his integrity and therefore could not be retained, as explanation.<sup>177</sup> The student protest became an outrageously disrespectful act of defiance in the eyes of several academics, most likely the same ones who had complained about Van Doren's quiz show appearances from the onset.

Lawrence S. Hall, a Columbia professor who had known Van Doren prior to his quiz show appearances, criticized Van Doren's congressional statement as "a string of piously reflexive formulas...the most maudlin and promiscuous ethical whoredom the soap-opera public has yet witnessed."<sup>178</sup> Hall, upholding the Columbia University party line, explained that the real shame was that telling the truth had been Van Doren's last resort. Columbia President Kirk responded directly to Hall's article in a Letter to the Editor of *The Reporter*, "I have read with much interest Mr. Hall's article on Charles Van Doren. It is extremely perceptive and, I am sure, will evoke widespread comment."<sup>179</sup>

Hans Morgenthau, meanwhile, had published "Reaction to the Van Doren Reaction" in the *New York Times Magazine* in late November, which also signaled the official academic line on Van Doren's participation in the quiz show fixes.<sup>180</sup> Claiming that the nation's supportive reaction to the Van Doren facts on record was cause for "the gravest concern," Morgenthau

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<sup>177</sup> "Van Doren Case Shut, Columbia's Head Says," *New York Times*, November 7, 1959, 13. Chapter 4 analyzes the public responses directed to Columbia University in response to Van Doren's dismissal.

<sup>178</sup> Lawrence S. Hall, "Eyeless in Wonderland," *Reporter*, December 10, 1959, 36.

<sup>179</sup> "Eyeless in Wonderland, Discussion," *Reporter*, January 7, 1960, 7.

<sup>180</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, "Reaction to the Van Doren Reaction," *New York Times Magazine*, November 22, 1959, 17, 106.

differentiated between the expected graft of “political or commercial” corruption and the “more profound issue” of “the Van Doren case.”

The professor is a man who devoted his life to “profess,” and what he is pledged to profess is the truth as he sees it. Mendacity in a professor is a moral fault which denies the very core of the professor’s calling. A mendacious professor is not like a politician who subordinates the public good to private gain, nor like a business man who cheats. Rather, he is like the physician who, pledged to heal, maims and kills. He is not so much the corrupter of the code by which he is supposed to live as its destroyer.<sup>181</sup>

Morgenthau equated the public’s reported tolerance of and sympathy for Van Doren’s plight as “the beginning of the end of civilized society.”

What a man ought or ought not to do becomes determined not by objective laws immutable as the stars, but by the results of the latest public opinion poll...What is morally good becomes identical with what the crowd wants and tolerates.<sup>182</sup>

Morgenthau’s commentary received so much feedback from the Columbia student body that he initiated a second public discourse in *The New Republic* in December in defense of Columbia’s decision to accept Van Doren’s resignation. In “Epistle to the Columbians,” Morgenthau directed his comments to the student protesters who had initially demanded Van Doren’s reinstatement and then followed up in an outpouring of response to Morgenthau’s *New York Times Magazine* editorial.<sup>183</sup> Taking the conversation to the national level through the pages of *The New Republic*, Morgenthau chastised the students for making the matter a personal issue concerning “that three-cornered relationship among yourself, your teacher and your university” and for their collective unwillingness “to judge the obvious facts by the standards of morality rather than adjust them for your and your teacher’s convenience.”<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>183</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, “Epistle to the Columbians,” *New Republic*, December 21, 1959, 8-10.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Morgenthau's second article ignited a second public discussion via letters to the editor of *The New Republic* over the following four weekly issues, including a tangential article, "On Stern Fatherliness," by Richard F. Sparks.<sup>185</sup> Charles S. Blinderman of Southern Illinois University accused Morgenthau of attempting to divert attention from the at-stake issues by dividing the public into the morally correct who agreed with Columbia and the morally misguided who did not: "like the editors of [*The National Review*], Hans Morgenthau seems to prefer the dichotomy between Good Guys and Bad Guys to the less simple but perhaps more liberal recognition of Problems."<sup>186</sup> More often than not, however, published comments regarding the opinions of Morgenthau and Hall congratulated the authors for getting to the heart of the matter.

Public response to the scandal became something that could be measured quantitatively and qualitatively, by professionals. In February 1960, *Saturday Review* published "The Public's View" of rigged quizzes, an Elmo Roper poll that found "the American public has refused to become hysterical" over the media drama surrounding the fixes and actually appeared to understand the problem and its implications in ways "saner than...many of the newspaper headline writers."<sup>187</sup> Luckily for the networks, a majority sixty-five percent of television viewers thought that the quiz show practices "are very wrong and should be stopped immediately, but you can't condemn all of television because of them." Roper found that respondents wanted to watch their television sets, and they were confident that television was generally reliable, even

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<sup>185</sup> Published responses, both pro and con, to Morgenthau's Epistle in *The New Republic* appeared under the common heading, "Reaction to the Van Doren Reaction." They include Eric Bentley, December 28, 1959, 30-31; Charles S. Blinderman, William R. Bigler, Aaron Levy, and Joseph Cottler, January 4, 1960, 21-22; and Frank N. Theriault, Alan Levensohn, and Bert Rosenstock, January 18, 1960, 22-23. Richard F. Sparks followed up on the continuing commentary about Morgenthau's article in "On Stern Fatherliness," *New Republic*, January 25, 1960, 11-13.

<sup>186</sup> Blinderman, "Reaction to the Van Doren Reaction," 22.

<sup>187</sup> Elmo Roper, "Rigged Quizzes: The Public's View," *Saturday Review*, February 13, 1960, 36.

more so than news magazines, which received the lowest believability score out of all mass media. When given a list of twelve headlining “recent issues reported in the newspapers,” the public picked “Rigged quiz shows on TV” as the second-to-least “serious moral problem” of the choices.<sup>188</sup>

Seven months later, *Newsweek* reported that Queens College sociologists Gladys and Kurt Lang had presented their findings from “the reactions of 225 college students to the plight of Van Doren” at the September 1960 American Sociological Association meeting.<sup>189</sup> What they found was widespread “hazy rationalization” among the undergraduates—the “Van Doren syndrome”—which, like so many other popular Cold War discourses, equated a social phenomenon with a disease. Rather than find fault with Van Doren, the students considered him a victim, and “26 per cent saw no personal wrong in what he had done.” The Langs also uncovered a prevalent fear among young Americans: “Not wishing to face the consequences of living in a world that stresses success, and rewards it even if it is obtained by violating the rules, students identified with him, the victim, against a world they never made.” There was a helplessness, and resignation, to students’ interpretations, an acceptance that this was the way of the world. Why bother to fight it? It was also the way of the narrative that had been typeset in production newsrooms across the country. Everything and everyone—except Charles Van Doren—associated with the big-money primetime quiz shows receded into the scenery.

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<sup>188</sup> The top issue was “The increasing amount of juvenile delinquency,” with 89%, closely followed by “Dishonest labor leaders,” at 88%. The only issue more insignificant as “a serious moral problem” was “Disc jockeys taking payola,” 34%. “Rigged quiz shows on TV” earned a 41%, just behind “Congressmen putting their relatives on U.S. payrolls,” at 42%.

<sup>189</sup> “Van Doren Syndrome,” *Newsweek*, September 12, 1960, 94.

At the beginning of October 1960, exactly one year after the congressional investigation had begun, Charles Van Doren was one of a group of twenty former NBC quiz show contestants to surrender to DA Hogan's office. As *Newsweek* reported:

The action was the result of a two-year probe...that brought about the demise of TV's big-money quizzes, resulted in stiffer self-policing by the networks, broadened into a probe of false advertising, led to the resignation of onetime quiz creator Louis Cowan as president of CBS-TV, and set off a furious hullabaloo about American morality in general.<sup>190</sup>

Familiar contestant names—Hank Bloomgarden, Ruth Miller, Vivienne Nearing, and Elfrida von Nardroff—appeared in the columns, but “all eyes were on Charles Van Doren,” reported the *New York Times*. His story, with its lofty heights and its plunging lows, had been the sustaining force of the quiz show narrative for almost four years.

Alan Levy, writing for *Redbook* in November 1961, tried to put the “Aftermath of a Scandal” in perspective for readers.<sup>191</sup> The bolded subheading read: “Two years have passed since Charles Van Doren confessed his part in the television quiz scandal. Here is the story of what has happened to him and to the men responsible for his brief success and lifelong tragedy.” It was a sympathetic depiction of Van Doren's personal life since his congressional testimony, although the supplied background information leading up to Van Doren's appearance on *Twenty-One* was taken largely verbatim from the *Time* cover story of 11 February 1957. Since the end of 1959, Van Doren had become a family man who doted on his daughter and adored his wife, while Stempel was unemployed, Barry and Enright had seemingly broken up but stayed in the entertainment business, and Freedman, back in Mexico, was writing a novel.<sup>192</sup> Freedman had

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<sup>190</sup> “Torture—The Real Thing,” 81.

<sup>191</sup> Alan Levy, “Charles Van Doren: Aftermath of a Scandal,” *Redbook*, November 1961, 42-43, 126-31.

<sup>192</sup> Barry and Enright would again team up for *The Joker's Wild* in the 1970s, so their temporary dissociation was more likely for appearances than for anything else.

voiced the opinions shared by most, if not all, of the 1950s quiz show producers in a statement to the *New York Times*' Mexico City bureau:

We thought it was good entertainment. After all, the quiz shows were not a public utility. We were not conducting Civil Service examinations. We were not conducting College Board examinations. The public wasn't paying any admission price to watch these programs. Financially, it made no difference to the public who won.

Our only error was that we were too successful. The stakes were too high and the quiz winners fused themselves into the home life and the aspirations of the viewers.<sup>193</sup>

Freedman neglected to mention that the producers, sponsors, and networks intended for the winners to be fused to viewers, or that sometimes it pays to be careful what you wish for.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Charles Van Doren had written a column in *Leisure*, the magazine that had hired him prior to his national confession, which proclaimed, "We tend to forget that we are moral agents, uniquely and individually responsible for what we do...To say, for example, to one who has erred, that most people would also have erred in the circumstances is no real consolation...*He is not all those other people; he is himself* [emphasis in *Redbook*]."<sup>194</sup> It had become a personal issue after all.

As January 1962 came to an end, so, too, did the quiz show scandal. *Time* reported that the "Final Flashbulbs" had captured Van Doren and several other former contestants in a Manhattan court, where all received one-year suspended sentences for their perjury pleadings.<sup>195</sup> *Senior Scholastic*, in its 7 February 1962 issue, declared the "TV Quiz Case Closed," and so it was.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Quoted in Levy, "Aftermath of a Scandal," 131.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> "The Final Flashbulbs," *Time*, January 26, 1962, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,872902,00.html>.

<sup>196</sup> "TV Quiz Case Closed," *Senior Scholastic*, February 7, 1962, 20-21.

### 3.5 ALWAYS THE FOOTNOTE, 1962-PRESENT

By August 1963, with a federal law against rigging quiz shows on the books, a new breed of entertaining contestant participation show was making its way into the living rooms across the U.S. The old “quizzes” had been replaced with the less troublesome, new “game shows,” which were greatly pared down from the cash rewards of the big-money primetime programs of the 1950s. The new games were broadcast almost entirely during daylight hours and also required no knowledge of esoteric subjects or names, dates, and other facts. Contestants needed only to have fun and to be entertaining. Throughout the 1960s, audiences were treated to *The Dating Game*, *Hollywood Squares*, *Let’s Make a Deal*, *Match Game*, *The Newlywed Game*, *Password*, *Sale of the Century*, and a significant number of others that have become the sustained “classics” of their genre for many viewers and critics.<sup>197</sup> Their status as classics also erases any lingering attachments to the “crooked” shows of the 1950s.

The big-money quiz shows of the 1950s, with Charles Van Doren’s involvement situated in the center of the story, have not been completely forgotten, however. They collectively remain an example of one-time-only deception that the networks quickly corrected. Their example has been re-publicized at opportune media moments, most notably in relation to Robert Redford’s 1994 Academy Award–nominated film *Quiz Show*—in which Charles Van Doren, Herb Stempel, and the *Twenty-One* producers are the primary characters—and again, when high-stakes question-and-answer shows reemerged as primetime money-makers for the new network conglomerates in the 1970s and early 1980s and at the turn of the twenty-first century.

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<sup>197</sup> The names of more than ninety game shows that premiered in the 1960s can be found at: <http://www.gameshowfame.com/shows/shows1960s.htm>.

Since 1962, media have typically glommed onto the soundbyte version of Van Doren's public humiliation and pit him at the center of their simplified histories of scandal, disillusionment, and national identity. Mass media retellings of Van Doren's narrative focus almost exclusively on the events of fall 1959, on one partially-true version of occurrences, on one specific act of "betrayal," and on the emotions embedded in a public's alleged but unsubstantiated "shock and disbelief." In so doing, media remove themselves entirely from liability and ignore the larger ideological issues entrenched in both the historical events and their subsequent reiterations, which do not always get the facts right. The fact of the matter is that mass media in the late 1950s tirelessly wove Charles Van Doren into the national fabric, and then they summarily cut him from their cloth once the 1959 quiz show scandal effectively devalued his celebrity.

The media focus on Van Doren—in the wake of the congressional hearings and since—masks a critical turning point in broadcast history and the television industry's relationship to the public, as the event opened two doors—the first helped to pave the way for the golden age of the network system that peaked in the 1970s, while the second helped to erode the existing FCC Blue Book rules that mandated licenses to stations, based on the condition that their programming serve public interest. In follow-up congressional hearings, network executives, notably CBS's Frank Stanton, pointed to the scandal as evidence that the networks needed to oversee every aspect of broadcast programming. By reorganizing structural control of the industry, the networks essentially shredded advertisers' broadcasting power from a position of authoritative sponsorship to the 30-second commercial, all with government approval.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Chapter 5, "Say It Ain't So: Unmasking the Cultural Memory of Charles Van Doren," addresses the broadcasting industry issues related to the 1959 congressional investigation.

In the retellings of the “crisis,” however, most public attention coalesces around a single individual—Charles Van Doren—rather than the fact that the networks and the government had neglected their responsibilities toward the public. Forgotten is the lament by *The Commonwealth* that “Once again the American dream has not accorded with the reality, which is somehow less appealing and less simple than one had thought.”<sup>199</sup> Instead, media report that Van Doren’s performances on *Twenty-One* constituted a public misrepresentation of himself and of the academic institution he promoted by association.

Historical evidence indicates that popular magazines actually explained the many variations of “real scandal” to their readers and allowed their readers to contribute their own opinions and understandings to the dialogue. What the quiz scandal showed the public beyond doubt was that in the cutthroat world of television ratings, “morality and truth are sacrificed on the altar of the ‘popular.’”<sup>200</sup> As Shayon assessed, “The widespread letdown engendered by the revelations of quiz-show duplicity was due to the realization of TV viewers that they had been treated as mere numbers, without being accorded individual dignity.”<sup>201</sup> The public understood with certainty that, to business executives, television viewers were merely cogs in the capitalism wheel, nothing more and nothing less. Their apathy at the revelation was understandable. The dominant cultural memory of the quiz show scandal, however, morphs the multiple narratives of public apathy and disillusionment with the commercial aspects of television into a single act of broken trust between Van Doren and his admirers. Yet Van Doren could not have become the national symbol of the primetime television quiz shows of the 1950s without the specific

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<sup>199</sup> “The Packaged Answer,” 92.

<sup>200</sup> “Quiz Show Debacle May Not Be All Loss,” *Christian Century*, October 21, 1959, 1205.

<sup>201</sup> Shayon, “Havoc Up One Sleeve,” 25.

interrelationships between the broadcasting industry, print media, and their Cold War audiences in the latter half of the decade.

Van Doren's print media narrative between 1957 and 1962 reveals how complex his public image was. In early 1957, magazines and newspapers played critical roles in distributing news of Van Doren's unprecedented winnings and in characterizing him as both scholar and hero. The networks and sponsors benefitted directly from this press coverage, as ratings for the entire personality-driven quiz show genre rose along with Van Doren's fame. Even at the height of the media frenzy over Van Doren's success, however, the tensions between entertainment and education were trigger points for heated debate over the ability of television to bring intellectual programming to a mass audience. The distraction of big-money payouts on the quiz shows, to keep viewers enthralled, ultimately reduced knowledge to the retention of facts and cloaked intellectualism beneath camera-ready congeniality.

Van Doren's print narrative became even more complex once he ended his reign on *Twenty-One*. Although NBC lunged at the first opportunity to make Van Doren an exclusive network-associated personality, keeping him in the entertainment business, Van Doren rebelled against his popularity as a quiz show contestant, proclaiming that quiz shows and knowledge were in many ways antithetical. Van Doren made no secret of his intention to use the powerful medium of television as a means to democratize knowledge—a stance that inspired both positive and negative press commentary across the critics spectrum—and solidified his pledge by becoming a respectable commentator and host on various educationally inspired and culturally enriching programs. Meanwhile, television viewers and journalists began to question the legitimacy of quiz show winners, even though they willingly accepted producers' assertions that effective showmanship required control and direction. As 1957 came to an end, print coverage of

television quiz shows continued to focus mainly on the money involved—and on the freedom money promised—while Van Doren further attempted to manage his public image by publishing two articles that positioned him as a believer in education and knowledge, as well as in television’s ability to deliver their access to the public at large. Had the story ended there, Van Doren would be remembered as an advocate for educational television and perhaps as one of the most intellectually qualified television presenters in the history of broadcasting. But the story did not end there.

In September 1958, print media filled the space between their advertisements with news about rigged quiz shows. Edward Hilgemeier Jr. had *Dotto* shut down by its sponsor, and Herb Stempel and Stoney Jackson wanted to come clean about fixing on two of the biggest primetime quiz shows of the 1950s, *Twenty-One* and *The \$64,000 Challenge*, respectively. The producers and many contestants, including Van Doren, denied the accusations, but months and months of grand jury testimony revealed that rigging was not limited to a few select incidents; rather it was as ubiquitous as the sponsor’s logo during a televised match. The New York County grand jury investigation would effectively put an end to the television quiz craze of the 1950s, as the big-money shows were nixed from programming schedules for lack of sponsor interest.

When the New York County grand jury presentment was sealed in June 1959, long after the television quiz show damage had been done, Congress opened its own inquiry into quiz show practices to find out why the fraud had not been stopped sooner. Magazines and newspapers began their coverage of the congressional hearings by examining every angle, from the dangers of television industry privatization to the ineffectiveness of the FCC to the proper public-interest uses of the television spectrum. The investigation coverage threatened the networks’ economic interests, and so they worked hard to deflect blame onto the government and the producers and

contestants. A critical part of the deflection was instigated by NBC executives, who required Van Doren to respond to Stempel's testimony in a telegram to the House subcommittee. In a crisis of conscience, Van Doren finally admitted to doing the wrong thing for the right reasons.

In simplifying the story, while at the same time continuing to use Van Doren's public image as a profitable commodity, print media placed Van Doren as the central figure in the quiz show narrative. The previously wide-ranging discussions about the entertainment and broadcasting industries, federal regulation and oversight, economics, and ethics boiled down to the tale of one man as the classic Greek hero who reached the moment of his downfall. A cacophony of self-interested parties joined in and reinforced the tale of personal transgression, which became the enduring narrative of that pivotal moment in broadcasting.

One final important note involves the positioning of the "mass audience" as a narrative tool. Frequently talked about but rarely heard from in cultural memories of the quiz show scandal, the audience is assumed to have been deeply upset and offended by Van Doren's transgression. In truth, the public recognized the economic motivations of the broadcasters and fully expected that the quiz shows were at least influenced in order to make good entertainment. As the next chapter shows, the media have been equally misleading in positioning the public as an entity outraged at Charles Van Doren.

#### 4.0 A JURY OF PEERS: AT HOME WITH CHARLES VAN DOREN

The flood of mail sent to Columbia University administrative offices began on Monday, 2 November 1959, in response to breaking news reports.<sup>1</sup> Eighty-seven people, from twenty-four states across the country, immediately communicated their concern to the University's Board of Trustees, expressing disapproval of the Board's decision to accept Assistant Professor Charles Van Doren's tendered resignation. Only a few hours earlier, the sympathetic onlookers and temperate majority of U.S. House of Representatives Special Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight members had lauded Van Doren's candor and sincerity as he courageously faced the flashbulbs and film crews that illuminated the wooden witness table at which he sat. There, Van Doren confessed that he had, in fact, received explicit directions, including the questions and answers, from television producer Albert Freedman during his entire unprecedented winning streak in 1956-57 on NBC's primetime hit quiz show, *Twenty-One*. The sole rebuke of Van Doren's statement, voiced by New York Representative Steven Derounian, had met silence in the cramped Congressional hearing room, whereas well wishes and supportive comments about Van Doren's bravery, honesty, respectable genealogy, and service to education were heartily

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all correspondence cited in this chapter are pieces archived in *Quiz Show Letters*, housed in the Columbia University Archives, hereafter abbreviated *QSL*, CUA.

applauded. Overwhelmingly, immediate public opinion seemed to support Van Doren and his worthiness to pursue an academic career.<sup>2</sup>

The correspondence to Columbia's offices increased dramatically on Tuesday, 3 November, as reports of the Board's decision made the front pages of newspapers, alongside summaries of Van Doren's introspective congressional testimony. That same day, NBC swiftly joined the ranks in declaring Van Doren "compromised" and severed his \$50,000-a-year contract with the network.<sup>3</sup> While corporate business-minded boards tried to restore the taintless shine to their public images and reputations through newspaper, radio, film, and television news releases, numerous citizens heard or eyed the sensationalized headlines about Van Doren's very public downfalls and took matters into their own hands, pleading to be heard.

For a time, the Congressional investigation, the quiz show scandal, and the apparent indiscriminate decision to single out Charles Van Doren from hundreds of other implicated participants were subjects of heavy discussion in open-air media forums and among educational settings, civic groups, families, and friends. In the weeks following Van Doren's confession, thousands of people across the country lobbied for his reinstatement in letters, postcards, telegrams, and phone calls to Columbia University, to NBC's New York studios, to U.S. Representatives, to the Federal Communications Commission, and to editorial columns alike. Their responses represent a cross-section of attitudes and opinions of the public, from people

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<sup>2</sup> Reports of reactions to the Congressmen's comments are documented in Richard N. Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988), as well as in William M. Blair, "Van Doren Admits Lying, Says TV Quiz Was Fixed; Loses His Columbia Post," *New York Times*, November 3, 1959, 1, 20. According to personal correspondence between Columbia President Grayson Kirk and Charles's esteemed father, poet Mark Van Doren, New York reporters seeking Charles Van Doren's response to his dismissal were the first ones to inform the young professor of the university's decision at his home after 11 p.m. on Monday night. Mark Van Doren, Letter to Grayson Kirk, November 4, 1959, *Central Files* Box 454, Folder 21, Columbia University Archives.

<sup>3</sup> "Text of NBC Statement," *New York Times*, November 5, 1959, 29.

whose only knowledge of Van Doren came from one-way interactions with their television screens to those who felt a personal loss in the dismissal of their own teacher.

The outpouring of sentiments was truly a countrywide effort, an example of an historical moment when people everywhere seemed to be focused on a single national dilemma. The 909 writers represented in the correspondence sent to Columbia University's administration alone include an amazingly wide geographical sample.<sup>4</sup> Their homes crisscrossed the continental U.S., from Maine to California, Washington to Florida, and practically all points in between. The writers were all ages, both genders, and from various social classes, and they were largely unified in their support for Van Doren, regardless of his public faults. For these authors, the issue of Van Doren's dismissal from the university faculty was not drawn along clearly defined political boundaries; it was not merely a matter of conservatives versus liberals. Respondents across the political spectrum considered the matter urgent enough to take whatever recourse was available. Indeed, some were inspired by radio callers who pushed for letter-writing campaigns, but each letter was a personalized, unique effort, quite unlike the form-letter correspondence David Thelen discovered in the 1980s regarding Oliver North and the Iran-Contra Affair.<sup>5</sup> The demographic range of writers who directed their correspondence to Columbia in 1959 and the thematic similarities of their communications reveal how Americans-at-large understood numerous issues attached to the "Van Doren case," as the scandal came to be known, beyond a question of right and wrong. Their explanations, which reflect some of the same cultural complexities mass media had attached to Van Doren's public image over the previous three

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<sup>4</sup> Forty-four of the forty-eight continental U.S. states are represented in the *Quiz Show Letters* files at Columbia. Alaska and Hawaii, which had only been granted statehood in 1959; the lesser-populated Western states of Idaho, Montana, and Nevada; and New Hampshire were the only places absent from the mix of opinions. Three correspondents from Ontario, Canada, did write to Columbia University as well.

<sup>5</sup> For an extraordinary analysis of audience protest correspondence, see David Thelen, *Becoming Citizens in the Age of Television: How Americans Challenged the Media and Seized Political Initiative during the Iran-Contra Debate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

years, fleshed out deeper social concerns about the U.S. education system, juvenile delinquency, the benefits and drawbacks of free enterprise, the threat of communism, the threat of unwarranted persecution, adherence to religious tenets, and the fluid definitions of parent, citizen, teacher, student, fraud, and fool.<sup>6</sup>

Influential academic analyses of the 1959 quiz show scandal generally arrange Charles Van Doren's ethics within the spate of political-economic symptoms of the fledgling television broadcasting business during the post-war era of booming mass consumption.<sup>7</sup> Their broad scope, however, focuses on the television industry as an institution and has largely incapacitated fragmented audience members into a single, nebulous, "outraged" mass, which grossly oversimplifies the public's varying responses to the scandal. Generalities overlook the more personalized levels of understanding that individuals expressed about television, business, government, education, and Charles Van Doren, particularly once the fraud allegations were

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<sup>6</sup> Chapter 3, "Will the Real Charles Van Doren Please Stand Up?: The Construction and Deconstruction of a National Media Image," addresses the Van Doren narrative created by mass media between 1957 and 1959.

<sup>7</sup> Media histories about the quiz show era eloquently analyze and interpret the structural facets that steered the 1950s' economic, aesthetic, and government regulatory decisions that eventually coalesced into the context of the scandal. Together, these works draw from a range of sources that include industry memos, insider interviews and testimonials, journalistic articles, congressional reports and hearing transcripts, trade publications, and other media sources. See Kent Anderson, *Television Fraud: The History and Implications of the Quiz Show Scandals* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978); Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, 1933-1953*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), and *The Image Empire: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, from 1953*, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Thomas A. DeLong, *Quiz Craze: America's Infatuation with Game Shows* (New York: Praeger, 1991); Jeff Kisseloff, *The Box: An Oral History of Television, 1920-1961* (New York: Viking, 1995); Joseph Stone and Tim Yohn, *Prime Time and Misdemeanors: Investigating the 1950s TV Quiz Scandal—A D.A.'s Account* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Goodwin, *Remembering America*; and Walter Karp, "The Quiz Show Scandal," in *American Vistas: 1877 to the Present*, ed. Leonard Dinnerstein and Kenneth T. Jackson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 317-34. Anderson, Barnouw, Boddy, Stone and Yohn, and Goodwin each connect the deception to corporate greed. For general historical analyses of the 1950s, see Dan Wakefield, *New York in the Fifties* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992); Stephen J. Whitfield, "The 1950s—The Era of No Hard Feelings," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 74 (1975), 289-307; Joel Foreman, ed., *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Dale Carter, ed., *Cracking the Ike Age: Aspects of Fifties America* (Oxford: Aarhus University Press, 1992). For accounts of how television, film, and other mass media functioned within a tenuous social landscape, see Barnouw, *The Golden Web*; Boddy, *Fifties Television*; Nina C. Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); and Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

confirmed. The public was outraged, yes, but the target of their protests was decidedly not Van Doren.

The 865 communications to Columbia, housed in the University Archives, represent historical sites for analyzing the discursive framework in which the scandal and Van Doren orbited.<sup>8</sup> This chapter will be the first attempt to examine this archive to establish the national public's understanding of Charles Van Doren through both quantitative and qualitative methods. The numbers are important, in that they tell an uncomplicated story that is incongruent with what has become the cultural memory of the 1959 quiz show scandal.<sup>9</sup> The numbers, however, only reveal a fragment of the story. Embedded in every letter, whether ambivalent or pro- or anti-Van Doren, are the traces of a particular author in a specific moment in time. Far from being a mindless mass, those who sent correspondence to Columbia constituted a well-informed public of individuals who demanded social justice above all else.

In analyzing the public's responses to Van Doren's resignation from Columbia as they are divulged through very personal letters, postcards, telegrams, and phone calls to the university from across the nation, this chapter provides a vista of the diverse demographic makeup of the correspondents and examines the most recurring themes found throughout the exchanges. While the messages sent to Columbia directly relate to Van Doren's employment there, they also reveal larger underlying social concerns on the minds of many Americans. Similarly, Columbia University President Grayson Kirk's personal responses to individuals intricately connected to Van Doren and to Columbia, when synthesized with the administration's form-letter replies to most correspondents, expose the issues at stake for the university.

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<sup>8</sup> The numeric discrepancy between writers and letters received is due to a small number of correspondences that were signed by multiple parties of the same family. One letter from Florida was signed by fourteen members of the Jacksonville community. Most letters, postcards, and telegrams were signed by individuals, however.

<sup>9</sup> The cultural memory of the scandal is the subject of Chapter 5.

## 4.1 THE WRITERS

According to administrative office memoranda, in the first four business days following Charles Van Doren's scandal-ridden resignation on 2 November, the university received some 446 responses to the Board of Trustees' swift decision. The number of pieces of correspondence would grow to 741 after the first full week and continue to rise by more than another hundred. In personal letters to such prominent New York media industry insiders as *New York Times* publisher Arthur Hays Sulzberger, book publisher Alfred A. Knopf, *Christian Herald* editor Reverend Daniel A. Poling, and *New York Herald Tribune* reporter Judith Crist, Columbia University President Grayson Kirk claimed that the overwhelming majority of the messages sent to Columbia were from "teary housewives" and "Protestant ministers who were shocked because [Columbia] had displayed so little 'Christian charity.'"<sup>10</sup> This hasty generalization, which would later be repeated, not surprisingly, in print media, does little to characterize accurately the wide-ranging domestic situations, ages, education levels, and professions of the citizens who communicated their concerns to Columbia.

Of the more than 900 people who wrote to Columbia University, almost two-thirds were women, but the fact is that little more than forty percent of the overall correspondents affixed the title of "Mrs." to their signatures or return addresses. The remaining sixty percent of letter writers were men, unmarried women, or women who made no reference to their domestic attachments. Even more telling is that a total of only eleven of the 578 women writers categorized themselves specifically as housewives. Instead, other personal identifiers were more commonly used among both genders, such as an individual's parenting status, educational

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<sup>10</sup> See Grayson Kirk, Letter to Alfred Knopf, November 13, 1959; Letter to Dr. Daniel Poling, December 8, 1959; and Letter to Judith Crist, December 16, 1959. All are located in Box 2, Folder 7, *QSL*, CUA.

background, or religious affiliation, which were referenced five times more often than domestic position. Such details were included for the benefit of Columbia's administrators and were intended to authenticate the sender's credibility, to validate her or his opinion on the subject of Van Doren, and to justify the impulse to write.

Women overwhelmingly supported Van Doren by eighty-eight percent; a total of only sixty-five women expressed an explicit wish for Van Doren's removal from the faculty, and an additional five took the opportunity to articulate their displeasure with facets of Columbia University more so than with Van Doren. For the twenty-eight percent of correspondents who were men, the issue of Van Doren's complicity in the television fraud was also generously decided. Out of 252 men, 171 voiced reasons why Van Doren should be given a second chance. More men than women supported Columbia's firm ethical stance in dismissing Van Doren, but more men than women also proclaimed ambivalence toward the matter. The remaining eight percent of correspondents declined to give the tell-tale signs of their gender. Without signatures, and with only initials or an ambiguous moniker such as "A Citizen" or "A Fan," seventy-nine anonymous messages crossed Columbia's administrative desks. Many were catalogued as "crank" letters and left unanswered, but a vast seventy percent of these inscrutable writers, too, considered the university's dismissal of Van Doren a betrayal.

More than twenty percent of writers referenced a profession or career choice in their correspondence to Columbia. Sixty-six past and present teachers, from junior high schools and university faculties alike, cited their professional position as a reason for their interest in the Van Doren case, although not all agreed on the trickle-down effects his confession would have. Thirteen condemned Van Doren for the mockery he had made of educational purity and applauded Columbia for following standard procedure. Fifty-two others, many of whom were

Columbia alumni, remained steadfast in their insistence on tolerance. Helen P. Allen, of Toronto, Canada, is one example.

The press states that Columbia is accepting Mr. Charles Van Doren's resignation. That, of course, means you are firing him, for as you know, he loves to teach. It is born in him. As a graduate (M.A.—1931 from Teacher's College) I am wondering if all the members of the staff are quite blameless? Are they all without fault or error? Are they all free from mistakes? Where is your understanding, your tolerance, yea, your compassion?...Please—a little mercy for a repentant soul—not the axe.<sup>11</sup>

The seventy-nine percent of teachers who supported Van Doren found little correlation between education and the television industry. They urged Columbia's administration to overlook the television fantasy version of the young professor and consider only Van Doren's real, proven professional ability. While some acknowledged the possibility of challenging days ahead—for the teaching profession as well as for Van Doren, should he continue to instruct—they also clung to a heartfelt belief that education would prevail.

Protestant clergymen, whom Kirk claimed were a segment of the “overwhelming majority,” were the second-largest group to write to Columbia, but they totaled a less-impressive number of only twenty, and their opinions were not unanimous. At least three outwardly denounced Van Doren's lapse in moral responsibility, and one remained ambiguously without pronouncement. The majority did support Van Doren's reinstatement and, as one would expect, pointed to religious doctrine for inspiration. Reverend Gordon S. Price, rector of the Christ Episcopal Church in Dayton, Ohio, wrote:

I am not in the habit of writing letters of this sort, but cannot let the occasion go by without voicing some sort of protest. The acceptance of the resignation of Charles Van Doren, while seemingly expedient on the surface, raises questions in the minds of many of us as to the Christian Ethic of reconciliation. He has made his confession and has thrown himself on the mercy of the accusers. The lamb is slain and the real perpetrators of the hoax go unblemished. This letter does not seek to condone the sin, but asks that forgiveness be meted out to the sinner. A careful reading of the New Testament (and we

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<sup>11</sup> Helen P. Allen, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 14, *QSL*, CUA.

pride ourselves as being a Christian Nation; hasn't our President boasted of such?) shows Jesus discerning between the sinner and the sin. So far as I can determine, He never encountered an unforgiveable person, although He did understand certain sins as in the category of unforgiveable. I hope that this letter and others of its kind will prompt the officials of your great University to reconsider the case of Van Doren.<sup>12</sup>

Teachers and clergy were the most represented occupations throughout the Columbia correspondence, but 108 other writers also included their professional lives as factors in their opinions. People from widely varied social backgrounds felt affected by Van Doren's dismissal. Artists, farmers, laborers, researchers, secretaries, social workers, and even a congressional aide—all lobbied Columbia for a fair shake for Van Doren. Fifteen medical doctors, including thirteen men and two women, weighed in on Columbia's decision, with a full two thirds rebuking the university. Business owners and media industries, with thirteen representatives each, also largely supported Van Doren's side in the matter. Of the twenty-six different professions mentioned in correspondence, only five—landscape architect, military serviceman, National Republican Committee member, newspaper/magazine professionals, and sales—had more backers for Columbia than for Van Doren. The opinions split evenly among engineers, insurance agents, and lawyers.

More than twenty percent of correspondents also specified their educational affiliations as testaments of their credibility and purpose for writing. By naming an earned degree or a particular college, or in reference to the general educational prerequisites of their chosen profession, 198 writers contextualized their opinions in terms of their educational backgrounds. Writers mentioned their educational accomplishments to separate themselves from the “mindless masses,” particularly so that Columbia administrators would know that their opinions were the product of rational thought rather than base emotion. Writers also often cited their schools to add

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<sup>12</sup> Rev. Gordon S. Price, November 3, 1959, Box 2, Folder 4, *QSL*, CUA.

credence to their claims; the prestige attached to a name translated into cultural capital for the alumni, or so the alumni believed. “We are Harvard people,” wrote Mrs. E. Guy-Sharp across the top fold of her Beverly Hills stationery, as though that statement put her letter’s contents within the proper perspective.<sup>13</sup> Overall, the Ivy League was amply represented among letter writers to Columbia, with graduates of Harvard, MIT, Princeton, Stanford, the University of Pennsylvania, and Yale included in the mix. So, too, were graduates of eighteen other prestigious academic institutions, including Cornell, Oberlin, Temple, Tulane, and UCLA. A full eighty percent of correspondents who referenced their own education supported Van Doren’s continued pursuit of the field. The general consensus among this group was a belief that Van Doren would be a better teacher as a result of his ordeal.

Ninety correspondents identified themselves as present or former Columbia students, sixty-six of whom felt the Board’s decision was a poor reflection of the educational tenets espoused by the university. As students and alumni, reflective representations—and future benefactors—of Columbia, these writers felt a personal stake in the matter and demanded a say. Four went so far as to remove the university from their wills. In University City, Missouri, Louise Nagel wrote, “I am a graduate of Columbia University but I am not proud of our Trustees this evening. By dismissing Charles Van Doren you have failed to help a brilliant young man ‘come back.’ Maybe he did do wrong in a world of ‘fake,’ but cutting him off has not helped. In like manner, I have cancelled Columbia University from my Will.” As a postscript, she emphatically declared, “Ask for no more funds.”<sup>14</sup> Eleven others, like Edwin S. Smith from the affluent Shadyside neighborhood of Pittsburgh, considered new options in terms of potential colleges their children would be permitted to attend. As Smith explained:

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<sup>13</sup> Mrs. E. Guy-Sharp, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 11, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>14</sup> Louise Nagel, November 2, 1959, Box 2, Folder 7, *QSL*, CUA. Underlined in original.

We were seriously considering having our son who is now sixteen years of age make his application for admission to the school you and your faculty represent. When you accepted the resignation of Mr. Charles Van Doren, you showed me, as a father, that your narrow minded school is no place for us to advance the education of our young man. Further education from the academic standpoint is very necessary in this world, but we also want him to learn humility, kindness, tolerance, and understanding of the weaknesses of human beings. Having something on ones [*sic*] conscience is a terrible thing. How many of you could bare yours to the entire world, knowing that forever after it would remain a raw and open wound. This man is going to need all the guts in the world to go back to his profession, it will be a terrible battle, at least allow him to put up a fight.<sup>15</sup>

Many thought the decision would come back to haunt the entire university.

There are several difficulties in accurately characterizing a unified national audience—either for or against Van Doren—but the messages sent to Columbia University in November 1959 do reveal consistencies among diverse Americans. Most significantly, letter writers voiced their personal apprehensions about the Van Doren case from a framework of citizenship. In numerous instances, the writers related their interest in Columbia’s decision as “concerned,” “ordinary,” “law-abiding,” and “private” citizens. As participating members of a free society, these citizens were entitled to exercise their First Amendment rights and express their opinions, especially since they felt they had a personal stake in the national outcomes. Furthermore, it was their responsibility to speak out against injustice, even if they were not guaranteed the right to be heard. “Probably no one will read this, but I feel better for having been honest enough to write it,” and “My own thinking will not affect the action taken I know and yet I think in such a matter it is well to have public opinion and this comes as one small section of it,” were typical comments that expressed for the letter writers both an overwhelming sense of futility and a determined perseverance to speak.<sup>16</sup> Some writers were acutely aware that the television

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<sup>15</sup> Edwin S. Smith, November 3, 1959, Box 2, Folder 7, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>16</sup> Priscilla M. Zink, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 9; and Ruth Sayre, November 8, 1959, Box 1, Folder 12, *QSL*, CUA.

airwaves belonged to the public, not the networks or stations, and that the whole scandal was a government regulation matter rather than an educational matter. Others were more concerned with the civic responsibilities higher education was supposed to instill in students and how Columbia fared in providing proper guidance.

Writers also identified themselves as citizens through their membership in smaller communities: they were teachers or students, New Yorkers or Columbia alumni, intellectuals, parents, sinners, or moralists. In most cases, the letter writers belonged to something bigger than themselves as individuals, and they expressed their opinions in relationship to others in their group. Mrs. Edwin Powell of Tyler, Texas, for example, claimed to speak on behalf of everyone in the Lone Star State, while Mrs. P. L. Gisin of Denver, Colorado, explained, “In the past two days, wherever I went, I took my own poll on how people felt about Van Doren—my dentist, the beauty shop, the grocery store and my neighbors. None of us condoned his lying but to date we have not heard of one contestant who didn’t deny he had received help, when questioned.”<sup>17</sup> The letter writers presented themselves and their opinions to Columbia administrators as representations of widespread public agreement. They were not incompetent or foolish; they were, in fact, members of the majority.

## 4.2 THE CORRESPONDENCE

Correspondence sent to Columbia reveal three widely repeated common-sense perspectives on Van Doren’s participation in the scandal:

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<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Edwin Powell, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 14; and Mrs. Harry Gisin, November 4, 1959, Box 2, Folder 1, *QSL*, CUA.

- “Van Doren did what anyone would have done.” (Right)
- “Van Doren’s participation was contemptible, and he got what he deserved.” (Wrong)
- “Van Doren was wrong, but he confessed. And, because he is repentant, he should be given a second chance.” (Wrong, but...)

The ninety-six writers who believed that Van Doren did what anyone else in his position would have done constitute eleven percent of the correspondence. Their opinion of Van Doren’s involvement in rigged quiz shows concurred with the majority of the masses, according to a 16 November 1959 *Life* magazine poll. This segment of the population believed that Van Doren had committed no crime in receiving producer assistance during his quiz show appearances and, in fact, had responded to a worthwhile business proposition in much the same way that most people would—by accepting the offer. Their explanations claimed that, because no one was harmed, there was no moral infraction, and that Van Doren was being needlessly persecuted. Sustaining their claims by pointing to such realities as Van Doren’s meager annual teaching salary—only \$4,400 at the time of his quiz show appearances—and the underlying profit motives of the television industry’s commercial architecture, outright supporters of Van Doren most loudly problematized the structural arrangements that had mandated the rigging in the first place. From this perspective, the only scandal was that an outstanding—and entertaining—educator had been relieved of both of his teaching jobs without sufficient reason.<sup>18</sup>

In direct opposition to the “Van Doren did what anyone would have done” explanation, a cluster of opinion-makers concentrated on Van Doren’s moral misjudgments, particularly his extended collusion in the quiz show cover-up following the initial rigging. For sixteen percent of writers, Van Doren brought his downfall upon himself, and he deserved spurning. With such prominent voices as Kirk, Hans J. Morgenthau, and U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower taking

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<sup>18</sup> “Public Reacts with Anger and Pity,” *Life*, November 16, 1959, 36-37.

this position in alignment, the “official” reaction to Van Doren’s involvement was clearly condemnation. From this perspective, Van Doren had led a privileged life in an upstanding family household, was a genuine intellectual, and, due to his idyllically charmed upper-middle-class American existence, should have known the difference between right and wrong. In their eyes, Van Doren’s failure to abide by the rules of the game was a justifiable reason for his public shunning. Mrs. Carrie E. Humphrey, of Meadow Vista, California, was one to commend Columbia University on 3 November:

Please allow me to congratulate you on the stand you have taken in regard to Chas. Van Doren. I have read where many are sympathetic and have criticized Columbia for their viewpoint. The argument seems to be that Van Doren is from a fine family, has had super rearing, education, etc. This is all the more reason why he should have been fine, upright and above such crooked and deceitful and untruthful conduct. People are not surprised when a lad from the slums of a great city, whose parents are separated, and often uneducated and all too often drunkards or narcotic addicts, but for a young man with the background (family, social and educational) that has been Chas. Van Doren’s heritage, it seems to me that disgrace and shame is very, very great...I am almost seventy-two years old and only had eight grades in a country school in the middle west, what I would have given for the background, the opportunity to learn and associate with people of the kind that Mr. Chas. Van Doren’s life [*sic*]. I cannot find one tiny excuse for the crooked deceitful conduct nor the untruth he told in the beginning...If this is allowed to be overlooked, it seems to me that every student would feel that Columbia was, more or less, too ready to overlook deceit and untruth.<sup>19</sup>

Between the two extremes of commendation and condemnation stretched degrees of middle-ground tolerance. Roughly seventy-two percent of correspondents to Columbia recognized the horizons of Van Doren’s situation as well as the moral dilemma it presented. While not condoning Van Doren’s participation in the fraud—in fact, in most instances, citizens condemned Van Doren’s participation—this position combines with additional, fluidly defined “American values” to rationalize a sustained faith in Van Doren’s proven, inherent “goodness” and his potential to “do good” for the nation. Thirty-seven percent of all writers utilized

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<sup>19</sup> Carrie E. Humphrey, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 4, *QSL*, CUA.

references heavily steeped in Christian conceptions of contrition and forgiveness, which were invoked to remind Columbia administrators of the fallibility of every individual and to stress the ideological importance of second chances. Biblical verses and parables concerned with stone-throwing filled many lines of many letters. Others reinforced an enlightened code of conduct: it was not in good form to “kick a man when he’s down.” In this regard, the rules of decency necessitated that Van Doren be given an opportunity to continue his proven talents in educating the public. This position, in strong concurrence with Columbia’s undergraduates, predicted that because Van Doren had fallen to temptation, he would be the ideal representative to caution youths from following the same self-destructive path.

Writers across these three general perspectives repeated an assortment of themes to establish their concerns about 1950s America for Columbia administrators. The majority reference quotes from Van Doren’s congressional statement, the full text of which was distributed by the Associated Press and widely reprinted in newspapers on Tuesday, 3 November. Its extensive availability allowed many correspondents to comment directly on the sincerity of Van Doren’s remarks and to interpret the underlying issues at stake for the country’s citizens from a variety of vantage points. The entertainment industry, the culture of capitalism, scapegoating, the status of American education, and Columbia University were the most prominent points of contention for correspondents, and letter writers expressed a range of opinions about each.

#### **4.2.1 “That’s Entertainment”**

Overall, one quarter of all correspondents blamed “television” for the quiz show debacle. More than 210 letter writers insisted that Columbia administrators needed to place Van Doren’s

participation in the proper context of the entertainment industry, but two very divergent lines of thought arose in regard to which context was correct. For those who believed Van Doren was “right,” television was strictly entertainment, harmless make-believe in the reality of everyday life. They generally understood that television was a commercial business, designed to sell consumer goods to the masses, and that nothing about any broadcast was unrehearsed. Judy Miller, a young girl from Queens, explained:

Dear Sirs, I am thirteen years old and I have the privilege of being a resident of a free country, and so I am writing to you in protest of what I heard. You dismissed Charles Van Doren. And why—because he was involved in the Quiz Scandal? Does that make him an incompetent teacher? Of course he did have responsibility but to me (and my family) Quiz shows are merely entertaining and absolutely no entertainer will go on stage without a prepared script—including quiz shows. At least Mr. Van Doren was honest enough to admit it. Your dismissal was rather stupid and I certainly lost much respect for the staff of a great university. An angry admirer, Class 7-5 S.P.<sup>20</sup>

From the perspective of many writers in agreement with Miller, competently intelligent people should have known that quiz shows were no different than dramas or comedies. Mrs. E. L. Norris, of Indianapolis, wrote:

Personally I think nothing could be duller than a series of contestants asked questions, and have to say “I don’t know.” Nor do I think the intelligent quotient [*sic*] of Americans would be raised by such a program...We watch TV not as producers, but viewers, and ought to use our brains as to whether a thing we see is true or false. I deemed all of these programs rigged, ages ago, but enjoyed watching their performances.<sup>21</sup>

A few correspondents equated the television quiz show producers to P.T. Barnums and the programs to funhouse mirrors; distortions were to be expected. At the very least, the viewing audience should not have been surprised at the discovery of heavy-handed showmanship controls. “Coaching goes with the theater,” stated Frances M. Merkle of Millis, Massachusetts, as she further explained:

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<sup>20</sup> Judy Miller, November 2, 1959, Box 1, Folder 8, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>21</sup> Mrs. E. L. Norris, November 2, 1959, Box 1, Folder 8, *QSL*, CUA.

I do not believe that the television officials, the sponsors or any of the contestants owe the public an apology. They have no cause to feel embarrassed, shamed or apologetic. Remember that the aim of a sponsor is to sell a product. The Revlon Company wanted to “push” the sale of good cosmetics by a novel approach. It was their money. They had a right to distribute it to whomever they chose. Naturally, they selected contestants with appeal. (Don’t we all have favorites?) There is no law forbidding us to give to those we like. Actually, an award should be given to the “acting” ability of the contestants who feigned nervousness, frustration and registered the emotions of accomplished actors. Deception that hurts no one is considered a joke. Who was hurt? I personally benefited from the show because I became acutely aware of the importance of study. I selected games for the children of a constructive nature: “Go to the head of the class”, “Game of Presidents”, etc. I read, questioned and discussed more topics. I encouraged the children to read more and became intensely interested in the school curriculum. My zest for learning was sparked by the quiz-show and I think more people gained more than they realize...The discontents are those envious contestants who were not selected to be coached. The complainers are those who were intent upon removing the halo of intelligence from Van Doren and the others. It was an ACTING job in an ACTING profession. Do we criticize the magician or the immoral actor who plays contrary to his real self? No moral or ethical law was violated because the situation developed in an atmosphere of entertainment—the stage.<sup>22</sup>

At the opposite end of the entertainment industry explanation, letter writers who believed that Van Doren was “wrong, but,” condemned television as a corrupt business in which program producers were shady, sly, and cunning, always on the prowl for weak prey they could manipulate to sell a sponsor’s products. Some letter writers directly equated the producers to wolves and the contestants to sheep, and held the program producers, sponsors, and networks accountable. “The press isn’t publicizing the other contestants nor putting the blame...where it belongs on the producers and sponsors, who invented the scheme and knew of its rigging,” insisted Edna J. Silvester from St. Petersburg, Florida.<sup>23</sup> J. L. Cotten, of Pasadena, California, also indicated that blame should fall on the producers, while putting the severity of Columbia’s response to the situation into perspective:

Nobody suffered any loss from this episode except the producers of the show and they are the ones who are guilty more than any one else. Furthermore, Van Doren was not convicted of any crime and has, after searching his soul...come forward and made a clean

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<sup>22</sup> Frances M. Merkle, November 5, 1959, Box 2, Folder 1, *QSL*, CUA. Emphasis in original.

<sup>23</sup> Edna J. Silvester, November 4, 1959, Box 1, Folder 10, *QSL*, CUA.

breast of everything. I am sure he has learned a lesson he will never forget and is now a much better man for this experience. He could still be of great service to his chosen profession. Where is our forgiveness? Why should he be treated like a convict and be ruined for the rest of his life?<sup>24</sup>

Nearly 100 people pointed out that Van Doren had hurt no one except himself. Many more validated Van Doren's congressional assertions that he had been regrettably naïve and easily persuaded by a corrupt industry, that he had been tormented by his participation in the fraud and was truly remorseful, and that he would be a better teacher because of his experience.

#### **4.2.2 “A Sign of the Times”**

Thirty-one writers with vastly different social agendas referred to the quiz show fraud and Van Doren's participation as a “sign of the times.” Although not specifically identified as “capitalism,” the “money-mad” culture of the U.S. in the 1950s was blamed for a variety of bad behaviors. Columbia University supporters and those who recognized Van Doren's complicity in the television fraud insisted that big business and materialism, among other things, were leading to increased apathy and moral ambivalence in American citizens. Everyone, it seemed to many correspondents, was “in it for themselves” or “for a fast buck.” Mrs. P. L. Gisin commented, “This is the basis for this entire unhealthy mess—greed,”<sup>25</sup> while Cornelia Burjess, of Westport, Connecticut, observed, “Integrity seems to be a vanishing quality in our money-mad era.”<sup>26</sup> Miss Verna M. Zimmerman, an alumna of Teachers College who resided in Goshen, Indiana, wrote:

I was not a television fan and have never observed [Van Doren's] program. I was deeply moved by his lack of integrity and his inability to withstand the pressure of dishonest practices of our commercialized world. However I would like to point out that his sin was

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<sup>24</sup> J. L. Cotten, November 3, 1959, Box 2, Folder 4, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>25</sup> Mrs. Harry Gisin, November 4, 1959, Box 2, Folder 1, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>26</sup> Cornelia Burjess, November 6, 1959, Box 1, Folder 4, *QSL*, CUA.

no greater than millions of students in our colleges, universities, professional schools, business concerns and our political machines. I realize that one wrong does not make another right but I would like to point out that I believe that many of the citizens in our land still hold to the principle that to ERR IS HUMAN BUT TO FORGIVE IS DIVINE.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, avid Van Doren supporters, who believed he had done nothing wrong, used similar phrasings to justify Van Doren's participation. In their letters, the permeation of money-madness in American culture had left Van Doren with no real choice. He had been susceptible to the same pressures that others faced on a daily basis in the business world. The glorification of material rewards had compromised all citizens engaged in its competitive pursuit to some degree.

#### **4.2.3 Conspiracies, Witch Hunts, and Scapegoats**

Mrs. Joy Tuck Bell of Redlands, California, was one of several correspondents who questioned the motives behind the congressional quiz show investigation. Since television programs seemed more or less innocuous in the greater scheme of national concerns, it was not particularly logical for the government to spend taxpayer dollars on such an extensive inquiry. In her estimation, someone else must surely be behind—and benefitting from—Van Doren's downfall.

In my opinion, Congress is not qualified to pass on any moral issue. (I say this although, to me, no moral issue is involved). It is just one un-ethical practice of the entertainment field. There are dozens of others in the entertainment field, and in almost every phase of business in the United States. If Congress exists to investigate un-ethical practices in the U.S. they will hardly touch the fringe in their life time...It doesn't seem reasonable that just this one man [Herb Stempel] could keep this turmoil going as it is, so I am wondering who might be back of him? Is it Pay-TV? Is it the Motion Picture or Film interests? Is it Professional performers, who do not want "amateurs" to have any chance on TV? (We need new talent the worst way, I think.) Is it a religious organization trying to drag everyone into their belief of what is right and wrong? Who is it?<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Miss Verna M. Zimmerman, November 4, 1959, Box 1, Folder 10, *QSL*, CUA. Emphasis in original.

<sup>28</sup> Joy Tuck Bell, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 14, *QSL*, CUA.

West Palm Beach resident Amy Exner, one of the eleven self-identifying housewives who wrote to Columbia, thought the conspiracy might run even deeper than television's media competitors:

How can we be sure that this "thing" is not being kept "stirred up" by say, those who would benefit by disgusting the public so much with T.V. that they would go back to the movies and stage shows in droves? Imagine that just such a situation would be worth a lot of money to such an industry. And in that case who would be the most logical to approach to further that cause? I firmly believe that there is something deeper and much more devious behind these matters than meets the eye. Or could it be Communistic "stirring up" of the good people of the U.S.? How about politicians? Could each and every one of them bear investigation and come through unscathed? Are not politicians "paid off" for certain things? My impression is that in order to get favors in this world one has to pay extra well...It definitely, according to me, should not matter to the public how show-business is run. Our only interest should be to be entertained, and that with good clean, interesting and educational entertainment...Are we not entitled to laugh and enjoy ourselves any more, or are we headed for a sombre-faced United States under dictatorship, like some well known countries of Europe?...If the Congress of the United States is interested in doing something really worthwhile for their people, let them concentrate on settling the steel strike satisfactorily, and bring down the cost of living. That is of vital interest to us all. The other concerning showbusiness, is both ridiculous and superfluous.<sup>29</sup>

A few authors related their concerns about Columbia's excessive punishment of Van Doren by revealing their personal persecutions. John Gedwell, half of a successful songwriting duo from Washington, D.C., knew from first-hand experience what it was like to be involved in a conspiracy. He unapologetically wrote:

I stole secret government files as the Rosenbergs did, not the same type of secrets maybe, but secrets never-the-less. What happened: I was hushed up. I was apologised [*sic*] to by the United States Secret Service. And the United States government waits for the statute of limitations to run out so that I cannot get a trial for this federal crime. Does our government advocate the truth? Give a good man a good chance and we will have a good country.<sup>30</sup>

Guy Endore expressed his opinion as both a Columbia graduate and a victim of unwarranted persecution:

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<sup>29</sup> Mrs. Amy B. Exner, December 10, 1959, Box 2, Folder 7, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>30</sup> John Gedwell, November 3, 1959, Box 2, Folder 5, *QSL*, CUA.

As a graduate of Columbia, I feel that I should make my voice heard in the matter of Assistant Professor Van Doren, and plead for his reinstatement. I'm glad the hoax of this quiz programs is no longer being served up to the American public, but I must say that out here in Hollywood it was pretty commonly suspected that they were being faked. But in particular I think it is wrong to deprive a man of all avenues of making a living in his chosen profession. From personal experience I know what it is to be blacklisted.<sup>31</sup>

Others additionally recognized similarities between the House quiz show investigation and Senator Joe McCarthy's reign of terror earlier in the decade. From Los Angeles, Mrs. Martin I. Gordon asked the anonymous Columbia University authorities in charge:

Is this an entertainment investigation or a McCarthy witch hunt? How many teachers do we have like Charles Van Doren that this man is sentenced to obscurity. Perhaps if he hadn't been a teacher he wouldn't have needed the money to begin with. How about investigating that!...Personally I don't care how I'm entertained as long as I am. This was show business in its purest, simplest form. It's a tempest in a tea pot with Charles Van Doren as the goat. Perhaps the House investigating committee doesn't have the guts to investigate anything more "dangerous" than show business or perhaps they hope to pinch some chorus girls.<sup>32</sup>

At least a dozen people voiced explicit outrage at the "witch hunt" underway, while another half dozen praised Van Doren for not hiding behind the Fifth Amendment. Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, resident Katherine Beaver posed a straightforward query to the Columbia Trustees:

One question: If Mr. Van Doren were appearing before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee and used the Fifth Amendment, would he be ousted from your faculty? I imagine your policy would be to applaud him in the name of "academic freedom." As a former teacher and a mother, I feel Mr. Van Doren's courageous display of honesty has done more to offset the "fast buck by any means" and "smart guy" attitudes which have been undermining America's basic morals for a generation.<sup>33</sup>

Many members of the writing public expressed anger at the overwhelming sense of hypocrisy apparent in the fact that someone who told the truth was being excessively punished

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<sup>31</sup> Guy Endore, November 4, 1959, Box 2, Folder 5, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>32</sup> Mrs. Martin I. Gordon, November 8, 1959, Box 1, Folder 13, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>33</sup> Katherine Beaver, November 2, 1959, Box 1, Folder 14, *QSL*, CUA.

while others who remained silent were excused from repercussion. Many others also expressed a sense of injustice about the negative attention concentrated upon Van Doren, especially when so many others were implicated as well. Fifty-seven correspondents commented specifically on Van Doren as the national scapegoat—for the other contestants, for the producers, sponsors, and networks, for Columbia, and for capitalism alike. Van Doren’s humble confession had left him an easy target.

#### **4.2.4 Education**

Throughout Van Doren’s national celebrity, mass media journalists had argued and disagreed about what he represented in terms of American education. He was either the right image or the wrong image; the one certainty was that he was the locus for a number of contentious understandings. In this context, it is not surprising that the issue of Van Doren’s teaching effectiveness elicited comments from thirty-six percent of the Van Doren supporters. In the U.S. Cold War competition against communism, education had become a major battleground, particularly once the Soviets launched ahead in the space race, and Americans had been frequently reminded by their policymakers that education was the nation’s greatest weapon in the “battle to win men’s minds.” Opinions split evenly between those who thought Van Doren would remain the same abundantly competent instructor he had always been and those who believed Van Doren’s ordeal would make him an even better teacher than before. Olive K. Skemp of Silver Spring, Maryland, for instance, said:

I wish that my children might have had the benefit of studying with Mr. Charles Van Doren and if I had children of school age now I should do my best to have them enter his classes. Integrity is an important factor in a teacher’s character, of course, but integrity is an “eternal verity” and not an intermittent virtue—nor is it shattered by a departure therefrom. I am convinced that because of Mr. Van Doren’s obvious sensitivity and

intelligence he will be dominated henceforth by the profound need of unqualified truth. There is much said and written about the difficulty of securing good teachers and if you allow Charles Van Doren to leave your faculty you are depriving yourselves and your students of a unique and, I firmly believe, an instructor of (increased) stature, understanding and competence.<sup>34</sup>

Overwhelmingly, the public demanded to retain the one promising intellectual role model they had had in some time. Religiously inspired writers made their appeals through direct analogies between Van Doren and Jesus, “the greatest teacher in history.”<sup>35</sup>

Many letter writers questioned the value of education, especially as it was tied to juvenile stewardship and providing the ethical and moral foundations for young lives. Mrs. Florence Camargo, a university supporter who lived in Westport, Connecticut, wrote:

I fail to see how the television industry can be expected to hold up higher ethical standards than our courts, our Senate [*sic*] or our institutions of higher learning all of which for the most part come off so badly in this incident. It seems to me that the whole sorry mess, reeking of decadence in our national health, would be greatly benefited if Columbia University were to spearhead an agonizing reappraisal of the aims and methods of education, with a retuning of emphasis on moral and spiritual values to a place alongside intellectual values. It seems to me that this is a matter of greatest importance, more so than putting a missile on the moon.<sup>36</sup>

Juvenile delinquency, a catch-phrase of the 1950s, surfaced as a focal topic in the aftermath of the quiz show scandal. Mrs. Jane Fox Mullison, of the Philadelphia suburb of Norristown, emphatically distinguished between entertainment that contributed to the delinquency of minors and the entertainment of quiz shows:

It is my thought that the investigation committees could better employ their time by delving into the mysteries of the current popular horror programs and the Westerns with their pistol packing papas, their brute displays, and the flagrant sex shows. No quiz show—whether or not “fixed”—ever contributed to the delinquency of a minor. My thanks to you and to all the other contestants, winners and losers alike, for many an evening’s rescue from some of the run of the mill programs cited above. And shame on

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<sup>34</sup> Olive H. Skemp, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 14, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>35</sup> See particularly Mrs. Maril Lee Brubaker, November 4, 1959, Box 2, Folder 1; Anna S. Goolsby, November 6, 1959, Box 1, Folder 11; and Joyce Cannon Rich, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 14. *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>36</sup> Florence Camargo, November 4, 1959, Box 2, Folder 7, *QSL*, CUA.

those who would make a scapegoat of a learned man, a dedicated teacher, a respected and respectable citizen of the United States!<sup>37</sup>

Barbara Lane Faubel, from White Plains, New York, was one of many correspondents to point out the discouraging example Columbia's decision was setting for impressionable youths.

The whole city is affected in a way, what with the University being a part of it. All those delinquent and near delinquent boys and girls. It is so important to set them a good example. With all this publicity the whole country is sort of involved. We have to be careful. We have to be right. We can't risk teaching the wrong thing. Yes—I know. This way, what are you teaching? Growing up isn't worth the effort, since we won't accept you? Facing the truth is a waste of time, since we won't accept you? The decision has been made! What's done is done! Why carry on about it?<sup>38</sup>

In a number of instances, the correspondent was more—or only—familiar with Van Doren through his *Today* show appearances on NBC, rather than with his winning streak on *Twenty-One*. “The only decent bit of non-Maverick type entertainment I've seen on TV in years was the Van Doren TODAY lectures. Now even that's gone,” lamented Craig Raupe, Assistant to Jim Wright of the Texas House of Representatives 12th District, from Fort Worth.<sup>39</sup> Dozens spoke fondly of Van Doren's cultural segments, and many treasured the knowledge he challenged them to seek, right in their own living rooms. In Burbank, California, Marie Gephart closed her letter with:

I wish to add further that I have watched [Van Doren] each day on the TODAY program, and the part he has played in that program has brought something into my life that has been elevating, inspirational, educational, refreshing and enjoyable, and the sort of thing I have failed to find in any other program. So please try to find it in your hearts, all of you, to forgive him and find some way to bring him back to the public that loved him; thus helping him to mend his life and bring him to a new path...PLEASE bring him back to us, for the good of all of us.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Mrs. Jane Fox Mullison, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 9, *QSL*, CUA. Underlined in original.

<sup>38</sup> Barbara Lane Faubel, November 5, 1959, Box 2, Folder 1, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>39</sup> Craig Raupe, November 7, 1959, Box 2, Folder 6, *QSL*, CUA. Emphasis in original.

<sup>40</sup> Marie Gephart, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 14, *QSL*, CUA. Emphasis in original.

From Barlow, Kentucky, Willa Stringfield pointed out that:

From the opinion expressed by notables and the general public the dismissal of Charles Van Doren by N.B.C. is one of the major blows suffered by those who desire better programs on T.V. Charles [*sic*] own programs on “Today” N.B.C. were sincere, informative, highly interesting and superbly presented—little gems I’ll never forget. The only trouble was that they were too short—he should have had at least a half-hour.<sup>41</sup>

Van Doren’s enlightening portion of the morning program provided an illusion of equal access to education, and education—or, so many people had been told—provided avenues of upward mobility. When the congressional investigation revealed that, in fact, not all playing fields are level, despite repeated and explicit claims to the contrary, the public openly challenged the point in trying to “win” if no such outcome was ever possible.

#### **4.2.5 Columbia’s Glass Houses**

Although the Board never publicly discussed its decision beyond the contents of a short official statement released on 2 November in time for Monday evening network news broadcasts and the next day’s newspaper cycles, much of the public understood that the university was trying to wash its hands of a delicate situation. Van Doren’s previous media popularity had benefited Columbia University in tandem, and the Trustees had not interfered during the good times to protect the sanctity of the institution. It looked cowardly and hypocritical for Columbia to sever ties with Van Doren now that he was critically exposed in the press. From Los Angeles, University of Southern California alumnus J. S. Taylor lamented, “Well, I was certainly amused to see how you stuck by one of your teachers, Charles Van Doren. The man needed a friend and

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<sup>41</sup> Willa Stringfield, November 10, 1959, Box 1, Folder 13, *QSL*, CUA.

the only thing the employer could think of was to ‘fire’ him. This should be a great morale builder for the other teachers and students in your University.”<sup>42</sup>

More than a few writers—a total of eighty—surmised that the threat of negative publicity had most influenced the Trustees’ decision. These authors experimented with persuasive styles as they appealed to the Board to show bravery through benevolence. Some letters are saccharine, while others, like the one written by William Coulter of Battle Creek, Michigan, packed threats:

I shall be brief. Charles Van Doren, of your English department, has suffered greatly at the hands of an expertly-led public. If he remains on your staff, part of the disapproval will be transferred to you. As a member of a great university, you must do your utmost to check public opinion; not sway with it like a faded rag. If Prof. Van Doren is dismissed because of his part in this “scandle” [*sic*], may God damn you royally.<sup>43</sup>

Mrs. Miriam D. Gebbie, of Phoenix, Arizona, was an observer who pleaded with the Trustees to contemplate the greater lessons at stake in the university’s decision. She saw the predicament as an opportunity for a revered academic institution to take a compassionate approach to human frailties:

With untold numbers of people throughout the world, I respect Columbia as a beacon light of knowledge. I appeal for a re-consideration of the resignation of Charles Van Doren so that he may be re-established as a respected member of the faculty. This young man has been undergoing a harrowing experience during which he has been subjected to tremendous pressure and deception, as you know. He has won through. The truth has triumphed and from this experience Truth has become more precious than ever to millions of people. Cannot the decision of the University be reconsidered?<sup>44</sup>

Likewise, self-identified teacher Priscilla M. Zink, of Bridgeport, Connecticut, questioned Columbia’s motives in dismissing Van Doren once he had fallen off his pedestal:

At various times Columbia has tolerated individuals who have been guilty of far more dubious attitudes, behavior and morals. Is this sudden assumption of virtue owing to the publicity which this matter has received or owing to a genuine fear that Van Doren

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<sup>42</sup> J. S. Taylor, November 3, 1959, Box 2, Folder 4, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>43</sup> William Coulter, November 2, 1959, Box 2, Folder 4, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>44</sup> Miriam D. Gebbie, November 2, 1959, Box 1, Folder 8, *QSL*, CUA.

himself or the unsavory broth he [be]came an ingredient of will impair the morals of the undergraduates and place a smoke screen over the clear lamp of knowledge? It would appear to be influenced by the former rather than the latter. First, no matter how thoughtless, even guilty if you wish, one of your young instructors is, he can never do any real harm to the progress of knowledge per se. You know that; greater and lesser men than Charles Van Doren have, intentionally and otherwise, tried to impede the course of human progress—no one did more than temporarily to stem the current. Therefore there is no need to be disturbed about the most important aspect of the situation—what his example will do to the status of learning in the country...The best teachers are those who have come down out of academic ivory towers and lived in a world of men...As a member of the teaching profession, I think you have made a mistake in accepting Charles Van Doren's resignation. As a graduate (of sorts) from your institution, I am not proud of what you have done, for I think you have deprived the school of valuable material. As a human being, I am inclined to think you were so eager to whitewash the situation that you lost sight of realities and fundamentals.<sup>45</sup>

A selection of writers believed Columbia had been presented with a stellar opportunity in the Van Doren case. Goldie Ward of Inglewood, California, admonished administrators for not taking advantage of the possibilities presented to them through Van Doren's congressional testimony:

It has puzzled me that the University has failed to see...and utilize...the positive to offset the negative in the unfortunate Van Doren situation. In staying with you...in staying with teaching...in spite of the money and the many opportunities that came out of quiz show publicity...Mr. Van Doren has given you something more valuable than an endowment: positive proof that there are values in teaching, beyond salary, with which to interest budding teachers. Also, so much has been written in fiction (and in fact) of the stuffiness of academicians...one smirch on your escutcheon and you are a pariah...that the glamour of teaching has been considerably dimmed...Comedians have made fun of the low pay... But here you have a practical demonstration of the values someone in the public eye found...to keep on with a \$5500 job while earning \$50,000 for considerably less effort and considerably more glamour. If this had been an academic situation...but it was not. Most intelligent people had to realize that a producer with an audience of millions...and a multi-million dollar investment...does not leave the creation of interest to chance. There is a difference between acting from a "script" and cheating in an exam. Who of us, having subjected a captive audience to the mercies of a worthy...but dull...speaker while acting as a program chairman, has not wished for a way to remove that speaker from the lectern. How much more so, the producer with an audience of millions and a big investment would feel the responsibility to the audience and the temptation to protect the investment. True, there were better ways of working it out...but this is an imperfect world with imperfect people. One can deny, explain, apologize...but nothing is as

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<sup>45</sup> Priscilla M. Zink, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 9, *QSL*, CUA.

effective a defense as a good offensive...and Mr. Van Doren has given you offensive on a silver platter.<sup>46</sup>

Marjory R. More, of Tacoma, Washington, indicated that she had first-hand knowledge of how university decisions were reached and that she knew from experience money went the longest way to determining final outcomes.

Gentlemen: May we commend your “valiant action in keeping the young and pliable minds of the students of Columbia University untainted.” The quotes are mine but the words and thoughts are those of many many people who feel as I do. We are becoming sickened by the lack of loyalty, the lack of basic precepts of Christian tolerance and the lack of understanding being exercised in this country (for it seems to be country-wide) between employer and employee. We noticed you hastened to accept Charles Van Doren’s resignation. Was it because you couldn’t tolerate the least bit of stigmatism from Dr. Van Doren’s recent publicity or was it because you must at all odds, protect and defend your worthy beneficiaries and their august funds which might accrue to the coffers of your institution? (I speak from the experience of formerly having been an assistant to the treasurer of a college on the West Coast.)...What do your students think of your actions? Do they find it a little confusing to find that a fine and good teacher who admittedly made a mistake and went before the public to denounce himself, was rewarded by the quick and decisive action of his employing institution? And isn’t it quite conceivable that they say in that ironic way that youngsters have, “Oh well, that’s the way the ball bounces. Just step out of line and everyone grinds you into the dust just a little more. Seems to make the other guy a hero or big shot or something.” Well to many of us, you are not heroes, nor big-shots. We see you through the wrong end of the telescope and you seem rather microscopic at this point. But you’ve kept Columbia University from the taint of publicity of your principled institution of higher (?) education.<sup>47</sup>

Van Doren’s teaching salary was specifically blamed sixty-two times as a major mitigating circumstance in his participation. Clarke Maynard, of Wilmington, Delaware, offered his understanding of both the necessity for the Board’s firm decision and the implicit contribution the university made to Van Doren’s downfall:

I deeply regret that the action taken by the Board of Trustees concerning Charles Van Doren seemed necessary at this time, but I believe that you had no other proper course of action. It is my hope, however, that you will do as much as you can to help this young man in what amounts to a rehabilitation program for him. What causes me even more

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<sup>46</sup> Goldie Ward, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 9, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>47</sup> Marjory R. More, November 5, 1959, Box 2, Folder 1, *QSL*, CUA.

regret is that a great University of the calibre of Columbia should have been paying any of its teaching personnel the salary of \$4000.00. A seduction such as television and other industries readily afford becomes even easier under these conditions. What you were paying is obviously ridiculous and possibly under moral law a contributing factor to delinquency; it is surprising to me that some of your more wealthy students can't bribe some of these underpaid underlings to coach them for the examination questions right there at Columbia. As a teacher of long standing, working on the basis of teaching degrees from Teachers College, I know what it is to be underpaid. But even working with what many of the haughty Columbia professors feel is a second or third class degree—even though one of them bore your signature—I have been able to do better than Dr. Van Doren. In a letter of this brevity it is not possible to make all of the points which are important. But I do think that you have a huge obligation to your ex-professor and I suggest you get to the task.<sup>48</sup>

Other letter writers were not so sympathetic to a revered school that paid its beginning professors less than plumbers' wages.<sup>49</sup> Atlanta resident John A. Glominski bluntly informed President Kirk:

I have read with considerable disgust, the self-righteous action of your institution in discharging Prof. Van Doren from your English staff because of his T.V. activities. After all, he was merely an actor on a make-believe T.V. show. I consider him no more a reprobate than the late P.T. Barnum. Both men fooled the Public and the Public enjoyed it. Nevertheless you and Columbia U. should "hang your heads in shame" at the exposure of your paying an educated English teacher the miserly salary of \$4500.00. One of the wealthiest Universities in the United States! Do you know that many of our poor Southern Universities pay fledgling English instructors with the degree of M.A. a minimum of 4800.00-5000.00 — and you expect a man to live decently in a town like New York on 4500.00 or less! Columbia is far more discredited in the thought of thinking people than young Mr. Van Doren. Scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites.<sup>50</sup>

While referencing the realities of necessary second jobs for many teachers, Ethel H. Morgan, from Chester Heights, Pennsylvania, also commented on the set of double standards to which teachers alone were held:

You have set the teaching profession back fifty years by accepting Charles Van Doren's resignation. It has been but a short time that teachers and professors have been relatively free to lead a life that suits them. When undue importance is attached to an individual's poor judgement [*sic*] in getting involved in entertainment that was wholesome enough but

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<sup>48</sup> Clarke Maynard, November 8, 1959, Box 2, Folder 6, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>49</sup> Eleanor B. Moore, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 9, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>50</sup> John A. Glominski, November 3, 1959, Box 2, Folder 4, *QSL*, CUA. Underlined in original.

not on the level; What next? Shall the teacher, who must work as a bar tender to supplement his income in order to live, be forced to leave his post? By what criteria do you judge the worth of a teacher? We are human beings, prone to make errors and do things that are not always as honorable as we would like. Columbia has lost a good teacher. We teachers have lost what has taken years to gain—a life that permits us to live as others, without being subject to public scrutiny. Please reconsider.<sup>51</sup>

It seemed as though Van Doren was being held accountable for obviously unrealistic reasons.

Scores of correspondents—pro, con, and ambivalent alike—thought the root problem in the entire mess was much closer to home for Columbia. They vigorously scrutinized the practices of Columbia’s Teachers College and its progressive educational model, which had been instituted in public schools as the preferred teaching method, for evidence that the university was somehow implicated. Some, like Hazel Young Grinnell of Newcastle, Maine, believed that Teachers College promoted dangerously misguided methods. On 2 November, at the announcement of the university’s decision, she wrote:

In 1935 I was granted a Master of Science degree by Columbia University, Teachers’ College. I have never been proud of the degree...I have never felt anything but disgust for the work offered at your institution. Moreover, I feel that the deplorable state in which the schools of this country find themselves at the present time is in large part due to the dishonesty of much of the work given at Teachers’ College which has turned out thousands of half-baked teachers. I am especially disgusted now at the rotten treatment which you are handing out to Mr. Van Doren. It behooves you as an institution to look at your own morals.<sup>52</sup>

Several deemed the absence of discipline a root cause of the “education gap” between Americans and the rest of the world. For these conservative-thinking writers—many of whom supported Van Doren—there was such a thing as too much individual academic freedom, an educational trend that had originated at Columbia with Teachers College pedagogy. On 4 November, after a

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<sup>51</sup> Ethel H. Morgan, November 2, 1959, Box 1, Folder 14, *QSL*, CUA. Underlined in original.

<sup>52</sup> Hazel Young Grinnell, November 2, 1959, Box 1, Folder 14, *QSL*, CUA.

full day of media coverage on the Van Doren aftermath, Howard V. McCurdy of Mason, Michigan, wrote:

In connection with the dismissal of Charles Van Doren from his position as English instructor at Columbia University, I think it would have been a better idea to have expelled most of the teachers of the School of Education at Columbia or to have closed the school entirely. No other factor has been so detrimental to the public school system of the United States of America as this school of education. We now have a system offering weak subject matter, a silly curriculum, and a ridiculous method of measuring results. Discipline has gone completely: a student doesn't have to do any work unless he feels like it. As a teacher of many years and as a veteran of service in France in World War 1, it is completely disgusting to me to see a school so undeservingly keep a stranglehold on the philosophy of education in this country. Charles Van Doren did a foolish thing, of course, but his influence would not control thought all over this country. In fact, I see no connection between his television behavior and the teaching of English.<sup>53</sup>

From Renton, Washington, Margaret H. Rogers also described what she saw as inherent hypocrisy in Columbia's decision:

You taught Charles Van Doren to be a pragmatist when you accepted him, and now you fire him (or words to that effect) because he acts like a pragmatist. Makes sense! The end justifies the means??? You don't even practice what you preach, do you! You should be erecting a monument to the man. We think he did wrong, but you have no right to say so, none at all, much less to accept his resignation. Watch out! those paper halos are slipping!!! Special attention — BOARD OF TRUSTEES — The Holy ones. P.S. Dear old John Dewey —because you, and whole school systems, fell for him, I resigned as a teacher.<sup>54</sup>

At the same time, many Teachers College alumni spoke benevolently about their education and credited their program for instilling tolerance and understanding. More often than not, present and former teachers could not comprehend why Columbia was turning its back on Van Doren. Miss Anne F. Byers of Kenmore, New York, wrote to remind her alma mater of its impressive Teachers College tradition:

I am a teacher and a graduate of Teachers College (1925). I am writing to protest the firing of Charles Van Doren. You who taught us tolerance and understanding should be the last to do such a thing. It seems out of line with Patty Hill-John Dewey and Kilpatrick

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<sup>53</sup> Howard V. McCurdy, November 4, 1959, Box 2, Folder 5, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>54</sup> Margaret H. Rogers, November 10, 1959, Box 1, Folder 13, *QSL*, CUA. Underlined in original.

who all taught the philosophy of understanding. Van Doren is a product of that school of education you are to blame not him. Van Doren's teaching hasn't been affected in fact he should be a better teacher for the experience. Look at the many juries that fail to condemn so why should you put a new Hawthorne letter Q on him. Do bring him back.<sup>55</sup>

For some, the issue of communism was decidedly at work in the Van Doren matter. Several correspondents abhorred the thought of Columbia University harboring communists while it turned Van Doren out to the wolves. Those writers who were particularly sensitive to the Red Menace saw communism at Columbia in everything from the progressive philosophies of Teachers College to various faculty members across the university. Jeanne C. Bose, of Indianapolis, demanded, "Let's have a few more Charles Van Dorens on the faculties of our big universities—and fewer fellow travelers and plain dullards who call themselves educators...I would expect more courage and less 'Follow the crowd' in your dealing with a mistake in ethics—not in morals—from a fine teacher."<sup>56</sup>

For many additional correspondents, the university needed to consider its own ethics and morals before passing judgment on Van Doren. The university's failure to condemn Van Doren's quiz show appearances at the outset remained problematic for those who thought education and television entertainment should be mutually exclusive. Edward W. Andrews, of Mobile, Alabama, posed some difficult questions to the Board:

I was waiting with some curiosity to learn how you would react to the problem brought to a head by the confession of Charles Van Doren. I was hoping that American educators and those who have a major share of the responsibility for determining what education in the United States shall be would realize that they had a little confessing of their own to do and would not take advantage of Van Doren's weakness to make him a scape goat, or even a sacrificial lamb offered as a holocaust to the purity—or rather in behalf of the purity, perhaps—of American education and educators. My newspaper tells me that this is not to be the case...Now I am not a person of such holy living that I feel qualified to set myself up as some one else's conscience. But there is one question that I feel that I have a right to ask you, for I am a parent with three sons being educated in American schools,

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<sup>55</sup> Anne F. Byars, November 4, 1959, Box 1, Folder 11, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>56</sup> Jeanne C. Bose, November 2, 1959, Box 1, Folder 14, *QSL*, CUA.

following an educational program for which Columbia University is in large measure responsible, being instructed by teaching methods for which, also, Columbia University is in large measure responsible. The question is simply this: Why did you not fire Van Doren the moment he made his first appearance on one of those quiz programs? For if any public event has ever held American education up to well-merited ridicule, it was this shameful prostitution of knowledge and the intellectual faculties. It is a shame, I say,—and I am by no means the only one who is saying it—for Mr. Van Doren to be fired for confessing that now he realizes the enormity of this very thing.<sup>57</sup>

Malcolm C. McMaster of Brattleboro, Vermont, indicated that he had no connection with Columbia but still wanted to have his say in the matter:

Dear Mr. President: Since I am neither an alumnus nor a “grateful parent” of Columbia University it is a foregone conclusion that my vote will never be counted. Nonetheless, I am so bold as to suggest to you that Columbia showed an unseemly alacrity in accepting the resignation of a certain controversial figure, one Charles Van Doren. Such haste hardly impresses one as in the academic tradition. You have contributed to depriving the ordinary man of a uniquely inspirational educational personality. The fact that in so doing you have kept you own shirts clear of moral turpitude impresses me not in the least [*sic*]. As far as I know Columbia’s shirts are voluminous enough to absorb a few shocks—provided Columbia had the character. If they are not, it is time that you started mending your own fences.<sup>58</sup>

A number of correspondents were eager to point out that Van Doren was not the only Columbia connection involved in quiz show rigging. Elfrida von Nardroff, the top television quiz show money winner on *Twenty-One*, was a Ph.D. student in Columbia’s psychology program as well as the child of a well-respected and important university faculty member and dean. Vivienne Nearing, the Warner Brothers attorney who dramatically defeated Van Doren in March 1957, had earned her law degree at Columbia. The university also had extensive ties to television industry insiders, most notably at CBS, including president Frank Stanton, who had formerly

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<sup>57</sup> Edward W. Andrews, November 9, 1959, Box 1, Folder 13, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>58</sup> Malcolm C. McMaster, November 2, 1959, Box 2, Folder 4, *QSL*, CUA.

served in Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research, and network overseer William S. Paley, who was a sitting member on the university's Board of Trustees.<sup>59</sup>

Many correspondents recognized the cooperative associations between Columbia and media institutions and demanded that the Trustees accept their share of accountability in the television matter. One letter writer, Sophie Goichman of the Bronx, boldly asserted:

As an alumna of Columbia, I am ashamed and pained at the over-hasty action taken by the trustees in regard to Mr. Charles Van Dorn [*sic*]. I do not condone his actions, but because I was taught humanities (yes, even at Columbia), I can understand human weakness...To follow through on your action regarding Mr. Van Dorn [*sic*], I am sure you will ask Rockefeller Center to terminate the lease of the National Broadcasting Co., since you own the land of the Plaza. I trust you will not again make me ashamed of my Alma Mater.<sup>60</sup>

Further complications arose when one considered the relationships between Columbia, Eisenhower, and New York City's elite. Until he became President of the United States, General Eisenhower sat as President of Columbia University. Eisenhower particularly disliked the smirch left by Van Doren on Columbia, a private institution on which he retained a degree of influence. Republican National Committee executive director Albert B. Herrmann noted to Kirk on 29 October 1959, before Van Doren's testimony:

As you undoubtedly know President Eisenhower is thoroughly DISGUSTED with the recent TV scandals. There is no worse crime than deceiving the public and taking money under FALSE PRETENSES. The other day he expressed to me personally his dismay in that Assoc. [*sic*] Professor Charles Van Doren has not as yet been relieved from his connections with Columbia University. Since he was a former President of Columbia he is doubly sensitive in the premises and is most anxious to see that places of higher learning employ teachers who are honest and beyond reproach. Such deception as practiced by Charles Van Doren is bad for the morale of the students and should not be countenanced under any circumstances. Hope proper disciplinary action is taken.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> William S. Paley is listed among the sitting Board of Trustees members in William M. Blair, "Van Doren Admits Lying, Says TV Quiz Was Fixed; Loses His Columbia Post," *New York Times*, November 3, 1959, 1, 20. It was also reported that Paley was absent from the November 1959 Board of Trustees meeting and abstained from casting a vote on Van Doren's employment.

<sup>60</sup> Sophie Goichman, November 3, 1959, Box 1, Folder 9, QSL, CUA.

<sup>61</sup> Albert B. Herrmann, October 29, 1959, *Central Files* General Alphabetical Correspondence Hen 1959-1960, Box 134, Folder 16, Columbia University Archives. Emphasis in original.

After Van Doren resigned, a number of letter writers complained about the procedural irregularities that had accompanied Eisenhower's appointment at Columbia, and many accused the Trustees of currying future favors in hiring Eisenhower in the first place. To Dorothy Emmer of Park Avenue in New York City, Eisenhower's lack of ethics presaged Van Doren's involvement. Mrs. Emmer wrote:

When General Eisenhower left Columbia to run for a higher office, it was—as the saying goes—Columbia's gain + the country's loss. As a matter of pure curiosity I am wondering at your Board's cynicism in hiring a man solely in the expectation of his ability to solicit endowments + firing a boy who has not had a chance to do a man's errand. Surely even in the "higher educational circles" there is room for clichés about casting the first stone, and I take it as an affront that Columbia regards the first fall from grace as the final one. I had hoped we were teaching our children much more at colleges. Mr. Van Doren's "resignation" is your loss—but more poignantly the loss of your students—and I sincerely believe you are doing a serious disservice to everyone interested in justice. If Eisenhower was an educator, then surely Van Doren is a teacher—particularly when you consider the very wide discrepancy in qualifications + salary.<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile, Ruth Frank in Wichita, Kansas, enumerated an entire pattern of Columbia follies:

Gentlemen: "The Ed.D. degree has recently been awarded by Teachers College, Columbia University, to a candidate whose dissertation was titled 'The nature of the sports page in relation to intercollegiate athletics.'" Quotation from the Council For Basic Education Bulletin June, 1959 (Trivia of the Month). Considering (1) the above quotation, (2) that the word communism has been used in connection with your school, (3) that a general, not a scholar, once held the position of President of your University, I think Columbia would do exceedingly well to have one Charles Van Doren on its faculty. As for myself, I would consider it a privilege indeed, to have Mr. Van Doren for a teacher. Yes, before—and after!<sup>63</sup>

The university was further discredited to those who deemed Eisenhower more untrustworthy than Van Doren.

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<sup>62</sup> Dorothy Emmer, November 2, 1959, Box 1, Folder 8, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>63</sup> Ruth Frank, November 5, 1959, Box 2, Folder 1, *QSL*, CUA.

#### 4.2.6 Winning Combinations

Most correspondents who wrote letters to Columbia took great lengths to explain their opinions about the Van Doren case in full. In the majority of instances, writers pointed to more than one underlying concern they saw manifested in the university's handling of the situation. In total, there were myriad connections between social issues. Marie Cotten of Pasadena, California, who wrote independently of her husband, fellow Van Doren supporter J. L. Cotten, is one writer who incorporated multiple themes. In a single letter, she addressed issues of the entertainment industry, the degree of harm Van Doren caused, scapegoating, and casting stones as well as how these themes related to communism and to Teachers College philosophies:

I assume that your action against Charles Van Doren was taken in the interest of teaching young people not to cheat. Well, did you also want to ignore the Christ teaching of forgiveness by ruining a fine man's chances for the rest of his life when he is so obviously sorry for having been a party to a deal that was not at all illegal, hurt noone and was at least a grand show just like any other story on TV entertains by creating an illusion? Story telling for entertainment might be called deception or fraud—but it isn't. So could Santa Claus...The circumstances certainly do no warrant ruining a man especially one of such character, talent and ability. We need more such people who are able to stand up and take correction so nobly...I think the word "dastardly" is not too strong to apply to your action, especially when some of our leading universities lean over backward to keep communists on their faculty, and TV programs are so loaded with crime stories and deceptive advertising. Those are evils that really need throwing out. From our study of the educational system we feel that Teachers' College of Columbia has done more to poison the schools than anything else. Now I want you to know that I never even heard of Charles Van Doren before this program, and I have no connection whatever with him. It is possible that people's jealousy is responsible for the whole ruckus. That combined with the impulse to find a scapegoat. Could you now show yourself as big a character as Mr. Van Doren and acknowledge making a mistake in firing him. Can you live with yourself if you don't?<sup>64</sup>

Mrs. Bob Fisher of Centerville, South Dakota, likewise included in her letter an array of themes, from conspiracies to commercialism's sideshow circus, that touched on her deep-seated social

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<sup>64</sup> Marie Cotten, November 4, 1959, Box 1, Folder 10, *QSL*, CUA.

concerns, including juvenile delinquency and undue punishment. Mrs. Fisher claimed that these concerns were particularly pertinent to her at the time she wrote because she was expecting a child.

I cannot let another day go by without trying, in my small way, to alleviate the suffering of Charles Van Dorn [*sic*]. Every intelligent American is heartsick over his misfortune. This situation is so reminiscent of the McCarthy “witch hunts” of a few years ago in which the careers of many brilliant young people were ruined by the hysteria of the time. Please, please take note of the thousands of letters pouring into N.B.C. and to Dave Garroway on behalf of this fine young man. We all pray that public opinion will right this situation. After all, what terrible thing has Mr. Van Dorn [*sic*] done? Has he robbed or hurt anyone? The contestant he beat knew the score. Noone forced any of them to go on the show against him, but they were anxious enough to get on anyway. Men in show business think of just one thing, putting on a good “show” for the public to enjoy. The fact that almost everyone in America was highly entertained by these shows means, to these men, that they were a success. How can anyone break a law which doesn’t exist? Would anyone condemn Barnum & Bailey for the hoaxes they dreamed up to entertain the people of their time? We worry so much about the corruptibility of our children’s morals with all the Twentieth Century licentiousness they are exposed to, but it seems to me there would be far better quarters to start the reform than in the quiz show department. This is all a mad, inhuman thing. It is ridiculous [*sic*], and in a few months or so when it settles down it will be forgotten (when newspapers can no longer “sell” it). But the sad thing is that the damage will then be done to this fine young man and the others. Please listen to the heart of America, and reinstate Charles Van Dorn [*sic*]. Perhaps that would turn the tide in this nightmarish thing...I have never written a “fan letter” before! But I am a young mother expecting a child, and I am horrified that my child can be born into a world where 16th century cruelty still exists.<sup>65</sup>

To the public that had watched Van Doren on television and knew him as an accessible intellectual, his participation in fixed quiz shows was inconsequential to his teaching abilities. In fact, quiz shows were inconsequential to the patterns of everyday life. Education and human decency far surpassed television as the public’s most pressing social concerns. While many writers expressed disappointment or disapproval at Van Doren’s lapse in judgment and his repeated untruths, they believed it was an isolated incident, that surely Van Doren would never lose his ethical and moral sensibilities again in the future. Van Doren had always been framed in the national media as a role model, and the public-at-large still considered him as such. Most

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<sup>65</sup> Mrs. Bob Fisher, November 6, 1959, Box 1, Folder 11, *QSL*, CUA. Underlined in original.

correspondents viewed his mental, moral, and legal struggles only as more positive examples to follow.

#### **4.2.7 Student Protest Backlash**

Whereas Van Doren supporters had had justification for writing from the first moments of Van Doren's severance from the university's faculty, anti-Van Doren letter writers began to contact Columbia administrators in greater numbers on 6 November. Of the 909 recorded correspondents, a total of 154 people supported the university trustee action and validated the underlying motivations expressed by its authorities. Those 154 correspondents included sixty-five women and seventy-one men, while eighteen letters arrived unsigned. Many took the opportunity to express disapproval for Van Doren and his actions, but the more pressing reason for their letters was the Columbia student body's very public protest of the Board's decision.

In the first days of November 1959, "We Want Charlie Back" became a mantra in Morningside Heights, where undergraduates from the all-male Columbia College and the all-female Barnard joined forces and were particularly visible in the media as quasi-organized activists who demanded Van Doren's reinstatement.<sup>66</sup> A petition of their demand, circulated by self-appointed student leaders, junior Jack Levy and sophomore Leslie J. Moglen, garnered 650 signatures, more than one quarter of the entire undergraduate student body enrolled within Columbia's ivied walls. The petition, simply titled, "We Object," provided a rationale that weighed the benefits of having Van Doren as a teacher against the damages the University claimed students would suffer under his tutelage.

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<sup>66</sup> See "Columbia Rally for Van Doren Draws Many Opposing Return," *New York Times*, November 6, 1959, 17.

While not condoning his actions in connection with the T.V. quiz '21' we assert that Mr. Van Doren is essentially a man of worth and of great intellectual talent; that he is a conscientious and brilliant teacher; that he is admired and respected by his students and by those who know him; and that we greatly value him as a professor and want him back as our teacher.

The student petition further questioned, "What greater teacher of morals can there be than the man who has lived and experienced the strains of moral conflict; what greater teacher of truth than the man who recognizes its essential necessity by having fought with and conceded to it. Do we desert a man because he has erred or rather do we look to his value in spite of his mistakes and, in fact, because of them." In the eyes of the students, Van Doren's transgressions made him even more qualified to lead them.<sup>67</sup>

Levy and Moglen personally delivered the petition to President Kirk on the morning of Friday, 6 November, on the heels of a late-night bonfire protest that amassed some 1,000 students in Van Am quadrangle to chant their unison support for Van Doren. It was the media coverage of the students' audacious exercises of free speech that had incited the sudden conservative letter-writing backlash. Eighty-four responses in support of Columbia's decision were mailed *after* the student body protest, and of those, fifty-seven were explicitly in response to the protest rather than to Columbia's initial decision to accept Van Doren's resignation. In such cases, Columbia University's "firm stand" was laudable, but there was a deep indignity attached to the outspokenness of young college students who felt they could make demands of

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<sup>67</sup> Students, "We Object. Petition for the Reinstatement of Charles Van Doren," November 4, 1959, *Central Files* General Alphabetical Correspondence Sti 1959-1960, Box 264, Folder 15, Columbia University Archives. The reports of the number of petition signatures vary widely. The *Times* initially reported that 1,000 student signatures had been collected (November 6, 1959) but later changed the number to 650 ("Van Doren Case Shut, Columbia's Head Says," November 7, 1959, 13). The *Columbia Daily Spectator* reported that approximately 800 signatures had been turned in to Grayson Kirk, who declined to reinstate Van Doren (Allen Young, "Kirk Rejects Petition Appeal for Return of Van Doren," *Columbia Daily Spectator* November 10, 1959, 1, 3).

wise, revered administrative men. C. A. Castle, a resident of Washington, D.C., took particular issue with the student actions. Castle demanded of Kirk and the Columbia administration:

Please! Tell those of your students (?are they thinkers?) who paraded\* (\*as over the radio this a.m.) pro-Van Doren (isn't he proved a perjurer and a duper of the public?) to poll foreign universities re their students' and their professors' estimate of U.S. 'education,' as revealed by Van Doren's fast-and-loose ethics.—What do those students want to do—cheat in the exams and be graduated cum laude?<sup>68</sup>

The much-scrutinized student demonstration and petition drew public attention to the local dismay with the Trustees' decision, but these on-campus acts also became emblematic of the public's deeper-seated social fears. Mrs. R. R. Brown wrote:

Thank you sir, for your stand on Personal Integrity!...The outside influences of to-day are so many, so strong that youth does get submerged in too many distorted values! i.e. "I passed—I got a D!" "It's fine!—if you don't get caught." Something deep in our culture in U.S.A. is wrong—and the crime of youth in N.Y. city [*sic*] should amaze too many people—what examples can youth use? Charles Van Doren is a man without a country—+ I can't find any too much sorrow in history for the man without a country. So thank you for no slobbering—no sorrow—but for your courage of convictions that a college such as yours has no place for Charles Van Dorn [*sic*].<sup>69</sup>

To many letter writers who saw symbolism in the still photographs of the protest and in the media accounts of the recent events, the students' activism was a springboard for verbalizing misgivings about a range of disparate issues. Helen Stolberg, from Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, contended that "no young man of extraordinary intelligence need work for \$50 per week unless he so chooses in this day and age of golden opportunity,"<sup>70</sup> while Janet M. Smith, of Fort Worth, Texas, opined, "when it comes to intelligent crooks—we have reason to tremble, to fear for the

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<sup>68</sup> C. A. Castle, November 6, 1959, Box 1, Folder 5, *QSL*, CUA. Underlined in original.

<sup>69</sup> Mrs. R. R. Brown, November 7, 1959, Box 1, Folder 4, *QSL*, CUA. Underlined in original.

<sup>70</sup> Helen Stolberg, December 15, 1959, Box 2, Folder 2, *QSL*, CUA.

fortune of our country. Once again, thanks for your wisdom and strength to withstand the onslaught of weak moraled people.”<sup>71</sup>

*Herald Tribune* reporter Judith Crist, who claimed that she had written her letter of support to Grayson Kirk in the spirit of her identity as “a private person, a Columbia alumna and a hopefully prospective Columbia parent...rather than as a newspaper reporter who has had a close professional association with the university,” asserted, “Above all, I am writing as an individual of educational experience who will yield to one in my high regard for your institution.” Crist’s greatest apprehensions focused on the apathetic attitudes articulated by Columbia students about the scandal, but her letter also shows that, while the protests seemed age- and knowledge-appropriate, she considered them “on target” only in their directives against the mechanisms of media and government, not against the university.

[N]ot one student seems concerned; all seem ready to accept the notion that a man can teach them the meaning of ‘truth is beauty, beauty truth’ without knowing the values thereof—a notion that there is a complete dissociation of intellect and morality...Certainly the University’s action shows its realization of the moral responsibility of scholars and teachers. But I fear that many undergraduates are going to be concerned about the trustees’ action and will yield to the theory held by cheap and cynical columnists and other ‘opinion molders’ that Mr. Van Doren is being made a ‘scapegoat’...and I am afraid they will feel that the university trustees have joined with the ‘rabid’ press, ‘publicity seeking’ Congressmen and ‘frightened’ television executives in pillorying a noble soul. (Their view of the press, Congressmen and television executives, expressed to me on campus, is, I should hasten to note, fitting for their years and spirit—and how far off, should we ask?)<sup>72</sup>

Kirk responded to Crist by concurring “entirely that the reaction to this situation was symptomatic of a popular attitude which is uncomfortably widespread.” He further assured her that “[o]n the whole, the student reaction was most favorable to the University” and that the

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<sup>71</sup> Janet M. Smith, November 10, 1959, Box 1, Folder 4, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>72</sup> Judith Crist, November 3, 1959, Box 2, Folder 7, *QSL*, CUA.

media accounts of the student protest had been “exaggerated far beyond its actual importance.”<sup>73</sup> But in fact, the most consistent support for Van Doren had always come from his students. In mid-October 1959, as Kirk’s office fielded the first public relations dilemma over Van Doren’s employment, Columbia undergraduates cheered at Van Doren’s comings and goings from Hamilton Hall, chanted “We like Van,” and sported signs that asserted “We’re With Charlie,” most likely for the benefit of reporters—including Judith Crist herself—who turned out to record the university’s atmosphere in light of the congressional investigation developments.<sup>74</sup>

The student protesters’ attitudes toward Van Doren ultimately signified a larger social rift between a youth generation engaged in a modern, fast-paced, experiential world against the discipline of a crawling tradition that held institutional control over them. Even President Kirk had admitted that “there was enough student reaction favorable to Van Doren to be a source of disquiet,” but the university stood steadfastly by the Board’s decision and quickly silenced the protests by refusing to reopen the subject.

### 4.3 COLUMBIA’S RESPONSES

President Kirk’s office had actually begun fielding queries about the future of Charles Van Doren’s employment at the university as early as 9 October 1959, two days after the House subcommittee opened their hearings and the first eager witness, Herbert Stempel, the opponent Van Doren had defeated to begin his quiz show reign, declared under oath that the producers of

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<sup>73</sup> Kirk, Letter to Mrs. Judith Crist, December 16, 1959, Box 2, Folder 7, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>74</sup> Judith Crist was the author of record for the article, “Students Hail Van Doren as He Resumes Teaching,” *New York Herald Tribune*, October 20, 1959.

*Twenty-One* had ordered him to “take a dive” to Van Doren.<sup>75</sup> But in the four weeks between Stempel’s testimony to the House subcommittee and Van Doren’s subpoenaed appearance on 2 November, Columbia received a total of only thirteen letters, postcards, telegrams, and telephone messages concerning the accusations. Eight correspondents demanded swift, immediate action by Columbia’s administration to remove Van Doren; four New Yorkers remained neutral, in the interest of fairness, until Van Doren himself provided answers; and lone letter writer Frank E. Baker, a resident of Tulsa, Oklahoma, who had signed away the rights to a quiz program format to none other than Barry-Enright Productions, Inc., producers of *Twenty-One*, proclaimed Van Doren’s absolute innocence. Throughout the interim period leading to Van Doren’s testimony—as Van Doren’s guiltlessness appeared less and less probable—the Columbia President’s office encouraged correspondents to suspend judgment until the young professor could speak in his own defense.

The administration’s cataloguing treatment of the various letters, postcards, and telegrams received by Columbia after 2 November, however, reveals that the university officially addressed correspondents in one of only two ways: as those who supported the university’s censure of Van Doren or as those who misguidedly supported Van Doren. Such assessments, of course, were subject to interpretations made by Kirk’s administrative office staff. The ambivalent remarks of twenty-one correspondents, who supported neither Van Doren nor Columbia, were sometimes miscataloged and other times ignored. The range of these letters varies widely, from

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<sup>75</sup> Helen S. King, “Memo re: Charles Van Doren,” October 9, 1959; and “Re: Phone call on subject of Charles Van Doren,” October 9, 1959, *Central Files* General Alphabetical Correspondence, Va 1959-1960, Box 296, Folder 1, Columbia University Archives. The *New York Times* closely followed the unfolding story. See especially “Van Doren Taken Off Air by NBC in TV Quiz Inquiry,” October 9, 1959, 1; “Now Silent Quiz Star: Charles Lincoln Van Doren,” October 10, 1959, 10; “Inquiry Says Van Doren Eludes TV-Quiz Subpoena,” October 13, 1959, 1; Seymour Topping, “Van Doren Agrees to Testify,” October 14, 1959, 1; Seymour Topping, “Van Doren Accepts Writ,” October 15, 1959, 1; “Hearings to Resume November 2,” October 16, 1959, 20; and “Van Doren Returns to Columbia Class,” October 20, 1959, 42.

the conflicted introspection of the genuinely disappointed to the intolerable rants of social extremists in search of a captive audience. Included in the miscataloged group are six of the nine high school students in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, who wrote short letters to Van Doren at their teacher's prompting. Mary C. Dunne, the teacher, included a cover letter to Dr. Kirk that expressed disapproval of not only Van Doren but also of commercialism at the expense of education:

After having said, in the last week of October, "I will put my last nickel on Charles Van Doren, because I believe the Van Doren name is incorruptible," I was forced to admit to my students on November second my own lack of character evaluation. How I regretted this admission is echoed by my students' letters which are enclosed. All are written by Juniors. In my opinion, the people involved in this miserable national scandal could benefit much from reading expressions of clear, honest values, expressed by these young people. We are completely disgusted by evidence of such disillusioning rationalizing and patent corruption. We are tired of the miserable low-taste programs dominating the networks, the nauseating advertisements, which, I should imagine, no one could take seriously, the deadly boring commercials...I wish to urge the granting of channel licenses to good, constructive sources...We are all humiliated overwhelmingly at our current position in the eyes of the worlds, especially in the eyes of Russia!<sup>76</sup>

Dunne's students may have written "expressions of clear, honest values" that acknowledged the moral and ethical dilemmas at stake, but more than the scathing condemnation of Van Doren for which they were credited, their letters included variable levels of sympathy. Foremost on their minds was Van Doren's culpability, but they also commonly expressed a wish to see Van Doren rise in the end. John Attmann, for example, wrote:

Dear Mr. Van Doren, You know you were wrong. Your friends know that you made a mistake, and the American people have lost faith in you. What you did was not honest or morally right, and I think you realize this. But why did you resign for [*sic*] Columbia? Your students are still behind you. Don't lose hope or the desire to resist, Mr. Van Doren. As you said on television, you can learn by your mistakes. I hope that you do not let this hurt your future. Such an unfortunate episode should help you mature into a wiser person.

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<sup>76</sup> Mary C. Dunne, November 12, 1959, Box 1, Folder 4, *QSL*, CUA.

I believe that even though the country knows you have erred, they remain behind you on your road to future success.<sup>77</sup>

Sentiments such as Attmann's were common among the ambivalent crowd.

### 4.3.1 Standard Public Replies

On Kirk's behalf, Secretary of the University Richard Herpers sent most people who contacted Columbia one of two form-letter responses that acknowledged their efforts. "Letter 'A'" was sent to Columbia supporters, while "Letter 'B'" was sent to Van Doren supporters.<sup>78</sup> Both form letters reference the volumes of correspondence generated by the Van Doren spectacle, citing that there were regrettably too many for Kirk to respond to on an individual basis. The lines of the single-spaced, two-paragraph "Letter 'A'" expressed Kirk's "acknowledgement and warm thanks" to supportive communicators who "associate [themselves] with the position taken by the University in this unfortunate affair." The letter also included the official statement from the university's administration "that the University followed the only possible course which would be consonant with its deepest obligations to its students and the general public," concluding, "For your understanding and approval, [Dr. Kirk] is grateful."<sup>79</sup> "Letter 'B'" recipients, however, encountered only a seven-line, double-spaced single paragraph with an explanation that each of the "many points of view" transmitted to the university "had been given careful consideration."<sup>80</sup>

Kirk later authorized personalized responses to a number of letters—both ones that supported the university's position and ones that did not—more than a month after Columbia

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<sup>77</sup> John Attmann, November 12, 1959, Box 1, Folder 4, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>78</sup> The correspondence folders in the *Quiz Show Letters* boxes also include one folder of letters deemed unworthy of a reply.

<sup>79</sup> Richard Herpers, *Letter "A,"* November 1959, Box 1, Folder 3, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>80</sup> Richard Herpers, *Letter "B,"* November 1959, Box 1, Folder 6, *QSL*, CUA.

dismissed Van Doren. By the time Kirk responded in late December 1959, the university's official press release position had been well established. In his forty or so personalized responses, Kirk wielded ethics and reason as the primary influences on the Board of Trustees' resolution to sever ties with Van Doren. He also included the university's official synopsis of Van Doren's quiz show involvement—a long chronology of events marshaled into a seamless narrative in which Van Doren was a willing participant—and provided stock answers about the university's position. As far as Columbia was concerned, Van Doren had “embarked upon his television career on a completely dishonest basis”; he had “accepted the offer of money plus the questions and the answers in order to defeat a man who, as far as he knew, was playing the game fairly”; he had “lied to the Grand Jury”; and he had “told ‘the truth’ only when he realized that he was about to be exposed.” Kirk assessed that “it seems a university has an obligation to protect its students from a man whose weaknesses have become so manifest” and “to place before its students men who have something more than the required technical competence to instruct them in subject matter.” Even though Van Doren had consistently been praised as a teacher, Columbia could not overlook his quiz show involvement and the dilemmas it posed for the university.<sup>81</sup>

Disturbed by the number of letters he received in support of Van Doren, Kirk believed that “in a situation such as this people who agree with the action seldom write, whereas those who disagree rush to their typewriters.”<sup>82</sup> Kirk's disdain for Van Doren's supporters and his harsh written words concerning the matter belie the more compassionate sentiments he had

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<sup>81</sup> Grayson Kirk, Letter to Mrs. Charles L. Blackman, December 17, 1959; Letter to Miss Shirley C. Jamar, December 28, 1959; Letter to Mrs. Judith Crist, December 16, 1959; and Letter to Mr. Allen Griffin, December 22, 1959. All personalized letters are located in Box 2, Folder 7, *QSL*, CUA.

<sup>82</sup> See especially, Kirk, Letter to Dr. Daniel Poling, December 8, 1959; and Letter to Mrs. Judith Crist, December 16, 1959, Box 2, Folder 7, *QSL*, CUA.

earlier expressed directly to members of the Van Doren family. Once the Board of Trustees had made its decision, Kirk sent a copy of the official press release to Charles Van Doren by special delivery. (The letter, however, did not arrive at Van Doren's home before several reporters did and broke the news to him first.) The letter was brief and rather impersonal, a copy of the straightforward text that was about to become national news. Kirk closed with, "I regret the necessity of transmitting this action to you, but I am sure you will understand the reasons for it," a small gesture but one that provides a context for the levels of complexities at issue for the university.

#### **4.3.2 Kirk's Personal Letters**

Members of some of New York's most prestigious family empires occupied the seats on Columbia's Board of Trustees and had weighed the consequences of Van Doren's actions and President Eisenhower's reaction for the university. At their regularly scheduled November meeting, which calamitously coincided with Van Doren's appearance before the subcommittee, Columbia University's Board of Trustees had considered three options as they pondered Van Doren's employment status following his congressional statement. Unbeknownst to the media and the public, Van Doren had delivered copies of his statement, along with a letter of explanation and his resignation, to the Board of Trustees via President Kirk's office some three days before his scheduled congressional appearance. The Board members had an entire weekend to consider the best course of action for the university.

"Alternative I: Acceptance of Proffered Resignation" posed those who outspokenly condemned Van Doren's actions against those who believed he had "led a somewhat sheltered life." Those in favor of extending to Van Doren a second chance had to be willing to believe he

was a naïve victim who had been led astray by menacing influences. From this perspective, acceptance of Van Doren's resignation was another form of punishment, for "his dismissal [would] *ruin* his life because he [would] not be able thereafter to resume a teaching career in *any* institution of higher learning."<sup>83</sup>

"Alternative II: Leave of absence without pay for the remainder of the Academic Year" merely stated, "For this alternative, the arguments as given above are substantially the same but in reverse order." While the administration considered a temporary reprimand as a feasible option, the option itself is situated as a lesser alternative, a secondary consideration. The unspoken question posed by Alternative II was the Board's third option: *if the Board voted to give Van Doren another chance, should they do so immediately or following a censorial sentence?* The Board's final decision to dismiss Van Doren unilaterally from service indicated that the membership's majority thought they could not "in good conscience allow a man with such a record to [stand] in front of its students." At that point, Alternative II was rendered moot.<sup>84</sup>

Personal correspondence between President Kirk and Trustee Emeritus Arthur Hays Sulzberger, owner of the *New York Times*, unravels the most significant complications Columbia encountered when reaching its decision. In a letter marked "PERSONAL and CONFIDENTIAL," Sulzberger—with an eye attuned to the cycles of news stories—initially cautioned Kirk and the Board of Trustees to be patient until they had sufficient time to gauge public opinion on the matter:

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<sup>83</sup> Both alternatives, with emphases in the original, were mimeographed, hand-dated "11-2-59," and titled "Van Doren Procedure," *Central Files* General Alphabetical Correspondence, Va 1959-1960, Box 296, Folder 1, Columbia University Archives.

<sup>84</sup> Columbia University Board of Trustees, "Van Doren Procedure," *Central Files* General Alphabetical Correspondence, Va 1959-1960, Box 296, Folder 1, Columbia University Archives.

I have only one thought in connection with the Van Doren matter and that is that it might be wiser for the Trustees not to take—or certainly not to announce—the action they plan until the public has had a chance to react to the testimony he will give before the Senate [*sic*] Committee on Monday (which will appear in Tuesday morning's papers). It would seem to me that this might be wiser, particularly in view of the fact that the District Attorney is now a member of our Board. It's an unpleasant situation and I don't envy you. Cheerio!<sup>85</sup>

In a response to Sulzberger, informing him of the Board's decision, Kirk wrote:

After careful review and discussion of the problem, the sentiment for acceptance of Van Doren's resignation was overwhelming. This was what I had recommended to the board. I then read them your letter suggesting the desirability of delay in announcing the decision. This was fully discussed but the weight of opinion was in favor of prompt action. On examination, all the available alternatives seemed to be either undesirable or impracticable. Since Monday we have, of course, received a heavy mail—about five hundred letters to date. All but a very few are against the university. I had expected this because people who approve a course seldom write to say so. But I had thought the letters would show a little more understanding than they do. Frankly, I am a little saddened by the fact that almost none indicates any realization that a moral issue is involved. The university, on the contrary, is charged with moral turpitude in punishing a fine young man who, having made a little mistake, then made a clean breast of the whole affair, and is now being punished because he told the truth. Student attitudes seem equally devoid of any moral sense. Perhaps all this is a sad commentary on the moral climate of our time...Perhaps the answer can be found in the fact that about three-fourths of these letters are from women, chiefly housewives. Curiously enough, the majority of the men who condemn us, and in scathing terms, are Protestant Ministers. It's all very confusing. Later on, when the dust settles, I will send a copy of a few sample letters to the Trustees for their edification.<sup>86</sup>

In his follow-up to Kirk's explanation about the Trustees' decision-making process, Sulzberger again revealed the definitive reason why Columbia could not keep Van Doren on its faculty:

I think if I'd been present at the meeting and had had a vote, I would have voted the way the trustees did. There was no alternative. The fact that [New York County District Attorney Frank] Hogan was a member weighed a little too much in my original thinking, I'm afraid.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Arthur H. Sulzberger, October 31, 1959, *Central Files* Box 407, Folder 11, Columbia University Archives.

<sup>86</sup> Grayson Kirk, Letter to Arthur Sulzberger, November 7, 1959, *Central Files* Box 407, Folder 11, Columbia University Archives.

<sup>87</sup> Arthur H. Sulzberger, November 10, 1959, *Central Files* Box 407, Folder 11, Columbia University Archives.

Columbia was pinned behind the fact that the only criminal offense perpetrated by Van Doren was his untruthful testimony to the New York County grand jury during their earlier investigation of quiz show practices in 1958, a full year before Congress opened its inquiry.<sup>88</sup> Columbia Economics professor Louis B. Hacker had presided as grand jury foreman, dedicating nine months of his one-year sabbatical from the university to the quiz show investigation.<sup>89</sup> Further, District Attorney Frank Hogan, an appointed Columbia alumni representative to the university's Board of Trustees, had carefully counseled each witness that they would not—and could not—be prosecuted for their participation in the quiz show orchestrations because it was not a crime. Approximately 100 of 150 witnesses did not heed Hogan's advice, however, and instead denied their involvement when called to the stand. Charles Van Doren had been one of them. His disregard for truth in front of his Columbia peers and his lack of respect for a Trustee—not to mention the law—made Van Doren's affiliation with Columbia untenable.

Kirk's public and private tones are drastic in their variations. When Geraldine Van Doren, Charles's wife, wrote to the university president the day after the press release, Kirk quickly responded:

Although it was not possible for me to send your husband the message which I know he hoped he might receive, I do want you to know that I read your brave and moving letter with the greatest care and interest. Charles is fortunate to have a wife who could, and would, say such things about her husband. I am sure you will give him the strength he will need in the difficult days ahead. A nightmarish chapter in his life—and yours—is over. You are both young, and there are many long years ahead for you. I hope they will be happy ones.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> The New York County District Attorney's Office conducted the initial investigation of quiz show fraud in 1958. After hearing testimony from some 200 participants, the grand jury compiled a 1,200-page presentment. Judge Mitchell Schweitzer unceremoniously sealed that presentment, however, and its contents were never disclosed. The 1959 House Special Subcommittee investigation heavily relied on the earlier efforts of District Attorney Frank Hogan and Assistant District Attorney Joseph Stone.

<sup>89</sup> As reported in "A Tawdry Hoax," *Newsweek*, June 22, 1959, 46.

<sup>90</sup> Grayson Kirk, Letter to Mrs. Charles Van Doren, November 3, 1959, *Central Files* General Alphabetical Correspondence, Va 1959-1960, Box 296, Folder 1, Columbia University Archives.

Kirk's tone hardly sounds like the hired administrator who staunchly recited the university's party line on the moral issues of honesty and integrity to the press and to private citizens alike. Kirk followed his letter to Mrs. Van Doren with a letter to the recently retired Mark Van Doren, living in Connecticut.

"I wonder if you realize how much you have been in the minds of your Morningside friends during these past painful days," begins Kirk's letter of 4 November. Calling the previous week the "saddest and most difficult week of [his] ten years in university administration," Kirk assured the elder Van Doren that no one on the Board of Trustees—and certainly not himself—wanted the scandal to lead to its inevitable outcome. "A University president can have no more heavy burdens than ones which force him to put aside considerations of a cherished friendship for what his judgment tells him is his duty to the institution he has been asked to serve."<sup>91</sup>

Kirk's early discussions are initial, private reflections on the effects of the scandal upon the Columbia community as a whole. His public attitude toward Van Doren's employment was unwavering, however. In his administrative role, Kirk dutifully and consistently represented his institution to a national audience. In his role as an advisor, colleague, and friend to a specific, like-minded community, Kirk engaged more directly in open discussion. He confided to Judith Crist that he "was distressed over the view that no matter what one has done, a confession should bring complete absolution. I was also distressed by the argument that no one should be entitled to pass judgment upon Van Doren unless the person passing the judgment was himself in every way unblemished and had been so throughout his entire life. Both of these arguments would, if carried to their extremes, destroy all social organization."<sup>92</sup> By contrast, Kirk considered the

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<sup>91</sup> Grayson Kirk, Letter to Mark Van Doren, November 4, 1959, *Central Files* Box 454, Folder 21, Columbia University Archives.

<sup>92</sup> Kirk, Letter to Mrs. Judith Crist, December 16, 1959, Box 2, Folder 7, *QSL*, CUA.

university's decision to be the most logical outcome at which the prestigious institution's overseers could arrive, one that upheld their mission to instill knowledge and tradition in their students and to build their moral characters. Further, he rationalized that a silent majority was behind him.

#### 4.4 CONCLUSION

The public response to Columbia University's decision to accept Charles Van Doren's resignation was not centrally orchestrated, but it did have national reverberations. A total of 734 people—women, men, children, senior citizens, wealthy, poor, comfortably middle class, well-educated, uneducated, Republican, and Democrat—from across the entire wide expanse of the United States felt directly and indirectly affected in negative ways by Van Doren's dismissal from Columbia. They either pleaded for a second chance for Van Doren or condemned what they perceived to be Columbia administration's hasty and harsh judgment of him. Each found it necessary to voice a personal opinion to the university's administrators, regardless of whether or not they believed doing so would influence the Trustees' decision.

For these Charles Van Doren supporters, there was no unique "party line" expressed in every letter, telegram, phone call, and postcard to Columbia. Rather, a patchwork of reasons why he merited a second chance weaved in and out of the correspondence. Van Doren's remorseful confession inspired immeasurable numbers of spectators to look more closely at the things they truly valued and to take steps to secure those valuables that mattered most.

The university's decision to relieve Van Doren of his duties incited and inspired responses from across the campus as well as from across the country. While most of the nation's

citizens had come to know Van Doren tangentially through his celebrity, several Columbia students and dozens of New York City residents had come to know him personally as a teacher, neighbor, student, and friend. The Columbia students, in particular, would be singled out for their support of Van Doren and vilified in the media. They would be accused publicly—by Hans J. Morgenthau—of having clouded moral judgment and privately—by Arthur Hays Sulzberger—of being immature. But these same students would turn out to be the older members of the 1960s civil rights and anti-war generation, lacking in neither moral judgment nor maturity, and some would see Charles Van Doren on their Columbia campus again, as the guest speaker at the fortieth reunion of the Class of 1959. They remained, in many ways, his biggest supporters.

Since Charles Van Doren's rise to national fame in February 1957, he had come to represent many different things to many different people. Media historians have yet to look closely at Van Doren's public respondents, perhaps because they were so effectively silenced in later media commentaries that constructed the scandal *for* the public. As a remedy, this chapter has privileged audience reception of the scandal, as it manifested in Van Doren's resignation from Columbia, and lets the public speak for itself. People on all sides of every issue freely offered commentary through their detailed messages to university administrators. As the communications throughout this chapter have shown, Van Doren—and his fate—were merely symbols for much larger social concerns on the minds of Americans at the end of the 1950s.

## 5.0 “SAY IT AIN’T SO”:

### UNMASKING THE CULTURAL MEMORY OF CHARLES VAN DOREN

[V]alues are not static, not bequeathed to us willy-nilly by the accidents of history... Rather, they are struggled over and contested every day on innumerable fronts and in countless arenas. What we choose to remember about the past, where we begin and end our retrospective accounts, and who we include and exclude from them—these do a lot to determine how we live and what decisions we make in the present.<sup>1</sup>

Myths are stories that are so true they can never happen.<sup>2</sup>

In his 2 November 1959 statement to the U.S. House of Representatives Special Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight, Charles Van Doren began, “I would give almost anything I have to reverse the course of my life in the last 3 years. I cannot take back one word or action; the past does not change for anyone.”<sup>3</sup> While the past cannot be relived or re-experienced in the exact ways ever again, the past does exist in memory beyond its original occurrence and can, in fact, be altered—via the practices of remembering and its counterpart, forgetting—to suit the agenda of the modern history-teller(s).<sup>4</sup> The 1959 quiz show scandal—and most specifically, Charles

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<sup>1</sup> George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Van Doren, “The Biggest Challenge of All,” *Columbia College Today* vol. 26, no. 1, September 1999, 30-31, Columbia University Archives.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, *Investigation of Television Quiz Shows, Hearings*, 86th Congress, 1st Session, 1959, *Special Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight of the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), hereafter cited as *Hearings*, 624.

<sup>4</sup> Marita Sturken recognized “remembering” and “forgetting” as “highly organized and strategic” “co-constitutive processes; each is essential to the other’s existence” in *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic,*

Van Doren's involvement—was a complex creation of specific historical conditions, including (but not limited to) television industry practices in a larger Cold War cultural climate, the role of gender in capitalist economics, the practices of print media in promoting popular culture, and audience members' understandings of citizenship, education, the entertainment industry, free-market enterprise, human decency, and truth. In the mediated moral panic that followed Van Doren's congressional testimony in November 1959, editorialists, journalists, and commentators captured these tensions that surrounded the scandal, threading their mass-distributed comments into the fabric of cultural memory, but in the process, Charles Van Doren was transformed into the emblematic national scapegoat as easily as he had been the emblematic national hero. By turning the focus of attention in mass media discourses to an individual's ethics, morals, and punishments, the accountability of social institutions—particularly of mass media—was lost. As Van Doren sagely predicted in his congressional statement, the only lingering truth about the scandal is that he became its “principal symbol.”<sup>5</sup>

Mass media memories of the 1959 quiz show scandal have been reintroduced at moments when Charles Van Doren's “personal tragedy” could be used as a cautionary tale and when the quiz show scandal required reference as an example of similarity or difference in evolving television industry and social environments: *Now is like then* was the underlying theme of Robert Redford's 1994 film *Quiz Show*, whereas, conversely, *Now is not like then* was the prioritized message by broadcasters and print media in the cases of quiz show resurgence in the 1970s and again at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In both Now-Then frameworks, the past is

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*and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1-17. Further, Barbie Zelizer observed that “Remembering to forget creates numerous potholes in the journey between past and present. Uncertain of where one memory ends and another begins, we blur events with the tools by which we remember them. As scholar Andreas Huyssen has aptly observed, ‘the simply remembered past may turn into mythic memory..., a stumbling block to the needs of the present rather than an opening in the continuum of history’” in *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 202.

<sup>5</sup> *Hearings*, 624.

relevant to the present, but the 1950s past is necessarily removed from its original context and its original cultural, political, and social issues, to fit the context of a conditionally different present.

The linkages between “sanctioned” history, collective and cultural memory, and mass media—as well as the ramifications that stem from their interrelated associations—have been ponderously analyzed by a number of scholars across multiple academic disciplines, including art, cultural studies, history, literary theory, media studies, and sociology.<sup>6</sup> As a whole, cultural memory scholarship has considered the ways in which historical narratives are reconfigured over time, in correlation with larger identity-building projects, wherein narrative changes are indications not only of authorized (re)conceptualizations of “belonging” in a contemporary environment but also of ongoing generational shifts in the interpretation and relevance of the narrative, resulting from changes in cultural, political, and social climates. Barbie Zelizer invoked Maurice Halbwachs in her assertion that “memory is accomplished not in one’s own gray matter but via a shared consciousness that molds it to the agendas of those invoking it in the present.”<sup>7</sup> Dominant narratives are often stretched to reframe a collective past in socially relevant terms, while still maintaining a consistent message of identity and purpose.

The distinctions between history and collective and cultural memory are important. As Peter Novick theorized:

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<sup>6</sup> Marita Sturken, in particular, defines “history” as “a narrative that has in some way been sanctioned or valorized by institutional frameworks or publishing enterprises,” *Tangled Memories*, 4. For dynamic considerations of collective and cultural memory, see Lipsitz, *Time Passages*; Sturken, *Tangled Memories*; and Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*; as well as Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000); Laura Hein and Mark Selden, eds. *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2000); Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 3.

To understand something historically is to be aware of its complexity, to have sufficient detachment to see it from multiple perspectives, to accept the ambiguities, including moral ambiguities of protagonists' motives and behavior. Collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes.<sup>8</sup>

When simplified, mythic accounts of a collective history are popularized, “told through popular culture, the media, public images, and public memorials,” they become cultural memories because they are publicly preserved—whether in quilts or on printed pages and in film or through obelisks in green fields—and ritualized through their public consumption.<sup>9</sup> Marita Sturken maintains that, “Memory is crucial to the understanding of a culture precisely because it indicates collective desires, needs, and self-definitions.” As she explains:

The collective remembering of a specific culture can often appear similar to the memory of an individual—it provides cultural identity and gives a sense of importance to the past. Yet the process of cultural memory is bound up in complex political stakes and meanings. It both defines a culture and is the means by which its divisions and conflicting agendas are revealed.<sup>10</sup>

The ways in which historical events are memorialized, remembered, and transmitted through narratives about a collective past reveals a lot about a society: its values, its aspirations and fears, its domestic and international identities and concerns. George Lipsitz claimed that the contemporary tales we tell about “collective history” and “national identity” are the very fronts on which struggles to determine the shape and content of history and identity, as well as the values prescribable to each, take place in the present.<sup>11</sup> The omissions are as crucial as the inclusions because with remembering comes also a “forgetting” of oppositional viewpoints and conflicting narratives. Sturken asserts, “memory is a narrative rather than a replica of an

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 3-4. Also quoted in Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, 41.

<sup>9</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 21-36.

experience that can be retrieved and relived...What we remember is highly selective, and how we retrieve it says as much about desire and denial as it does about remembrance.”<sup>12</sup> Zellizer further indicates:

Collective memories allow for the fabrication, rearrangement, elaboration, and omission of details about the past, often pushing aside accuracy and authenticity so as to accommodate broader issues of identity formation, power and authority, and political affiliation. Memories in this view become not only the simplest act of recall but social, cultural, and political action at its broadest level.<sup>13</sup>

Everyone has a stake in what gets said to whom, through what channel, and to what effect.<sup>14</sup>

Following Sturken’s claim that “We need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present,”<sup>15</sup> this chapter amplifies the evolving significance of our cultural memory about Charles Van Doren and the 1959 quiz show scandal, beginning with dissecting the ways in which members of mass media and the federal government influenced the shape of the media discourses surrounding the original events. Beyond the initial containment of the quiz show narrative by broadcasters and the federal government for economic and public image reasons, this chapter examines when and why the quiz show scandal—and Charles Van Doren—resurface in mass media since 1959. When examining media discourses that revive the scandal, three instances stand out in particular. The resurgence of television game shows in the 1970s, a trend that continued into the early 1980s, provoked comparisons and contrasts of the events of 1959; the theatrical release of Robert Redford’s 1994 Academy Award–nominated film *Quiz Show* retold a story specifically about Van Doren and the television scandals; and the runaway success of *Who Wants to Be a*

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<sup>12</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Zellizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Propaganda researcher Harold Lasswell developed his landmark communication model: “who says what to whom, through what channel and to what effect?” in 1948.

<sup>15</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 2.

*Millionaire?* in 1999, which propelled primetime quiz-based game shows to new heights throughout the 2000s, drew attention once again to the differences between knowledge and information through references to a 1950s past. In all three instances, Charles Van Doren's name was located at the center of the retelling, but the dominant narrative about Charles Van Doren and the 1959 television quiz show scandal has become a myth invoked at particular moments in history to accommodate the memory-teller's present and to justify their expectations for the future.<sup>16</sup>

### 5.1 DON'T KILL THE MESSENGER: CONTAINING THE NARRATIVE, 1959

Long before Charles Van Doren testified at the 1959 congressional investigation of quiz show practices, it was clear to a vast number of Americans that the television industry needed significant changes and that the quiz shows—which had been particularly problematic even in the days of radio—were a locus for capitalist greed at its manipulative worst.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, from 1941's *Pot o' Gold* (starring Jimmy Stewart and Paulette Goddard)<sup>18</sup> and the 1950 release of Richard Whorf's *Champagne for Caesar* (starring Ronald Colman and Celeste Holm)<sup>19</sup> to the publication of dime novel mass-market paperbacks, such as *Giveaway* (Bantam Books, 1955;

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<sup>16</sup> I would be remiss, however, if I did not acknowledge that this dissertation, in historically discussing events of the 1950s through the 2000s, is also struggling with and contesting its own immediate concerns by situating the historiographical discourse in “a story of a particular kind.” See Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 66.

<sup>17</sup> For an eye-opening look at the long history of quiz show broadcasting problems, see Jason Mittell, “Before the Scandals—Genre Historiography and the Cultural History of the Quiz Show” and “Conclusion: Some Reflections on Reality Television,” in *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29-55, 196-201.

<sup>18</sup> *Pot o' Gold*, Dir. George Marshall (James Roosevelt Productions, 1941).

<sup>19</sup> *Champagne for Caesar*, Dir. Richard Whorf (Cardinal Pictures, United Artists, 1950).

Random House, 1954)<sup>20</sup> and the phenomenally timed August 1958 hardcover release of *The Hot Half Hour*, “A lightning-fast, hilarious novel of Madison Avenue and the big-time TV giveaways,”<sup>21</sup> by Robert L. Foreman, executive vice president of Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn (BBDO), the ad agency that was “onetime cicerone of both ‘The \$64,000 Question’ and ‘Challenge,’”<sup>22</sup> filmmakers and book publishers had made corrupt quiz shows a relatively common narrative premise throughout popular culture. And for just cause.

In late 1956, before Charles Van Doren’s celebrity as a contestant on *Twenty-One* gained momentum, professional dancer Dale Logue had accused *The Big Surprise* producers of purposefully removing her from the program by asking her the exact question she had missed during a pre-show warm-up session. She filed a lawsuit for \$103,000 in owed “appearance fees,” equating her contestant role to a contracted theatrical performance.<sup>23</sup> In print, Dan Wakefield had characterized the “big cheat of the big payoff TV quiz shows” in *The Nation* in March 1957: “Certainly part of their appeal must lie in the fact that they provide one of the last spectacles of risk in our increasingly ‘canned’ and ‘packaged’ society. But, ironically enough, the producers of the programs have cut away the possibilities of risk to the bare minimum of whether or not the

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<sup>20</sup> Steve Fisher, *Giveaway* (New York: Bantam Books, 1955; Random House edition published 1954). Other mass-market paperbacks with quiz show themes include John Kenneth, *The Big Question* (New York: Ace Publishers, 1960) and James Sagebiel, *The Brain Buyers* (Evanston, Ill.: Regency Books, 1961). All three paperbacks cited here are part of the collection at the Ray & Pat Browne Library for Popular Culture Studies, Bowling Green State University.

<sup>21</sup> Robert L. Foreman, *The Hot Half Hour* (New York: Criterion Books, 1958). This description was printed at the top of the dust jacket on the 1958 hardcover edition. (Image available:

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/images/B0007EMEXK/ref=dp\\_image\\_0?ie=UTF8&n=283155&s=books](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/images/B0007EMEXK/ref=dp_image_0?ie=UTF8&n=283155&s=books))

<sup>22</sup> The release of Foreman’s book was mentioned in a column announcing the demise of *The \$64,000 Challenge*. “\$64,000 Answer,” *Newsweek*, September 22, 1958, 71. “Among the assorted and rather familiar characters who infest Foreman’s tale are contestants who are dumped by being thrown ‘a real curve of a question, specially prepared,’ others who panic producers when they draw a blank long before the show’s ‘plot’ can dispense with them, plus a large assortment of the kind of crackpots and would-be double dealers now commonplace in the headlines. But to those who claim that Foreman’s jerry-built fiction bears a striking resemblance to behind-the-scenes facts at ‘The \$64,000 Question,’ the author replies emphatically: ‘Nonsense. What it says in the front of the book—all characters and incidents in this book are fictitious—is absolutely true.’”

<sup>23</sup> David Aldrich, “Are TV Quiz Shows Fixed?,” *Look*, August 20, 1957, 45-47. For additional information about Logue’s lawsuit, see also “Federal Trade Commission Eyeing Contestant Rules of TV ‘Big Surprise,’” *Variety*, January 16, 1957, 1.

contestant knows the answer.”<sup>24</sup> In April 1957, *Time* asked “Are the quiz shows rigged?”<sup>25</sup> And Robert Louis Shayon had criticized the programs in *Saturday Review*, calling them pure farce in his June 1957 condemnation of Van Doren, while a growing number of esteemed television critics—the loudest of whom was Harriet Van Horne of the *New York World-Telegram and Sun*—wrote about them as sideshow attractions.<sup>26</sup> There had never been a secret about quiz show producers’ contestant controls; many columnists and viewers cynically suspected something as blatant as the producers giving the contestants the questions and answers in advance.

Throughout October 1959, editorials in national magazines were particularly critical of the television industry’s practices as they manifested in the quiz shows. The editor of *The Reporter* commented, “the very logic of these programs and of the competition among them—their incessant pursuit of ever more interesting characters who could answer ever more improbable questions, the increasing urgency of the need for more drama, more human interest, more suspense, more amusement—bred a desperation that led inevitably to self-exposure and self-defeat.”<sup>27</sup> A writer for the *New Yorker* encapsulated the Cold War cultural significance that had been attached to the quiz shows, in that “The appeal of the programs, with the rising challenge of Soviet brain power as a backdrop, was ultimately patriotic; the contestants were selected to be a cross-section of our nation just as deliberately as the G.I.s in a war movie are.”<sup>28</sup>

The producers had, in effect, crafted stories of success—however temporary—that implicated

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<sup>24</sup> Dan Wakefield, “The Fabulous Sweat Box,” *Nation*, March 30, 1957, 272.

<sup>25</sup> “The \$60 Million Question,” *Time*, April 22, 1957, 78.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Louis Shayon, “What Would You Do?,” *Saturday Review*, June 8, 1957, 25. Harriet Van Horne’s newspaper column comments were often reprinted in national magazines. See, for example, “Question for TV Quiz—Who Has the Answers?,” *U.S. News & World Report*, September 5, 1958, 8; and “A Ray of Hope,” *Reporter*, September 18, 1958, 2-4. In addition to references to “ringmasters,” specific mentions of Barnum & Bailey Circus are made in Sister Mary Ransom, “National Folly,” *America*, November 21, 1959, 223-24; and Dalton Trumbo, “Hail, Blithe Spirit!,” *Nation*, October 24, 1959, 243-46.

<sup>27</sup> “Quizlings,” *Reporter*, October 29, 1959, 2.

<sup>28</sup> “The Talk of the Town: News and Comments,” *New Yorker*, October 24, 1959, 33-34.

diverse representatives of the national population. Women, immigrants, children, the elderly, people of color, members of multiple religions, the generally downtrodden and the well-off alike—the producers had made all of them intrepid protagonists in winding narratives of willful victory. As the *New Yorker* summarized, “And we sat there, like a nation of suckers, for years. It’s marvelous how long it went on, considering the number of normal Americans who had to be corrupted to keep the cameras whirring. In all this multitude, not one snag, not one audible bleat, not one righteous refusal that made the news.”<sup>29</sup> Even though the underlying economic purpose was deeply cemented in crass capitalism, there was arguably some artistry in the narratives and story arcs crafted by the quiz show producers. They casted their shows as carefully as any other, finding just the right characters with whom the audience would identify, and they proved amply capable of scripting victory and defeat, creating the kind of nail-biting drama that drew viewers to their television sets.

In admonishing the editorialists who claimed the public had lost its innocence in the television quiz show affair, Dalton Trumbo, a screenwriter casualty of the McCarthy blacklist, showed the complications expressed in the public’s apathy toward the revelations of scandal.

By now it no longer matters whether we believe, only that we acquiesce. And we do acquiesce. We expect the news to be slanted; we expect the statesman to lie; we expect the politician to make deals; we expect the advertisement to be false; we expect the repairman to cheat us; we expect the fight to be fixed; we expect men to place self-interest above any conceivable social end.

And when our expectations are fulfilled—when the fraud is finally revealed—we are never surprised and rarely angry. Publicly and before the children, we deplore it. Privately, we admire its audacity, and marvel that it went undetected for so long. We sharpen our wits on its details (but never its cause) and are wiser citizens for what it has taught us.

The unlucky young men of TV, whose downfall we shall applaud as all good Philistines must, haven’t really harmed us. They haven’t violated our innocence. We had no innocence. We never did believe.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Trumbo, “Hail, Blithe Spirit!,” 246.

In most accounts, the participants—and the audience alike—were still connected as a group and not separated as individuals. The “problem” remained at social and cultural levels. The editor of *Christian Century*, for instance, highlighted the positive social effects that might come from the scandal, in that “it may be that the American public needed just such a jolt to stir once more its recognition that a vast area of human activity exists where ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ not ‘legal’ and ‘illegal,’ labels are what count.”<sup>31</sup> Discursively, the quiz show scandal was a national problem that affected all citizens.

The networks’ disavowals of knowledge were received as generally meritless and did nothing to alleviate the situation for broadcasters, who were under scrutiny from the House subcommittee, the FCC, the U.S. Attorney General, and critics to fix their problems. In the industry’s favor, however, was the fact that the “attitudes of viewers toward TV as a whole had been affected surprisingly little by the quiz blowup,” according to an October 1959 survey conducted by *Broadcasting*.<sup>32</sup> While the public may have remained resignedly conflicted, television advertising sponsors were poised to step in and assume all program control for their “self-protection,” even as increased federal regulations loomed on the horizon if satisfactory changes in program content were not reasonably instituted.<sup>33</sup> FCC Chairman John C. Doerfer had warned that “If the industry does not successfully survive...it has no one to blame but itself,”<sup>34</sup> and a bolded subheading in *Business Week* cautioned its executive readership that “Scandals may bring federal licensing of networks, more scrutiny of program content, and a new

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<sup>31</sup> “Quiz Show Debacle May Not Be All Loss,” *Christian Century*, October 21, 1959, 1205-1206.

<sup>32</sup> “Quiz Probe May Change TV,” *Business Week*, November 7, 1959, 29.

<sup>33</sup> William M. Blair, “Pit Farmer Against City Slicker, Ad Man Told TV Quiz Producer,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1959, 1, 83. Letters, memos, and other documents that confirmed the direct involvement of Charles Revson, along with other Revlon executives, in the decision-making enforced by producers of *The \$64,000 Question/Challenge* were presented as evidence at the congressional hearing and admitted to the official record, which showed that the sponsors—and their ad agencies—could not be trusted, either.

<sup>34</sup> “On the Brink?,” *Time*, November 30, 1959, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,825999,00.html>.

drive against misleading commercials.”<sup>35</sup> Whereas this was welcomed news to the liberal critics who demanded more culturally worthwhile television program content and less advertising, it was a nightmare for industry executives and their sponsors who saw regulation in the way of their profits. “Of all the possible consequences of the uproar, two things worry the industry most: (1) the threat of more federal control and (2) the effect on TV as an advertising medium,” reported *Business Week*. In response to the pending threats, CBS President Frank Stanton was quoted in *Time* as saying, “Something has to be done before it’s done to us.”<sup>36</sup>

To ensure that broadcasters would continue to determine their own business affairs unimpeded, television industry executives launched a public relations offensive to contain the media narrative that was developing in national magazines and newspapers. Their tactics included high-profile publicity about their newly implemented industry-wide “standards and safeguards” and a few optimum red herrings that diverted focus from the networks’ culpability by putting Charles Van Doren, print media, and the federal government directly on the defensive. As the two biggest networks began to maneuver, like their smaller competition at ABC had, toward more Hollywood-produced filmed programming and away from New York-based live productions for economic reasons, NBC and CBS executives understood that “the economic development, political goals, and regulatory stability of the nascent industry required cooperation” between networks.<sup>37</sup> They collectively rallied around a specific narrative about the quiz shows and introduced a set of self-determined industry curbs they claimed would rectify future reoccurrences.

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<sup>35</sup> “Quiz Probe May Change TV,” 28.

<sup>36</sup> “On the Brink?”

<sup>37</sup> Michael J. Socolow, “‘Always in Friendly Competition’: NBC and CBS in the First Decade of National Broadcasting,” in *NBC: America’s Network*, ed. Michele Hilmes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 25.

Broadcasters first positioned the questionable quiz show “irregularities,” as they came to be called in official discourses, as old news. The networks had removed the “problem” producers and their rigged shows from the airwaves the previous year. “Fixing” was not currently taking place, and CBS and NBC had each implemented their own measures to ensure fixing could not continue. CBS removed all quiz shows from its programming schedule and began to label non-spontaneous production decisions with disclaimers to project a commitment to transparency, while NBC hired ex-FBI agents who secretly infiltrated the quiz shows NBC defiantly refused to cancel. Surely, the former G-men could reliably supervise them, testified Bob Kintner before Congress. “To head off any drastic Government restrictions on TV programming, the networks have begun to police themselves more carefully,” became a standard inclusion in printed reports of the scandal fallout throughout November and December 1959.<sup>38</sup>

Self-regulation was actually the corrective method preferred by Doerfer’s FCC, which had no true interest in regulating broadcasters, as well as Earl Kintner (no relation to NBC’s Bob Kintner) of the Federal Trade Commission, which shared limited oversight powers of television advertisements. Even President Eisenhower said in a 4 November 1959 news conference, every business “should remember that self-discipline is the thing that will keep free government working on and on through the centuries to come.”<sup>39</sup> *Newsweek* reported, “In the eyes of most observers, the suggestion that the networks be allowed to police their own bailiwick seems infinitely preferable to restrictive laws passed to regularize their operations,” despite the fact

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<sup>38</sup> “Television...America’s Fallen Idol?,” *Senior Scholastic*, November 16, 1959, 40.

<sup>39</sup> “News and Entertainment Industries Have ‘A Terrific Responsibility,’” *U.S. News & World Report*, November 16, 1959, 45.

that, as several critics had noted throughout October and November 1959, the networks had proven incapable or unwilling to do so.<sup>40</sup>

CBS, in particular, promoted an internal restructuring of the industry that promised to “rescue” advertisers in that it put all accountability squarely on the networks—by giving the networks complete authority over all aspects of programming, from the production stages. The Stanton Plan, as it was named in print media, called for the dismantling of all corporate-sponsored programming in favor of the “magazine concept,” in which companies would be limited to purchasing a 30-second or 1-minute “insertion” to be aired, among other 30-second and 1-minute commercial spots, between programs.<sup>41</sup> The fact that the Stanton Plan gave networks exclusive power over all television content was downplayed, however, in favor of claims that the restructuring provided economic fairness to smaller businesses who could not compete with the budgets of big sponsors.

With heavily publicized support from such corporate executives as Philip Courtney, president of Coty, Inc. (Revlon’s competitor) and from the FCC, where Doerfer insisted that “shows that lure viewers unethically are using unfair means to outdo the sponsor’s commercial competitors,”<sup>42</sup> the networks also used their own broadcast news journalists to promote the idea that “sponsors should be forced to keep their hands off the production of a TV show and just pay the bills—just as newspaper and magazine advertisers pay for their ‘ads’ without controlling the editorial content of the publication.”<sup>43</sup> Mike Wallace became the mouthpiece for the “widespread argument” among industry insiders that “The networks must have the guts to stand up and say to

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<sup>40</sup> “TV’s Big Question: What is Morality?,” *Newsweek*, October 26, 1959, 71. See also “Quiz Probe May Change TV” for a discussion of the FCC’s unwillingness to step in.

<sup>41</sup> “Quiz Probe May Change TV,” 29-30.

<sup>42</sup> “On the Brink?”

<sup>43</sup> “Television...America’s Fallen Idol?,” 41.

the sponsor, 'I'll run my network; you sell your products. If you want to use us, O.K., but on our terms.'"<sup>44</sup> *Business Week* soothed the egos of corporate businessmen and acknowledged the reality that it was:

naïve to think advertisers won't always exert some control over programs...Even if the magazine idea becomes widespread, it's doubtful that advertisers would stand aside completely from programming. Any network program—and the commercials it carries—is likely to be competing with a program on each of the other two networks for an audience. The advertiser is intensely concerned with sponsoring a program that will win viewers away from rival shows, so as to get the most for his money. The only way to tell how well he is doing is through rating services.<sup>45</sup>

Popularity and audience viewership would remain the deciding economic factors in a commercially based broadcasting system.

As the united networks' projected clean-up plan circulated through mass media, broadcasters appeared to be the only group with a clear-cut method to implement. Congress, unable to prove the extent of network and sponsor involvement and unable to enforce any punishment, could only suggest that policy changes be instituted to protect public interest better in the future. Beyond approving the realignment of power relationships among television industry parties, Bob Kintner suggested to the House subcommittee that Congress should pass legislation to make the rigging of quiz shows punishable so that broadcast executives would have concrete precedent to enforce. As it was currently, Kintner claimed, the networks' hands were tied because there was nothing for them to declare "wrong." No one had, in fact, broken any law, and it was not up to the networks to control program content. They were simply the messengers who delivered sponsored programs to stations. By claiming they were just "messengers," broadcast executives further refocused attention from the networks to the producers and

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<sup>44</sup> "The Ultimate Responsibility," *Time*, November 16, 1959, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,811468,00.html>.

<sup>45</sup> "Quiz Probe May Change TV," 29-30.

contestants—the actors who had performed the deceptions. Without a significant immediate resolution to report on, popular print media discourses about the scandal became treatises on responsibility, with attention focused on a single issue: *who was accountable—and to whom?*

Charles Van Doren's October 1959 telegram to the House subcommittee would be the pivotal catalyst that turned media discourses toward individual accountability, and it is of great significance that the telegram was not sent of Van Doren's free will but rather was extracted from him as part of his legally binding contractual obligation to the network.<sup>46</sup> NBC—and the entire television industry—needed Van Doren to be a very public distraction that would compete with critical discourses about their business practices and industry infrastructure while they formulated superficial fixes to their broadcasting woes. It proved to be an effective strategy, as the telegram put the House subcommittee members in the position of forcing Van Doren to testify. In front of a packed crowd, Van Doren admitted he had been lying about his participation for three years, and in a tragedy befitting the star-crossed lovers Romeo and Juliet, the very pair who pre-empted *Twenty-One* the week before Charles Van Doren lost to Vivienne Nearing in March 1957, Van Doren's conflicting professional lives in education and entertainment both met self-doomed ends in the first days of November 1959, essentially as a result of his telegram.

The 1959 television quiz show scandal and its far-reaching, industry-friendly regulatory ramifications are steeped in a mythology that claims the public lost faith in television at the moment of Van Doren's confession. The reality, however, is that the technically guilt-free networks and sponsors, with help from mass media outlets and the federal government, were able to re-channel the publicly presented focus of the scandal from issues of legality to issues of personal ethics. Although two-thirds of the 150 quiz show participants who had testified before

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<sup>46</sup> *Hearings*, 626-30.

the 1958 New York County grand jury knowingly provided false testimony under oath—despite being advised that participation in quiz show rigging was *not* punishable by law—Van Doren’s story became a stand-in for every participant on every quiz show over a four-year period, and his public embarrassments served the dual purpose of appearing to punish the wrongdoers.

In reports printed after Van Doren’s admission to the House subcommittee, mass-market magazines and widely distributed newspapers, such as the *New York Times* (which ran more than 80 articles on the scandal and its fallout in the three-month span from October to December 1959), emphasized Van Doren’s involvement and moral misjudgments as hopelessly “tragic,” an absorption that helped to transform the scandal from an examination of corporate responsibility to the public it purportedly served to a dilemma about principles, personal choices, and their consequences. Van Doren’s downfall stood as a warning to those individuals who were willing to take ethical shortcuts in their quest for bounteous rewards. As a colleague of Van Doren later summarized:

Charlie Van Doren, a teacher at Columbia, our answer to Sputnik, a Van Doren Van Doren—as he once seemed the most admirable of Americans, so after the scandals he seemed far and away the most culpable...the crushing opprobrium came down not only hardest but, it seemed, almost exclusively on Charlie. He, the argument ran, should have known better. He, given his natural advantages in life, was least in need of the superficial celebrity that winning on a quiz show had to offer. He was, moreover, a teacher, whose life was bound by the ethic of intellectual honesty.<sup>47</sup>

A conventional account of the quiz show scandal and its reflection on American society formed *around* Charles Van Doren, who merely had the combination of recognizability and heritage to personalize the issues for journalists writing for the public. The quiz show scandal narrative was significantly shaped by professional writers and institutional officials, who reduced deep-seated television industry problems to a story about one man’s predicament. With media

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<sup>47</sup> Joseph Epstein, “Redford’s Van Doren & Mine,” *Commentary* 98 (1994): 45.

focus adjusted to the particular actions of one individual—who hardly could be held accountable for the scope of the duplicity—all contexts were dismantled, turning the quiz show scandal into a “unilinear story line” that disguised the connections between capitalism, education, entertainment, and national identity that had been embedded in the media discourses about Van Doren and the quiz shows since 1957.<sup>48</sup> Instead of discussing the cultural, social, and economic implications of commercial television (and debating alternative structural formats), the public was limited to passing personal judgment on the appropriateness of Charles Van Doren’s public shunning.

To manage their industry image further, network executives exchanged both blatant and subtle accusations with their two biggest obstacles to self-government—print media and Congress. CBS and NBC network presidents began to blame print media explicitly for their current situation. Stanton and Kintner claimed the press was purposefully blowing the issue out of proportion because magazines and newspapers both needed and wanted broadcasters to suffer so that print media could win the competition for advertising revenues. Stanton testified before Congress that some big publishers, like Time, Inc., had vested interests in stations, over which the quiz shows were broadcast—and over which the FCC did have jurisdiction. In Stanton’s estimation, when Time had questions about the legitimacy of the matches in April 1957 and reported in its magazine that producers exerted too much control, Time should have taken action in its capacity as licensed station owner subject to government oversight. Stanton further

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<sup>48</sup> John Dower’s use of the term “heroic narrative” as a “unilinear story line” is discussed in Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, 42-43. Dower wrote, “In popular retellings, [a unilinear story line] often takes the form of an intimate human-interest story...Such accounts...tell us little if anything about how top-level decisions were made...and why. To seriously ask these questions is to enter the realm of multiple imperatives.”

suggested that their failure to do so should be investigated by the FCC and possibly punished with station license revocations.<sup>49</sup>

Stanton's insinuations had the desired effect of sparking heated responses from print media outlets—which left less column space for commentary on broadcasting's need for regulation or alternative structural formats. More importantly, the back-and-forth exchanges pinpointed sponsor influences on program content as the industry's primary problem. As an editorialist in *The Reporter* observed, "Newspapers and magazines, which have found themselves getting a smaller share of advertising budgets over the past decade or so, have not been noticeably reluctant to publicize TV's embarrassments about rigged quiz shows. For many of them the drama has been that of a rival mass medium on trial." But the editor provided an additional justification for journalists' interest, too. "Any commercial system of ostensible entertainment that places men, women, and even children in what appears to be well-nigh intolerable temptation to cheat, or at least to condone cheating, surely deserves careful study."<sup>50</sup> Big-name television personalities jumped into the fray, as Dave Garroway told his television viewers during a *Today* program that print media's television critics were "paid by one advertising medium to destroy another," and Jack Paar recited a parable to his *Tonight Show* audience, "likening some TV columnists to a prostitute who got religion and thereafter saw sin everywhere."<sup>51</sup> These two particular NBC assaults prompted *New York Herald Tribune* television critic John Crosby to respond, "a conspiracy to denigrate the medium—the publishers whipping on their hired hacks to flay television—exists only in the broadcasters' own minds.

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<sup>49</sup> "The Ultimate Responsibility." Stanton neglected to point out that, as FCC-licensed station owners, Time, Inc., also had a vested interest in the outcome of any potential new FCC broadcast regulations that would interfere with the status quo. New requirements and regulations might benefit the station owner in regard to his position versus the networks, but they might also equally cut into profits.

<sup>50</sup> "But for the Grace of God...?," *Reporter*, November 12, 1959, 2-4.

<sup>51</sup> "A Question of Freedom," *Time*, December 7, 1959, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,811533,00.html>.

Occasionally, newspapers have overplayed the quiz scandal, as they overplay a murder story. Sheer overzealousness. But why impugn our motives in the process?...The tradition [of newspaper policies] is freedom to observe and report on the facts as they are. It's the tradition of freedom that people like Garroway and Paar can't understand because they've never had any."<sup>52</sup> The Stanton Plan proposed to remedy this exact difficulty in the television industry, and the acrimonious exchanges only strengthened the broadcasters' position that sponsor control of programs was the root problem. Furthermore, when Crosby called the structural relationships between the television medium and advertisers "a question of freedom," he linked the debate to the national ideological level by questioning the workings of free-market enterprise.

Several journalists had aided the networks by blaming the FCC, in particular, but also the federal government as an institutional entity, in the problem. Trumbo bitterly indicted Congress—not only for the subcommittee's collusion in the spectacle of the current quiz show scandal but also for its past crimes against members of the entertainment industry.

As it almost always happens in the climatic passion of Congressional investigation, the real fraud consisted in the exposure of fraud. No Congressman can hope for headlines if he dwells on...the arrogant greed of men who have appropriated the free air and turned it into a witches' bazaar of howling peddlers hawking trash. A sixteen-year-old girl makes safer copy than the president of NBC and has fewer lawyers...

In only one aspect of the scandal can we take real satisfaction: all who participated in the fraud were certified, loyal Americans. The elaborate system of blacklisting, by which the networks deny use of publicly-owned channels to those with whom they disagree, makes certain of that. Everybody connected with the shows had been cleared by the American Legion, The House Committee on Un-American Activities, the Senate Internal Security Committee, AWARE, ALERT, *Red Channels*, sponsors' check-ups, the agencies' private eyes, the networks' corps of dedicated snoops. And Heaven knows how many private nuts, crooks and crackpots.

The people who dived, and the people who won, and all who arranged the cheat and sponsored it, and distributed it, had never been controversial; they had never publicly dissented from anything; they had never joined a *verboten* organization; they had never given money to unpopular causes. To the last child they were authenticated patriots, well-oathed and clean as the whistle that finally blew them up. Though tens of millions of dollars were earned by sponsors, broadcasters, and producers of the fraudulent shows,

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<sup>52</sup> "A Question of Freedom."

though the trust of the nation's children was ravished by them, at least the Republic could take comfort that it hadn't been gulled by a gang of subversives.<sup>53</sup>

The associations between the television industry and the federal government in containing the media narrative about the quiz show scandal should not, in fact, be overlooked. Declassified State Department records indicate that the government feared the quiz show scandal would have potential real-world Cold War consequences if international public relations officers could not contain the media coverage abroad. *Newsweek* had reported on headlines condemning the scandal in newspapers in Britain, France, and the Soviet Union,<sup>54</sup> and *Time* noted with disdain:

The last word, as usual, came from Moscow. *Izvestia* reported gleefully that the U.S.'s free-enterprise TV had sought out the shady quizzes simply to boost advertising revenue. For all those frustrated Americans who still hankered for a truly fix-free quiz, Moscow Radio had the answer. On its English-language propaganda broadcasts, it will pitch seven questions about the U.S.S.R. to U.S. audiences, then lace the answers through the program schedule. Any hard-eared American can spot the answers, mail them to Moscow, and possibly receive some prizes. Among them: four \$200 Zorky cameras, a pack of English-language Russian books, and—in case anyone cares—countless Sputnik lapel pins.<sup>55</sup>

Capitalism—and the U.S.—just looked bad.

In the weeks after Van Doren's congressional testimony, the U.S. Information Agency dispatched top secret airgrams to dozens of American embassies in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Scandinavia, and South America, targeting particularly those global hot spots where the futures of capitalism and communism were still in play. The circulars sought reconnaissance from Foreign Service agents about the "effect Van Doren and other cases may have had on [the]

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<sup>53</sup> Trumbo, "Hail, Blithe Spirit!," 245. Emphasis in original.

<sup>54</sup> "Out of the Backwash of the TV Scandals...The Question: How Far for the Fast Buck?," *Newsweek*, November 16, 1959, 67.

<sup>55</sup> "Purity Kick," *Time*, November 2, 1959, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,892835,00.html>.

foreign image of US, its people and institutions.” Recognizing the power of mass media to shape public discourse, instructions to U.S. agents directly requested:

To the extent such information is available, reports should include, inter alia:

1. amount of press and radio/television attention
2. editorial reaction
3. reaction of other opinion leaders, and
4. apparent impact of revelations on public at large.<sup>56</sup>

In the African capitals of Benghazi, Tripoli, and Dakar, as well as in Ankara and Athens, the U.S. television quiz show scandals received no press and left no impressions.<sup>57</sup> Media in Nairobi, Oslo, and Rome used the scandals as a backdrop to bolster or discredit arguments in favor of non-commercial television in their own countries.<sup>58</sup> In Pretoria, where the South African government had decided not to implement television, there was no television industry-related press nor any television celebrities for other media to report on.<sup>59</sup> Closer to home, Mexico City saw no measurable impact on the public, despite “prominent coverage to wire service dispatches on the recent TV irregularities.”<sup>60</sup> In South America, the Argentine press “expressed wonder that such a matter should become the subject of a congressional investigation...[and] surprise that we (U.S. citizens) should ever have considered them wholly honest.”<sup>61</sup> West German opinion from Bonn “was almost uniformly moderate, mild, and restrained...and there seems to be little residue

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<sup>56</sup> U.S. Information Service airgram circulars No. CG-330, 911.50/11-1759; No. CG-332, 911.50/11-1859; No. CG-336, 911.50/11-1959; and No. CG-339, 911.50/11-2059; General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland (hereafter abbreviated NACP).

<sup>57</sup> Incoming Airgrams No. G-75, 911.50/12-359; No. G-51, 911.50/12-959; No. G-86, 911.50/12-1059; No. G-296, 911.50/11-3059; and No. G-182, 911.50/12-159; General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

<sup>58</sup> Incoming Airgrams No. G-12, 911.50/12-459; No. G-64, 911.50/12-1159; and No. G-172, 911.50/12-1159; General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

<sup>59</sup> Glenn G. Wolfe, Charge d’Affaires ad interim, Foreign Service Despatch 267, 911.50/12-3059, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

<sup>60</sup> Incoming Airgram No. G-105, 911.50/12-1559, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

<sup>61</sup> Incoming Airgram No. G-41, 911.50/11-2559, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

of critical feeling vis-a-vis the American image.” More than anything else, the German press praised the very public examination of the “morality of success” in American society. “The fact that all these problems are passionately discussed certainly speaks for the U.S.,” wrote a Washington-based editorialist in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, reported the embassy airgram.<sup>62</sup>

The Egyptian press in Cairo raised “doubt about our much-advertised principle of free expression,”<sup>63</sup> and from Paris, editorial comments questioned why “180 Million Americans See Russian Conquest Moon Lesser Misfortune than Tears Charlie Van Doren.”<sup>64</sup> Helsinki opinion leaders merely engaged in “a little good natured kidding of some Embassy officers about the ‘purity’ of American television,”<sup>65</sup> and in Rome, the deputy editor of *Il Tempo*—identified in Agent Zellerback’s airgram as a Rightist daily—used the opportunity to underscore the hypocrisy of the American “liberal citizen” who “is justly, if paradoxically, for some measure of government control; in Italy, on the contrary, where TV is a state monopoly, the plea of the liberal is for some form of ‘free enterprise’ TV alongside the existing structure.”<sup>66</sup> An editorial in Brazil’s *Correio da Manhã* “deplored incidents but noted pointedly that the wrongdoers were punished in the end.” The airgram, from Agent Cabot in Rio de Janeiro, further noted, “In general, event had very little apparent effect on public opinion, possibly because of general tolerance such peccadillos [*sic*] which are much more common in Brazil than in the U.S. However, the effect on numerous more morally inclined individuals who probably see this as

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<sup>62</sup> Nedville E. Nordness, Public Affairs Officer, Foreign Service Despatch 907, 911.50/12-759, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

<sup>63</sup> Incoming Airgram No. G-107, 911.50/12-459, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

<sup>64</sup> Incoming Telegram No. 2673, 911.50/12-1159, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

<sup>65</sup> William L. Grenoble, Public Affairs Officer, Foreign Service Despatch 383, 911.50/12-459, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

<sup>66</sup> Incoming Airgram No. G-172, 911.50/11/2559, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

confirmation corruption U.S. morals reflected cinema, et cetera, should not be discounted.”<sup>67</sup> In Caracas, Agent Burrows reported, “Embassy has not yet noted any attempt by Communists or anti-American radicals to use revelations of TV fraud against US. No significant definable reaction observed on part of opinion leaders and unless Commies and anti-US radicals decide to exploit issue, unlikely have any impact on Venezuelan public opinion.”<sup>68</sup> Internationally, the world’s citizens were generally indifferent to the television quiz show scandal, and the U.S. was free to continue fighting for capitalism around the globe.

The harshest criticisms, in fact, came from America’s English-speaking pro-capitalist allies Canada and Great Britain, where public opinion shapers condemned the commercial broadcasting system and faulted the U.S. government for not looking out for its citizens. “Number of highly placed persons in Canadian communications media have expressed view that episode clearly establishes superiority of publicly owned broadcasting system,” reported Agent Wigglesworth from Ottawa.

Affair regarded as consequence of over-emphasis on money particularly easy money as measure of success and accompanying relaxation of moral standards. Believed time had come for searching self-appraisal and implementation of steps to correct abuses...Van Doren case cannot help but confirm in their views those persons in Canada who hold prejudices against United States or who are militantly convinced of superiority of Canadian institutions...To the extent that Canada itself remains untouched by the scandals, the Van Doren case will have tendency to enhance in the eyes of many Canadians the value of their own institutions and thereby may strengthen feelings of Canadian nationalism and separateness.

At least to small extent the moral position of the United States as leader of the Free World has inevitably been damaged.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Incoming Airgram No. G-66, 911.50/11-2759, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

<sup>68</sup> Incoming Airgram No. G-31, 911.50/11-2459, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

<sup>69</sup> Incoming Airgram No. G-65, 911.50/12-159, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

In England, William L. Clark, Counselor for Public Affairs, reported that Alistair Cooke wrote in the 13 October 1959 *Guardian* that Congress should “revise powers of the F.C.C.,” and further questioned the “old American habit of letting sinners ‘police themselves,’ a bizarre notion to foreigners.” Most British publications believed Van Doren “may yet have done more for American intellectuals who want to raise the standard of American television than he, or they, yet realise,” intimating that the quiz show scandal was finally the opportunity Americans needed to establish “some kind of non-profit making competitor for the existing networks.”<sup>70</sup> What was clear to Clark was that Britons did not want to be “Americanised” because “Americans admire more than is wise the man who makes a fast buck!,” according to the *Sunday Dispatch*.

President Eisenhower had said of the rigging, “It’s a terrible thing to do to the American people,” expressing shock and disbelief akin to the experiences of Chicago Black Sox fans upon learning that their prized professional baseball team had accepted a bribe to throw the 1919 World Series.<sup>71</sup> All he could muster was, “Say It Ain’t So!,” and to transfer the “terrific responsibility” of mass-distributed news and entertainment to business leaders who were charged with upholding the “United States beliefs, convictions and welfare.”<sup>72</sup> In a presidential news conference on 4 November 1959, two days after Van Doren’s subcommittee appearance, the television scandals were addressed at some length. When asked if he thought, “Is this something unique to the industry, or is it something that perhaps reflects the debasement of standards in the country?,” a question that subtly questioned the efficacy of capitalism in American society, Eisenhower responded by saying, “The reaction of Americans seems to be so universal. Every

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<sup>70</sup> William L. Clark, Counselor for Public Affairs, Foreign Service Despatch No. 58, 911.50/12-1759, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, NACP.

<sup>71</sup> Eisenhower started using the “Say It Ain’t So” phrase in October 1959 and continued to repeat the analogy throughout the end of the year.

<sup>72</sup> “News and Entertainment Industries Have ‘A Terrific Responsibility,’” *U.S. News & World Report*, November 16, 1959, 45.

one of them feels that not only he, himself—he may have a little sardonic chuckle when he realizes how he was taken in, but when he thinks about all America being deceived in this way, I think he has a reaction immediately, as expressed to me by my associates and friends and people I see. They are really—I don't think they are so much angry as they are bewildered."<sup>73</sup> Why fake the American Dream if the American Dream was possible?

In line with entertainment industry production code policies, however, someone “paid for it” in the end, and so it did not really matter what had transpired prior to the sentencing. The wrongs were righted, and American television viewers remained safe. The “corrupting power of money” was the theme, but it became an issue of personal evaluation and judgment. By the start of 1960, every individual in the American public had been implicated in the moral lapses typified by the scandal.

Cheating, lying, fraud; so many of the sins we can commit against our fellow men spring from the same foul sources of avarice and pride. But by themselves these forces are insufficient to drive a man to such damning behavior. If, however, the society in which he moves is congenial to or has foggy notions of that behavior then the requirements for it are complete. This society doesn't know what lying is, doesn't know when it's cheating, doesn't know what to call such action when it sees it. And who is to blame for such a state of affairs? You are. And I am.<sup>74</sup>

Throughout October 1959, mass media had focused on the inadequacies of the U.S. television industry and its failure to fulfill its responsibilities to the American public. Once Van Doren appeared on the witness stand at the start of November—an event put in motion by his October 1959 telegram—all media attention diverted to the sell-able story of Van Doren, the ill-fated protagonist in a human-interest saga. As Trumbo had said of the 16-year-old congressional witness, Van Doren made “better copy” than government regulations and was a safer career

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> “Inside and Out,” *St. John's News*, January 15, 1960.

move for journalists than probing into television industry business deals. Within the discursive framework, however, social issues were diluted to individualized audience responses about whose side they were on.

## **5.2 NATIONAL TRAUMA, THE PRIME TIME ACCESS RULE, AND THE PREDICTABILITY OF PRODUCT CYCLES: THE 1970S AND 1980S**

In November 1959, *Newsweek* had asked, “Would [the quiz show scandal] help rouse Americans from what many believed could be a wallow of cupidity or cynicism? Or, after a decent interval of mourning integrity, would Americans re-wed the callous and carefree world of unearned money and unlabeled make-believe?”<sup>75</sup> By the end of the 1970s and a twenty-year mourning interval, these questions would be answered resoundingly in favor of unearned money and unlabeled make-believe. Quiz shows were making a comeback—the first of several waves of popularity—due in part to the implementation of the FCC’s Prime Time Access Rule in 1971 and in part to a sagging national economy that left Americans dreaming of something more.<sup>76</sup> The Prime Time Access Rule, intended to increase diversity in programming, required one half-hour of primetime network programming to be created by and purchased from an independent production company. Game shows fit the requirement nicely. Although the quiz show genre never disappeared entirely from network programming schedules in 1959, the big-money games went on an extended forty-year hiatus. Once the federal legislation outlawing fixed television quiz shows was signed by President Eisenhower in 1960, there were explicit ramifications for

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<sup>75</sup> “The Ordeal of the TV ‘Hero,’” *Newsweek*, November 2, 1959, 24.

<sup>76</sup> Patricia Goldstone, “Quiz Shows Become Born-Again Bonanzas,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 1980, CAL-4.

continuing to feed questions and answers to contestants. As a result, program formats were altered to erase all suggestions of impropriety, even if the established 1950s producers' controls did not significantly change.

Beginning in the early 1970s, “game shows” replaced “quiz shows” in television vernacular, with discursive emphasis placed on the “sport of good fun” they promoted. Networks adopted safeguards such as capping contestant payouts at \$25,000, limiting the number of consecutive appearances a contestant could make on a show, and adopting industry-wide policies that restricted the number of game show programs on which any “non-celebrity” person could appear—no more than one game show per year and no more than three game shows in a lifetime was NBC’s rule.<sup>77</sup> What was not illegal, however, were the standard contestant selection processes the producers had always employed. To solidify their regularity as entertainment industry business standards, uniform contestant screenings that involved 400-question written exams, personality tests, and in-person auditions were instituted by quiz show producers across networks. Their purpose—to find marketable “personalities”—never changed. Further, producers replaced the emphasis on high-stakes rewards with an emphasis on the witty banter of celebrity panelists to attract audiences to watch. No one would mistake Brett Sommers, Charles Nelson Reilly, and Richard Dawson for intellectuals; the fun was watching them insult each other for twenty-some minutes a day on *Match Game*.

The faces of the hosts and many of the panelists were, in fact, familiar, as the same entertainers who had been on television in the 1950s returned to the airwaves. Gene Rayburn,

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<sup>77</sup> Charles Maher, “Money Winner Sues TV Game Shows,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 1982, I-3; and “TV Game Shows Repeater Loses Final Contest,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1984, I-20. In the 1970s and 1980s, CBS limited contestants to two appearances within a ten-year period—which was altered to one appearance every ten years and two appearances in a lifetime by 1994, according to *The Price Is Right* contestant affidavit everyone waiting in line to be in the studio audience is required to sign before they can gain admittance (this is based on personal experience). ABC also adopted a policy of one contestant appearance every twelve months and no more than two appearances in five years to maintain ethical transparency.

host of *Match Game*, had been the announcer on *The Steve Allen Show*; *The \$20,000 Pyramid*'s Bill Cullen had been the host of *The Price Is Right*, and Kitty Carlisle had been sitting in her *To Tell The Truth* chair for more than two decades. Even Jack Barry reappeared as emcee of *The Joker's Wild*, a show with an oddly familiar casino-based premise (*Twenty-One*'s blackjack basis had simply been replaced by a slot machine that "randomly selected" question categories and dollar amounts for contestants, who pulled the one-arm bandit joystick in front of them). Barry and Dan Enright were teamed up again to bring to viewers not only *The Joker's Wild* but also *Concentration* and, astonishingly, *The New Tic Tac Dough*, almost as though nothing had ever happened in the 1950s—or that only contestants on their shows had been singled out by the New York County grand jury for prosecution following the House subcommittee investigation.<sup>78</sup>

The reinstatement of game shows on network television in the 1970s should be contextualized within the cultural, political, and social realities of "the Me Decade," however.<sup>79</sup> In 1971, as the television industry celebrated its 25-year anniversary, the Vietnam War loomed large, the U.S. still faced a "woman problem," and nostalgia was becoming a national pastime.<sup>80</sup> "Pop psychologists—and many of the kids [partaking in the resurgence of hula hoop, sock hop, and other fads]—see the flight to the '50s as a search for happier times, before drugs, Vietnam, and assassination," proclaimed *Life* magazine.<sup>81</sup> Older Americans clung to oppositional discourses that reminded people "the 50s evoke such grim memories as Korea, Suez, Hungary,

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<sup>78</sup> Of the fifteen contestants convicted of perjury in 1962, nine had appeared on *Tic Tac Dough*, and the other six were on *Twenty-One*.

<sup>79</sup> Novelist Tom Wolfe coined the phrase "The Me Decade" to describe the 1970s in his article "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening," *New York*, August 23, 1976, 26-40.

<sup>80</sup> Throughout the first few years of the 1970s, *Life* magazine featured cover stories and special issues addressing these particular topics. See especially "Nostalgia" issue, February 19, 1971; "Saucy Feminist That Even Men Like" issue, May 7, 1971; "The Woman Problem" issue, August 13, 1971; "Television" special issue, September 10, 1971; "Dropout Wife: A Striking Current Phenomenon" issue, March 17, 1972; "The Marriage Experiments" issue, April 28, 1972; "Women in Politics" issue, June 9, 1972; and "The 50s" issue, June 16, 1972.

<sup>81</sup> "The Nifty Fifties," *Life*, June 16, 1972, 39.

Sputnik, and economic recession. It was a time of sexual repression, of cold war and Communist hunting, and for blacks it was a time of almost total exclusion from the white consciousness.”<sup>82</sup> Yet the all-important marketing group of twenty- and thirty-somethings—who would have been children, adolescents, and teenagers during the 1950s—characterized their childhood life experiences as “humorous” and “fun,” if not a bit “bizarre.” “There were plenty of problems in the world, but nobody cared. All we worried about were cars, records and who broke up with whom,” said a 29-year-old New York City photographer, without a hint of apology, in the 16 October 1972 *Newsweek*.<sup>83</sup>

As the 1970s began, so too did the obligatory product cycle of the 1950s. “It’s been barely a dozen years since the ’50s ended and yet here we are again, awash in the trappings of that sunnier time, paying new attention to the old artifacts and demigods,” assayed *Life*.<sup>84</sup> As the children of the 1950s became parents in the 1970s, there was marketing sense in reminding these new parents that their childhoods had been idyllic and wonderful and so simple in comparison to the period of economic uncertainty and global unrest in which they found themselves. “By no accident of history, the ’50s revival coincides with the emergence of Ike’s heir, Richard Nixon, as the dominant figure in American politics...The Nixon campaign is even sponsoring a rock ’n’ roll revival road show designed to lure younger voters to the Gold Old Days beyond recall,” reported *Newsweek*.<sup>85</sup>

Nostalgia for the 1950s consumed the imaginations of popular culture producers, dictating fashion trends; spurring Hollywood to imitate the box office successes of *The Last Picture Show*, *Grease*, and *American Graffiti*; influencing the music recording and radio

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<sup>82</sup> Jonathan Rodgers, “Back to the ’50s,” *Newsweek*, October 16, 1972, 78.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> “The Nifty Fifties,” 39.

<sup>85</sup> Rodgers, “Back to the ’50s,” 78.

industries' return to "Golden Oldies" and rock 'n' roll roots; shaping the production and marketing of toys and games; and affecting the television network landscape, where ample programming half-hours were dedicated to recreating the 1950s for audience consumption.<sup>86</sup> Many of these important consumers targeted by the popular culture 1950s product cycle would likely recall the first family television set entering their childhood homes, and they might even remember the big-money primetime television quiz shows that had captivated audiences nationwide. With Barry-Enright Productions back in the quiz-game business, mass media acknowledged the historical past of the 1959 scandal—including the general public's outrage about Van Doren's double unemployment at Columbia University and NBC, as well as the responsibilities networks owed to their public—but framed the unfortunate-ness of the situation as merely a growing pain of an "infant" industry.<sup>87</sup> Simultaneously, following his father's death in 1972, Charles Van Doren re-emerged as a respectable author in his own right, after more than a decade-long banishment. In reality, Van Doren had not stopped producing knowledge in 1959; he had only been denied the credit, much like blacklisted writers, directors, and producers had been in the 1950s.

Nostalgia for the 1950s managed to survive the Watergate scandal (1972-1974), although the media's preoccupation with the subject of scandal certainly reintroduced the 1959 quiz show

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<sup>86</sup> *M\*A\*S\*H\**, *Happy Days*, and *Here's Lucy* were three of the top 20 television programs of the decade. Other notable 1950s-associated programs include *Laverne & Shirley*, *Sha Na Na*, and Dean Martin variety specials.

<sup>87</sup> Whereas the New York newspapers had been the most reliable—and timely—publications to report on the significant happenings in the television quiz show business at its Big Apple heights in the 1950s, almost all television production had been moved to Hollywood and the southern California environs by the 1970s. The *Los Angeles Times* replaced the *New York Times* as the newspaper of record for the television industry, and for quiz shows in particular. See William Stephens, "There's No Biz Scandals Like Show Biz Scandals," *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1973, IX-5; Cecil Smith, "Scenes From the Golden Eye," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1977, IV-1; James Brown, "Jack Barry Back From the Brink," *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 1978, CAL-94; Goldstone, "Quiz Shows Become Born-Again Bonanzas," CAL-4-5; Elizabeth Mehren, "School for Game-Show Contestants," *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1981, V-1; Ron S. Heinzl, "Firms Turn to Game Shows to Teach Vital Data," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 1981, V-1; and Burt A. Folkart, "Jack Barry, TV Game-Show Host, Dies After Jogging," *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 1984, II-1.

hearings as a point of comparison. William Stephens, writing for the *Los Angeles Times* in May 1973, placed the 1959 television quiz show scandal in a chronology of “decadent Hollywood” setbacks that began with Fatty Arbuckle’s rape-murder charges in 1922. Stephens neglected to mention that the quiz shows took place in New York City, not Hollywood, or that Van Doren, unlike Fatty Arbuckle, was eventually convicted of a crime—for a far less serious occurrence. Scandal was clearly the theme of the opinion page on 6 May, as adjacent to Stephens’ quiz show column is an op-ed about the “Say It Ain’t So” 1919 Chicago Black Sox—the very same analogous tale Eisenhower had told in 1959. No explicit connection between the two scandals was provided in 1973, however.<sup>88</sup>

With network-produced game shows filling thirty hours of daytime programming daily and “countless hours of syndicated games” occupying early evening schedules by 1978, game shows had solidified their televisual presence and again became objects worthy of print media focus. Common themes were recycled from the discourses surrounding the 1950s quiz shows, including repeated reminders that game shows were really “dramas of real life” at their core.<sup>89</sup> Taxation of winning contestants remained problematic, as the *Los Angeles Times* reported in December 1974 that “The IRS...expects taxpayers to declare as income the value of any merchandise prizes, such as an automobile or refrigerator...The IRS does not usually check on small amounts, but it has ways of being informed about the larger prizes, especially those of \$600 or more.”<sup>90</sup> Jack Barry gave interviews and apologized for his mistakes of the past, which he recognized in hindsight were “wrong,” but which, he reminded, were not illegal in 1959. In

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<sup>88</sup> Stephens, “There’s No Biz Scandals Like Show Biz Scandals,” IX-5. For an intriguing connection between the Fatty Arbuckle and Black Sox scandals, see Sam Stoloff, “Fatty Arbuckle and the Black Sox: The Paranoid Style of American Popular Culture, 1919-1922,” in *Headline Hollywood: A Century of Film Scandal*, ed. Adrienne L. McLean and David A. Cook (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 52-82.

<sup>89</sup> Mark Goodson said, “Quiz shows are dramas of real life,” in Goldstone, “Quiz Shows Become Born-Again Bonanzas,” CAL-4.

<sup>90</sup> “IRS Has Own ‘Let’s Make a Deal,’” *Los Angeles Times*, December 27, 1974, I-23.

the 1970s recaps, the 1950s public was outraged, occasionally at being duped and almost always at the loss of Van Doren, who had proven entertainment could be educational, from the broadcast airwaves. Rather than focus on the fraud of the quiz shows, 1970s mass media instead attributed blame for the scandal to “two disgruntled losers” who “ruined it for everybody.”<sup>91</sup> Herb Stempel and James Snodgrass became the anti-heroes, with Stempel, in particular, taking the brunt of the criticism, despite the fact that on its own, his story had not been credible enough for journalists to pursue in 1957. Edward Hilgemeier Jr. and *Dotto* were erased from the narrative; *Tic Tac Dough*'s history was never mentioned; and Joyce Brothers and Patty Duke remained viable celebrity panelists on a number of game shows.

“At their best, game shows are one of the few remaining examples of pure, spontaneous TV left,” claimed Bob Wisehart, ironically invoking Dan Wakefield’s 30 March 1957 critique in *The Nation*.<sup>92</sup> “Either a contestant knows which U.S. President could write Greek with one hand and Latin with the other at the same time, or he doesn’t. That’s real,” insisted Wisehart, oblivious to the ease with which producers had been able to make it look like contestants knew answers to challenging questions throughout the 1950s. More significantly, many more journalists shied away from an investigative interest in the fact that the names Jack Barry and Dan Enright kept popping up in relation to “irregularities” concerning their 1970s game show programs. Due, in part, to libel laws, all journalists could do was report the “facts.”

Syndicated programs by independent producers, like Barry-Enright, received subsidies from the networks for production costs but were mass-marketed directly to local stations, and as such, were not subject to network limitations on contestant appearances and prizewinnings. As a

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<sup>91</sup> The exact term “disgruntled loser” appeared in Bob Wisehart, “How the Mighty Have Tumbled,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 1982, VI-22; and in Goldstone, “Quiz Shows Become Born-Again Bonanzas,” CAL-4.

<sup>92</sup> Wisehart, “How the Mighty Have Tumbled,” VI-22. Dan Wakefield’s comments about quiz show spontaneity appeared in “The Fabulous Sweat Box,” *Nation*, March 30, 1957.

result, the syndicated shows drew bigger headlines about contestant successes than the daytime network games that were mainly cross-promotional opportunities for other network shows and specials through their emphasis on the television celebrities playing with the contestants. By 1980, both the male and female all-time game show money winners were crowned on the Barry-Enright shows *Tic Tac Dough* and *The Joker's Wild*, respectively. Described as “a ‘natural’ right out of the Van Doren school,” Lt. Thom McKee, a 24-year-old F-14 Navy fighter pilot, “entered the Guinness Book of Records as history’s biggest game show winner on ‘Tic Tac Dough,’” by accumulating \$312,700 in cash and prizes over the course of eighty-eight games in forty-six days.<sup>93</sup> (His records would hold until the turn of the twenty-first century, when *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* upped the prize money and Ken Jennings found his way in front of the *Jeopardy!* cameras.) Likewise, Eileen Jason won a total of \$313,446.50 on *The Joker's Wild* after competing in two of the show’s \$250,000 Tournament of Champions.

The Tournament of Champions allowed Barry-Enright to bring back familiar-faced contestants, establishing continuity between the game show and its audience. The contestants had already proven themselves able competitors, and the high stakes added intrigue to the audience draw. As had been the case in the late 1950s, however, some contestants were not always predictable. During a Tournament of Champions playoff match against Jason, Frank Dillon, a retired Cleveland public school teacher who wrote a trivia column for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* after winning \$175,000 on *The Joker's Wild*, raised a “dispute” about how the tournament was conducted.<sup>94</sup> Although the source of her information—and its relevance to her

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<sup>93</sup> Trivia Hall of Fame.com reported these statistics for McKee. See <http://www.trivialhalloffame.com/thommckee.aspx>, accessed 12 December 2006. McKee had been “forbidden to speak to the press” by Barry and Enright until *after* he finally lost. See Goldstone, “Quiz Shows Become Born-Again Bonanzas,” CAL-5.

<sup>94</sup> Goldstone, “Quiz Shows Become Born-Again Bonanzas,” CAL-5.

report—is unclear, journalist Patricia Goldstone noted that Dillon had “left teaching because of the effects of busing on the Cleveland public school system,” which reads as a thinly veiled accusation of racism—the antithesis of the equality promoted in the American Dream myth—and which discredits Dillon’s character, just as accusations about Stempel’s psychiatric problems had challenged his credibility in 1958. Dillon “said he ‘didn’t know how’ to discuss their differences, and that he had the ‘greatest respect for Mr. Barry and Mr. Enright,’ who, he said, have offered him a job as ‘researcher’ on ‘The Joker’s Wild.’” Goldstone went on to note that “In the 1950s, the same producers offered Herbert Stempel a similar position to, they hoped, prevent him from airing similar charges, according to court records at the time.”<sup>95</sup> Barry and Enright refused to comment on any discrepancies or alleged job offers and accused reporters of creating a “very hostile atmosphere.”<sup>96</sup> In 1980, however, Dillon was “‘thinking very seriously’ about taking the job. ‘We come to crossroads in our lives,’ he mused. ‘Once you set your course there’s no turning back.’” It undoubtedly had been one of the lessons Van Doren learned, but it also summarized the relationship between the federal government (and its public by proxy) and the commercial broadcasting industry.

In Jason’s defense, her \$300,000+ payout was not all that it seemed. Contestants typically only received one third of their winnings in cash; the remainder was paid in merchandise and taxed at retail price, even though consumer items could not “be resold at [retail price] because once it is received it is technically second-hand goods.”<sup>97</sup> In addition, several game shows paid their largest money winners in annual installments, both to stretch out the show’s expenses over time and to defray contestants’ tax liabilities. The noticeable exception to this rule was *Tic Tac*

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

*Dough*'s Thom McKee—"lauded by his commanding officer...as an advertisement for the Navy"—who received his full total in one lump sum less than two months after his defeat aired in mid-October 1980.<sup>98</sup> McKee's persona and the dazzling prize amounts had successfully sustained an audience, and McKee was rewarded, the American Dream fulfilled.

Despite winning more than a quarter-million dollars, Jason and her husband owed so much in taxes that they could not afford to move out of their "dinky, miserable apartment," which overflowed with "crates of sound cameras, tea services, and microwave ovens."<sup>99</sup> In fact, in a familiar-sounding story, Jason and her husband had only gotten married after she won \$50,000 in her first appearance on *The Joker's Wild*, specifically for the tax break. The financial burdens placed on winning contestants did not extend upward to the producers, who cleared a "minimum profit of \$250,000 a year per daytime show, with 'virtually unlimited' profits for syndicated successes."<sup>100</sup> The networks supplied an average weekly allotment of \$20,000 for cash prizes, while advertisers paid \$500 promotional fees into a "kitty" and then would pay an additional \$500 if the announcer named the manufacturer on the air. The economics of the game shows equaled an estimated weekly minimum \$500,000 in advertising revenues for the networks, according to Maxene Fabe.<sup>101</sup>

Not all Barry-Enright news was bad news, however. Emily Clark, a 33-year-old reporter for City News Service, erroneously received a check from Barry-Enright Productions in the amount of \$55,000, even though her *Tic Tac Dough* winnings had only amounted to \$5,500. "So I had about 35 minutes of being rich and anxiety-ridden...Then I came to my senses," said Clark, who phoned Barry-Enright, alerted them to their mistake, and promptly mailed the check back to

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, CAL-4.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, CAL-5.

<sup>101</sup> Maxene Fabe, *TV Game Shows!* (Garden City, N.Y.: Dolphin, 1979).

them. Dan Enright, who had been the third person to approve Clark's original check, was quoted as saying, "It kind of gives you a glow... You're touched by someone's honesty, but you're also shaken by your own vulnerability." As a reward for her truthfulness—and, no doubt, tremendous public relations—"Dan Enright and Jack Barry...insisted she accept an expense-free trip around the world."<sup>102</sup>

"The big money shows, in particular the syndicated ones which hold out virtually limitless opportunity, seem to have tapped into a new feeling of poverty in the American middle class," noted the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>103</sup> The popularity of game shows throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s led to the creation of a game show contestant "school" by 1981. "Just down the hall from Kootie's Nail Parlor, the contestants on the set of 'Answer & Win!' were rehearsing their spontaneity," observed Elizabeth Mehren.<sup>104</sup> At \$300-a-head seminars conducted by former contestants, students were coached in the mannerisms and demeanors needed to be selected for a show. "Ninety to 95% of the people who audition to be game-show contestants are rejected," explained Mark Richards, one of the school's founders. Each show required an estimated average of 7,200 auditions every year to find the right cast. The successful contestants were the ones who could both reflect the ideal advertising market for the show and stand out in the crowd of 600 hopefuls a month. According to game show logic, attractive, personable ethnic women between the ages of 25 and 49 had the best odds.<sup>105</sup>

In the mid- to late-1970s, academics also began to take an interest in the history of television game shows, with particular attention given to the 1950s scandal. Richard S. Tedlow's

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<sup>102</sup> Richard West, "Honesty Has Its Reward," *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 1981, I-3.

<sup>103</sup> Goldstone, "Quiz Shows Become Born-Again Bonanzas," CAL-4.

<sup>104</sup> Elizabeth Mehren, "School for Game-Show Contestants; Wanted: People 'With the Kid Alive Inside,'" *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1981, V-1.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

“Intellect on Television: The Quiz Show Scandal of the 1950s” appeared in *American Quarterly* in 1976, while Kent Anderson published *Television Fraud: The History and Implications of the Quiz Show Scandals* in 1978, with encouragement and assistance from Eric F. Goldman and Erik Barnouw. These attempts to reconcile the past, however, did not include assessments of the 1970s present, although Maxene Fabe, in compiling *TV Game Shows!* by 1979, pointedly included the astonishing economics in play. Certainly, the 1970s relevance of game shows made game show history economically viable for book publishers.

From journalists throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the message was that the past was not like the present—except that certain quiz/game show events from both time periods looked quite similar, and that the same dynamic duo was at the production helm for each. But Barry and Enright had been forgiven and insisted that, “like the casinos in Las Vegas...They can make much more by playing it straight” the second time around.<sup>106</sup> That left only bitter Herb Stempel to blame for Van Doren’s wrongful exile.

It was a convenient plot with identifiable protagonists and a sore sport or two who thwarted the happy ending. For the most part, however, Charles Van Doren was a background extra in the media close-up on easy money, and the heated debate about commercial broadcasting in the U.S. was not even a memory. The game show craze that reached frenzied heights in the early 1980s remained largely unrelated to the “tragedy” of its past. Viewers, instead, were encouraged to be treated to entertaining appearances by a number of legitimately intelligent professionals who were rewarded with dizzying dollar figures. The chance to touch a dream was discursively available to all, although the fine print indicated that the offer excluded

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<sup>106</sup> Goldstone, “Quiz Shows Become Born-Again Bonanzas,” CAL-5.

anyone who could not pass the producers' screenings. Only good personalities inside attractive bodies were selected, the same as it had always been.

As Ronald Reagan's reign of deregulation permeated much of the 1980s and the networks' domination of the television industry met challenges from cable upstarts, the big-money game shows would largely recede from evening broadcast schedules, with the notable exceptions of *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel of Fortune*, which cemented their profitability—and Merv Griffin's King World empire—in the process. Jack Barry passed away suddenly in 1984, leaving Dan Enright to branch out into general television and film production. Enright was awarded an Emmy for the Hallmark Hall of Fame television special *Caroline?* in 1990, proving once and for all that the entertainment industry valued his production skills.<sup>107</sup>

### 5.3 ROBERT REDFORD'S VAN DOREN AND THE 1996 TELECOMMUNICATIONS ACT

Thirty-five years after the House Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight officially closed its investigation of television quiz show fraud, Robert Redford's film *Quiz Show* reopened a publicly mediated discourse about Charles Van Doren and the 1959 scandal, based on a 22-page chapter of Special Investigator Richard Goodwin's memory of the events.<sup>108</sup> With the film's theatrical release in 1994, a dormant tale of Charles Van Doren resurfaced and was woven into the nostalgia for the mythical 1950s, for simpler relationships and simpler dilemmas, for a time

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<sup>107</sup> Dan Enright, "Let's Replace TV Audience Testing With Ingenuity and Daring," *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 1992, F-3.

<sup>108</sup> *Quiz Show*, Dir. Robert Redford (Hollywood Pictures, 1994). Based on Richard N. Goodwin, "Investigating the Quiz Shows," in *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988), 43-65.

when the American public was capable of being duped—and, reportedly, was even more naïvely outraged that they had been. Redford’s film, widely discussed in print media as an homage to America’s “Lost Innocence”—although to whom this version of the 1950s belonged remained open for debate—was critically acclaimed by the motion picture industry, earning four Academy Award nominations, despite the film’s poor performance at the box office, where it earned less than \$30 million in its theatrical releases.<sup>109</sup>

Academy Award-nominated director and producer Redford and Academy Award-nominated screenwriter Paul Attanasio each admitted in publicity interviews that they “played with the facts” to make a dramatically entertaining film. In fact, they collapsed the deeply intricate events that permeated the entire television industry again into the story of a single man’s transgressions, a metonymic approach that shaped the narrative’s content for the greatest dramatic effect as surely as 1950s television producers shaped quiz shows. In their story form, the three years in between the first televised Van Doren/Stempel match and the subcommittee hearings are condensed into one, as are numerous contestants on multiple programs into a single Charles Van Doren, further solidifying Van Doren as the only recognizable face that humanized the scandal down to the level of the individual. Furthermore, Redford’s approach continued to privilege individual celebrity—both its allure and its shortcomings—and failed to get to the heart

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<sup>109</sup> *Quiz Show* was nominated for Best Picture of the Year 1994, Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role (Paul Scofield, who played Mark Van Doren), Best Achievement in Directing, and Best Achievement in Writing—Screenplay Based on Material Previously Produced or Published (Paul Attanasio). With *Quiz Show* grossing less than \$30 million in its two theatrical releases, Peter Bart reported in *Variety.com* that audiences considered the film poster’s promotional image of Van Doren [Ralph Fiennes] from behind “too highbrow.” See Peter Bart, “Living on credit.” *Variety.com*, September 19, 1994, accessed November 7, 2002, <http://www.variety.com/story.asp?l=story&a=VR1117859777&c=1>. *Quiz Show* was re-released in theaters after its Oscar nods. For whatever reasons, *Quiz Show*’s message was essentially drowned out that year by the “lower-browed” publicity surrounding *Forrest Gump* and *Pulp Fiction*, both of which proved to be exceptionally more marketable to media audiences.

of the vaster quiz show “problem,” namely that of corporate control of an intangible and allegedly public-interest entity.

As yet another mediated representation of both Van Doren, specifically, and the quiz show scandal as a whole, *Quiz Show* situated the weight of the burden, for the second time, squarely on Charles Van Doren, primarily because his mediated persona has always been so easily manipulated. While Redford’s directorial interpretation of the 1959 events does address the issue of corporate accountability, it does so secondarily to the theme of individual responsibility in which the story is framed. *Quiz Show* still does not ask the NBC network executives or the advertising sponsors pertinent questions about their involvement or even indicate that corporations ever face repercussions for their actions. Although this was, in part, Redford’s “point,” the film fails to offer the public any viable social alternatives to these power structures.<sup>110</sup> The moral of the 1990s tale is an admission that greed—in whatever form—is inherently bad but an admonition that each individual is ultimately responsible for the course of one’s life. If each person holds clearly defined values, such as “fairness” and “justice,” then the subversiveness of corporate strategies can be eradicated. But the American public should know by now that that is not what happened in mass media industries in the 1990s.

The Telecommunications Act, legislation passed in 1996, mandated a conversion from analog broadcasting technology to digital and high-definition broadcasting technology. Such a change in television industry standards also required the public to purchase improved television reception technology to see the very broadcasts that utilize the public’s airwaves, and yet, the

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<sup>110</sup> Buena Vista, a subsidiary of Disney, owner of the ABC television network (which aired few quiz programs in the 1950s and was not subject to the congressional investigation, but would be the home of both daytime and nighttime versions of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*) distributed the film, and some consideration must be given to their influence in shaping the content as well. For instance, Bronwen Hruska, wrote about the upcoming release of “Disney’s ‘Quiz Show’” in “They Conned America,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 28, 1994, CAL-3.

public's input was not solicited in the policymaking process. To get better-looking television reception, the required technology for which would additionally boost profits for mass communication-related industries and provide more opportunities for advertising-sponsored messages to reach the nation's homes—all citizens had to do was ignore the fact that their elected government officials were handing over the public's valuable digital spectrum resources for free and allowing media companies to merge into goliath corporations that essentially determine what we see, hear, read, and play in popular culture. The fact that the public is not consulted directly about the programming it watches, about that programming's purpose, or about what is being sold over the airwaves *was* the relevant, critical issue, not only in 1959 but also in 1994. Instead of constituting the audience in terms of a modern discourse, however, Redford's *Quiz Show* recognizes the television audience merely as a nondescript and powerless jury convened after the damage had been done, and each *Quiz Show* audience juror is left to determine the degree to which Van Doren, specifically, should have been punished for deceiving the public in light of widespread institutional wrongdoing that Congress could not—and cannot—control.

Reaction to the film from most newspaper reviewers was uniformly positive, with praise heaped upon the actors for their captivating performances and credit given to Redford's commitment to include the "ambiguities of the situation" authentically.<sup>111</sup> Magazine

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<sup>111</sup> Kenneth Turan, "'Quiz Show's' Category: Evil and Moral Ambiguity," *Los Angeles Times*, September 16, 1994, F-4. See also Hruska, "They Conned America"; Richard Bernstein, "For \$64,000, What Is 'Fiction'?" *New York Times*, September 4, 1994, 2-1; Richard Cohen, "A Question for 'Quiz Show,'" *Washington Post*, September 27, 1994, A21; Michael Elkin, "The Truth Behind 'Quiz Show': Herb Stempel Sets the Record Straight on the Jewish Question," *Baltimore Jewish Times*, October 7, 1994, 44; Rich Frank, "Van Doren Is Back," *New York Times*, September 11, 1994, E19; Richard N. Goodwin, "The Historical Facts About 'Quiz Show,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1994, F-5; Hal Hinson, "Quiz Show," *Washington Post*, April 21, 1995, D7; Hal Hinson, "'Quiz Show': Redford Has a Winner," *Washington Post*, September 16, 1994, F1; Caryn James, "They're Movies, Not Schoolbooks," *New York Times*, May 21, 1995, B1; M. J. McCollum, "A Look at Redford's 'Quiz Show,'" *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 16, 1994, E-5; "Quiz Show Rigged Again," *Christian Science Monitor*, October

commentators, however, generally picked apart the film's historical slippages and faulted Redford and Attanasio (a former television critic for *The Washington Post*) for crafting a narrative intended to elicit a specific audience response, just as the quiz show producers had done in the 1950s.<sup>112</sup> For such critics, the film was just another example of one medium out to slander its revenue rival. Comparisons were also drawn between 1950s quiz shows and the state of the television industry in the early 1990s, with clear concern expressed about the power of television decision-makers to shape the worldview of their viewers.<sup>113</sup>

In Redford's film publicity summaries, his retelling of the 1959 events is offset in idealized frames of "now" versus "then." In a 1994 interview with Redford, Dan Wakefield wrote:

"The quiz show scandal was the end of our innocence, a collective shock to the consciousness of the moment," Redford says with feeling at a break on the set. "Nowadays that kind of thing—deception, lying to the public—wouldn't even raise eyebrows. Back then, the revelation that we could be so malleable, that heroes of that stature could be lying to us, sent us into shock. It was the first time we all could *see* it, the first time we *watched* it. You can trace the decline in American morality to that event. It lowered the academic profession in the public mind, and I think it led to the atmosphere that brought on bigger lies and scandals—Vietnam, Watergate, Iran-contra."<sup>114</sup>

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28, 1994, ProQuest (69694298); Howard Rosenberg, "'Quiz Show': The Pattern Still Lives," *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 1994, F-1; and Julie Salamon, "The End of America's Age of Innocence," *Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 1994, A12.

<sup>112</sup> David Ansen, "When America Lost Its Innocence—Maybe," *Newsweek*, September 19, 1994, 62-63; Thomas Doherty, "Quiz Show," *Cineaste*, February 1995, 85-87; Reuven Frank, "'Quiz Show' Follies," *New Leader*, September 12, 1994, 18; Max Frankel, "This Is Your Life," *New York Times Magazine*, October 9, 1994, 32; Meg Greenfield, "The Quiz Show Scandals," *Newsweek*, October 24, 1994, 88; Brian D. Johnson, "Paradise Lost," *Maclean's*, September 26, 1994, 56; Stanley Kauffmann, "Truth or Consequences," *New Republic*, October 10, 1994, 32-34; John Leo, "Faking It In 'Quiz Show,'" *U.S. News & World Report*, October 17, 1994, 24; "Quizzling Show," *New Republic*, October 24, 1994, 9; Richard Schickel, "Barbarians at the Gate," *Time*, September 19, 1994, accessed August 5, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,981444,00.html>; Peter Travers, "Watergate TV Style," *Rolling Stone*, September 22, 1994, 103; Dan Wakefield, "Robert Redford: His 50's, Then and Now; 'Quiz Show' Takes Two Guys Back to a More Innocent America," *New York Times Magazine*, August 21, 1994, 26-29; and Richard Zoglin, "Why Quiz Show Is a Scandal," *Time*, October 10, 1994, 91.

<sup>113</sup> A relevant question is: Would the Tea Party currently exist in American politics without the racist, right-wing Rupert Murdoch propaganda machine that was permitted to flourish under the 1996 Telecommunications Act?

<sup>114</sup> Wakefield, "Robert Redford," 28.

As someone who lived in New York City—and who had reportedly won a fishing rod as a consolation prize on *Play Your Hunch*—Redford’s memory of public responses to the scandal does not align with the sentiments recorded in national print media nor with the very detailed understandings of the scandal voiced by several hundreds of people who wrote to Columbia University. While Redford aptly placed the television quiz show scandal in the historical context of government scandal, equations between the quiz shows and Watergate or Iran-contra are, simply, hyperbole. Redford’s conflation of more than two decades of political actions at the federal level with representations of the 1950s television industry deeply problematizes key components of the American cultural memory of the quiz show scandal. For the first time since the original disclosure of fraud, media discourses about the scandal were politicized, reigniting critical attention to the power of mass media to create the version of the world they wanted their audiences to see. But in politicizing the issues, the 1959 scandal became cloaked in 1990s discourses about “bleeding-heart liberals”—like Redford (and purportedly, mass media)—versus conservatives and the capitalist interests of big business.

Rather than recognize the 1950s audience as a united nation of citizens, as they largely saw themselves, media discourses about Redford’s film characterized the historical audience, essentially, as the “problem,” because they were “shocked...when it turned out that programs like ‘Twenty-One’ and its most celebrated contestant, Charles Van Doren, were not dealing from a straight deck.” From the perspective of journalists writing in the 1990s, “so many scandals have come and gone in the intervening years it’s hard to work up much passion about that one.”<sup>115</sup> But the fact that the quiz show scandal seemed trite and unimportant in the 1990s when

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<sup>115</sup> Turan, “‘Quiz Show’s’ Category,” F-4.

compared to the government and business scandals of the 1970s and 1980s obscures the 1950s reality that rigging television shows was not shocking to most of that public, either.

The *Quiz Show* audience is determining values, not of the 1950s but of their contemporary era, and these values are affected by the information gathered in the interim. As attitudes and cultural mores evolve with the passage of time, collective memories are amended with knowledge learned through distance and perspective. As Philip Rosen notes, “We now always know more than they did then. The gap between this ‘we’ and this ‘they’ is, as we have seen, a basic condition for modern historiography.”<sup>116</sup> Yet in Redford’s docudrama, Van Doren had again become the sole culprit who succumbed to the television industry’s lures, and instead of knowing more than the historical audience, the 1990s audience actually knows less. The *Quiz Show* audience is seemingly left with the residual message that media are impersonal, and resistance is futile, in that *Quiz Show* ultimately recognizes that the odds are stacked in the house’s favor and that the public has lost, not its innocence but its ability to determine its own media representation and, hence, its own historical record.

Redford’s film did stir the passions of people who had “been there” during Charles Van Doren’s original celebrity, on the campus of Columbia University or in the vast television viewing audience. Several protested loudly that Redford had “gotten it all wrong” and offered glimpses of a “real” Charles Van Doren in their personal memoirs.<sup>117</sup> In their first-person accounts, Van Doren appears consistently sympathetic and likeable. “Whatever Van Doren’s flaws, he was not a snob. He was much too well bred to spurn a handshake,” suggested

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<sup>116</sup> Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 226.

<sup>117</sup> Joseph Epstein, “Redford’s Van Doren & Mine,” *Commentary* 98 (1994): 40-46; Morris Freedman, “The Fall of Charlie Van Doren,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 73.1 (1997), 157-65; Jeffrey Hart, “‘Van Doren’ and ‘Redford,’” *National Review*, November 7, 1994, 78-80; and Philip K. Jason, “Van Doren—A Memoir,” *WordWrights* 17 (1999), accessed February 5, 2002, <http://previewport.com/Home/jason-y6.html>. Also available at <http://philjason.wordpress.com/2009/01/12/van-doren-a-memoir/>.

Goodwin.<sup>118</sup> Morris Freedman, a fellow Columbia University graduate student who advanced to teach at City College, likewise paid Van Doren genuine compliments on his character, even though Freedman and Van Doren apparently did not remain close. “Those of us who knew Charlie were surprised and pleased to see his prodigious weekly television demonstration of random information. We did not regard him as a wiz who made a point of his knowledge...Charlie flaunted neither knowledge nor insight. He was an amiable, gentle, self-possessed, charming man, without affectation, direct, well-spoken, thoughtful, comfortable with himself.”<sup>119</sup> In critique of Redford’s film, Joseph Stone, who had been the Assistant District Attorney for the 1958 New York County grand jury proceedings, used the same phrase he and D.A. Frank Hogan had publicized to characterize the original quiz show practices of deception: “a tawdry hoax.”<sup>120</sup> Only two years before the film’s release, Stone had authored his own book about the 1958 New York County investigation of quiz shows, which provided a more accurate picture of the breadth of the deception and contained far more details than Goodwin’s one-chapter synopsis.<sup>121</sup> Stone’s account of the investigation was from a local level, however; Goodwin’s congressional status effectively elevated the issue to the national level, and the congressional hearings had gotten far more press coverage (both domestic and international) than the original New York County grand jury (which had been silenced by media executives’ influence on Judge Schweitzer). Goodwin’s version was more marketable.

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<sup>118</sup> Goodwin, *Remembering America*, 55.

<sup>119</sup> Freedman, “The Fall of Charlie Van Doren,” 161.

<sup>120</sup> Stone told the *New York Times* that Redford’s film was “a tawdry hoax.” Quoted in Don Enright, “The Ethics of a Movie on the Quiz Show Scandal,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 1994, F-3. It was the same phrase the District Attorney’s office used in June 1959, when Judge Mitchell Schweitzer sealed the grand jury presentment. See “‘A Tawdry Hoax,’” *Newsweek*, June 22, 1959, 46.

<sup>121</sup> Joseph Stone and Tim Yohn, *Prime Time and Misdemeanors: Investigating the 1950s TV Quiz Scandal—A D.A.’s Account* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

In a scene following the reading of Van Doren's statement to the House subcommittee, Redford's balcony of gallery extras was filmed applauding New York Representative Steve Derounian's admonishment of Van Doren—the message, ostensibly, is no one should think they can get away with deceiving the American public. But Redford's 1994 American public was again in the midst of being duped—by the hollow promises of modern mass communication embedded in what would become the 1996 Telecommunications Act. In the 1990s, as they had in 1959, mass media moguls largely determined what was “better” television, not the public. In the 1996 legislation, technical standards—and profits—were primary concerns over content. With limits to ownership relaxed in favor of corporate media, several large media companies consolidated into one of six conglomerates, so that nearly every piece of popular culture consumed globally was produced by a familiar major player. The line between program content and advertisement would begin to fade, as product placement became the norm across visual media, including video games. The differences between “reality” and “fiction” would essentially diminish.

Rather than address contemporary issues head on, Redford's 1950s past is filled with men in funny suits who like big gas-guzzling cars and smoking cigars. It is a man's world—and a WASP man's world, at that. With the exception of Vivienne Nearing, who was important to Van Doren's original dethronement, the female contestants—the most sought-after commodity of 1950s quiz show producers—were nowhere to be found in Redford's tale. Through his narrative, Redford frames the underlying issue as a mythic Jew-versus-Gentile clashing, with the Gentile being the preferred audience draw. While there is certainly truth to the assertion that white, male Protestantism was ritualized as the middle-class norm in the 1950s, Redford again confuses a national narrative for television quiz show reality. The main concern for the quiz show producers

was to emphasize that the American Dream was possible for everyone—a concern that required including women and other members of minority groups. Their successes and accomplishments, in many ways, were more critical to the quiz show façade than were Van Doren's. Charles Van Doren had proven he could make his own successes and accomplishments long before he appeared on a quiz show. It was everyone else who had kept the nation dreaming of the day they would get their chance.

While the original saga of Charles Van Doren and *Twenty-One* contains elements of celebrity, corruption, and the power of the media, it is also an installment in the saga of how the American public lost control of the airwaves, an issue that was again raising its ugly head at the time of *Quiz Show's* theatrical release. The historical fact is that the public *was* misled in the 1950s and has never had any significant influence on a public-interest television medium, but historical motives essentially become irrelevant to the final outcome, particularly once Redford reintroduced the scandal into contemporary media discourses as emblematic of a “lost innocence,” an essential component in American cultural myths of the Cold War 1950s, when we were all sure who was “with us” and who was “against us.” Rather than clarify the long-forgotten history of television's obligations to public interest or how Van Doren came to symbolize a meshing of public interest and profitability, the myriad discourses that sprang as reactions to *Quiz Show's* acclaim managed to erase gender and race from the narrative completely, and to ignore the reality that, at the time of their writing, media corporations were again in the process of dismantling their commitments to serve the public interest. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 ultimately parceled out the digital spectrum, deregulated the broadcasting industry, permitted the convergence of multiple technologies into one device, enabled synergy to proliferate, encouraged the microtargeting of audiences, and required the

American public to purchase new versions of old technologies so that mass media could sell them consumer goods. One is left to wonder if iPods, iPads, and Blackberries are really worth their total costs.

The public's interest in television broadcasting was ignored in the 1950s and again in the 1990s—in national policymaking as well as in discussions about the 1950s. The 1959 congressional hearings, in fact, had done little to restore anything lost, to punish those inherently responsible for the fraud, or to institute dramatic changes in the American television broadcasting system, despite the outspoken consensus among the subcommittee members and television critics that changes needed to be instituted in the American public's interest. Then—and again in the 1990s—media conglomerations lobbied the right elected officials, and their corporate interests prevailed. For the networks—which had become fractions of giant media conglomerates—the fruits of the 1996 Telecom Act, and the conditions of the television industry in its wake, led ultimately to the runaway success of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* in 1999—and to a reengineering of the quiz show format to be competitive enough for primetime television.

#### **5.4 WHO DOESN'T WANT TO BE A MILLIONAIRE?:**

##### **QUIZ CRAZE REDUX IN THE 2000S**

In 1990, CBS tested a game show called *Everybody's Equal*, in which every member of the audience had the opportunity to walk away with the \$10,000 grand prize by being the fastest

person to buzz in with the correct answers to a variety of questions.<sup>122</sup> The show's very name emphasized the ages-old pillar of the American Dream myth, and the format, which included providing every audience member with a hand-held signaling device, reinforced the "common" man's access to instant financial reward. "To give the shows an all-American look, producers like to fill their studios with out-of-towners," noted the *Los Angeles Times*. Recruiters were stationed at all of the major Hollywood tourist attractions, where they offered sightseers free tickets to be in studio audiences. Producers were still trying to project a cross-section of the American citizenry, and they were still offering the audience something for nothing. It would take almost an entire decade for game show producers to combine the right amount of audience participation with a big enough reward. When the recipe congealed into *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* in 1999, the big-money primetime quiz shows returned to the airwaves with a vengeance that changed the stakes even for the well-established successful syndicated games like *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel of Fortune*.

Based on the British version of the same name, America's *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* premiered in August 1999 on ABC, with longtime television personality Regis Philbin as the host. Rather than occupy a regular timeslot, however, the show was scheduled sporadically and marked as a "special event." The specialness of it was confirmed when, for the first time in more than forty years, a game show became the most-watched program on television. Within months, the overwhelming popularity of the show propelled it to the number one spot in the ratings, to which ABC responded by airing new episodes up to five nights a week in primetime. *Millionaire*'s format was similar to *The \$64,000 Question*, in that contestants were required to answer a progression of questions (originally fifteen levels) that increased in

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<sup>122</sup> Bob Pool, "It's No Contest: Visitors Jump at Free Chance to Play Along," *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1990, B-1.

difficulty as the dollar amounts increased. *Millionaire* even reused some of the same 1950s quiz show vernacular that had been dormant for decades. Contestants sat in the “hot seat” (the term used to describe contestant trial runs, during which producers would determine if the applicant was camera-ready) and could use “lifelines.” Originally a key component of *Strike It Rich*, the Heart Line enabled home viewers or consumer goods corporate executives to phone in with donations for the downtrodden losing contestants who appeared on the show.

There was no isolation booth on the *Millionaire* set, but that also made it easier for Philbin to interact with the contestants to let the audience see their personalities—and his. Contestants faced no time limits for giving their “final answer,” which they had to choose from among four possibilities—the show was, in fact, still “giving” contestants the correct answer; the contestant merely had to recognize which of the four was correct. Furthermore, contestants were granted three opportunities for outside assistance: Ask the Audience, 50/50 (the computer would remove two of the wrong answers from the choices, leaving only two answers from which to choose), and Phone-a-Friend. And, should a contestant use all three lifelines, he or she could always count on being shown the next question and its multiple-choice answers before making a final decision about whether to continue playing or to stop and walk away with the money they had accumulated up to that point.

*Millionaire* projected immediacy. Episodes were aired the day after they were taped, which was as “live” as any game show got in the twenty-first century. Contestants were culled from all parts of the country through a multi-staged process that began with home viewers phoning a toll-free number and answering a “Fastest Finger” question that typically required putting four names, places, objects, or ideas in some type of chronological order, from first to last or from newest to oldest. The noticeable difference was that *Millionaire*’s questions, at least

in the earlier rounds, were usually pop culture-based and required no academic knowledge of the *Jeopardy!* caliber. It was everybody's chance to fulfill the American Dream.

*Millionaire*'s wild success prompted the other major networks to try to imitate it. Newcomer network Fox quickly jumped on board, airing the bluntly named *Greed* by November 1999. Only one month after *Millionaire* premiered, "NBC executives did not attempt to hide their envy of ABC's hit quiz show...when they leaked news of their 'Twenty-One' plans to the trade papers," noted the *Washington Post*.<sup>123</sup> Just five years after the release of Redford's *Quiz Show*, "NBC is looking to bring back the game show that helped bring down the big money quiz shows of the late 1950s," an announcement that many journalists found puzzling.<sup>124</sup> "So why would NBC want to bring back the show that has come to symbolize the industry's greatest shame?" asked Lisa de Moraes. The answer, for NBC Senior Vice President Rick Ludwin, was simple. "I think the notoriety of it and the danger work in our favor...It's an intriguing property and we will certainly have a small army of compliance and [broadcast standards and] practice people watching our every move. Who would want to be the broadcast standards person who allowed the most notorious show in the history of television back on the air and had something go wrong? I'm sure it will be carefully monitored."<sup>125</sup> Three months after NBC's news leak, *Twenty-One* did begin airing in primetime on the network, with tabloid television's Maury Povich as the host.<sup>126</sup> Press coverage mainly concentrated on the network's ownership of the notorious show and the twenty-first-century format updates—including multiple choice answers and the studio audience selecting which waiting contestant played next—rather than emphasize

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<sup>123</sup> Lisa de Moraes, "Which Scandal-Ridden Quiz Show May Return?," *Washington Post*, September 28, 1999, C-7.

<sup>124</sup> Joe Schlosser, "NBC Revives Infamous 'Twenty-One,'" *Broadcasting & Cable*, September 27, 1999, 6.

<sup>125</sup> de Moraes, "Which Scandal-Ridden Quiz Show May Return?," C-7.

<sup>126</sup> Maury Povich was the host of the celebrity gossip show *A Current Affair* from 1986 to 1990 and went on to host his own talk show that featured heated discussions of sensitive personal matters (often paternity test results) on display for the television viewing audience to see. *The Maury Povich Show* aired 1991-1998, and was renamed *Maury*, whose program run began in 1998 and continues at the time of this writing.

how producers had historically controlled the outcomes or how widespread the practices had been across networks.<sup>127</sup> With Redford's film occupying the most recent memory of the 1950s quiz show scandal, it was as though *Twenty-One* had been the only offender, and it was time to see if it had been rehabilitated. Not to be outdone, CBS announced it was considering the possibility of bringing back *The \$64,000 Question*, *I've Got a Secret*, and nearly every other quiz show property taking up space in their copyrighted programming closet.<sup>128</sup> The primetime quiz craze had begun again.<sup>129</sup>

Throughout the 2000s, quiz-based shows evolved and mutated into myriad game-based programming and viewing options, from *The Weakest Link* to *I vs. 100* and *Russian Roulette* to *Are You Smarter than a 5th Grader?* In most cases, there were few opportunities for contestants to show off their knowledge of Shakespeare, geography, or history. Instead, contestants were required to be familiar with contemporary popular culture and to recall the headlines and top stories from various mass media outlets. As federal regulations restricting media outlet ownership were further dismantled via the 2003 update to the 1996 Telecommunications Act, the successes of the new crop of \$1 million-plus quiz games even took a toll on longtime syndicated game show staples *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel of Fortune*, which altered their formats, essentially to "keep up with the Joneses." *Wheel of Fortune* added a \$1 million prize wedge, although the

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<sup>127</sup> Paul Gray and William Tynan, "Those Old Good Games," *Time*, January 17, 2000, 44-45; Mark Lacter, "Blair Witch TV," *Forbes*, May 1, 2000, 64; Lewis Lord, "When the Winning Answers Were Rigged," *U.S. News & World Report*, December 6, 1999, 72; Judy Quinn, "It's Quiz Time," *Publisher's Weekly*, December 20, 1999, 19; Johnnie L. Roberts, "How to Use a 'Lifeline,'" *Newsweek*, February 28, 2000, 46-48; Joe Schlosser, "NBC Revives Infamous 'Twenty-One,'" *Broadcasting & Cable*, September 27, 1999, 6; Joe Schlosser and Melissa Grego, "Multiple Choice," *Broadcasting & Cable*, January 17, 2000, 128; and Joel Stein, "Going Millionaire Crazy?," *Time*, January 17, 2000, 40-43.

<sup>128</sup> Joe Schlosser, "CBS Has \$64,000 Answer," *Broadcasting & Cable*, October 4, 1999, 6.

<sup>129</sup> Lewis Lord, "When the Winning Answers Were Rigged," 72; and Joe Schlosser, "Game Show Frenzy Takes Hold," *Broadcasting & Cable*, November 1, 1999, 22.

possibility of a contestant actually winning \$1 million remained hopelessly miniscule,<sup>130</sup> and *Jeopardy!* removed its five-day contestant appearance limit, which meant a winning contestant could earn an unlimited amount of money over an indefinite period of time. The changes in *Jeopardy!*'s format, in particular, should have resulted in a sense of déjà-vu for television viewers over the age of 60—as well as for anyone who knew the history of primetime U.S. quiz shows.

Under *Jeopardy!*'s new format rules, Ken Jennings, a mild-mannered 30-year-old Utah software engineer, amassed more than \$2.5 million over the course of seventy-four consecutive wins from June through November 2004—for identifying hundreds (perhaps thousands) of categorical factoids largely unrelated to everyday human existence, and overwhelming his every competitor in the process. He was unbeatable—and oddly popular with mass audiences.<sup>131</sup> The “Cult of Ken” spread via web rings and chat rooms, across bulletin boards, and through internet message posts from fans around the world, although some critics began to think Jennings was just a smug smart aleck.<sup>132</sup> And then it happened—during his seventy-fifth appearance, Ken Jennings lost. To Nancy Zerg, an actress-turned-Ventura, California, real estate agent.<sup>133</sup> The same evening that his taped *Jeopardy!* defeat aired, Jennings appeared on *Late Show with David Letterman*, and local television news programs across the country aired footage from a press interview in which Jennings proclaimed, essentially, that he had proven you can accomplish

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<sup>130</sup> To be rewarded with the \$1 million prize, a contestant had to land on the \$1 million sliver, then avoid Bankrupt wedges for the remainder of the game, then spin the final Bonus Round wheel AND land on the secretly hidden \$1 million prize, and actually solve the Bonus Round puzzle correctly to be rewarded.

<sup>131</sup> James Gorman, “‘Jeopardy’ Millionaire Is Smart, but Is He a Genius?,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2004, WK5.

<sup>132</sup> Jennings himself commented on the disparity of audience opinions of him in *Brainiac: Adventures in the Curious, Competitive, Compulsive World of Trivia Buffs* (New York: Villard, 2006).

<sup>133</sup> Scott D. Pierce, “Question: Who is Nancy Zerg? Answer: Contestant who beat Utah’s Ken Jennings on ‘Jeopardy!’” *Deseret Morning News*, December 1, 2004, accessed December 4, 2004, <http://deseretnews.com/dn/print/1,1442,595109201,00.html>.

anything by being *smart*.<sup>134</sup> Although Jennings was not credited with reigniting the American public's interest in education (a seemingly impossible task in the age of No Child Left Behind), he would make the talk show circuit and be interviewed by Ellen DeGeneres, Regis Philbin and Kelly Ripa, the women on *The View*, and Carson Daly before beginning to appear in television commercials for Cingular Wireless and Federal Express.

Whereas Charles Van Doren toiled to shed his public image as a quiz show contestant once his reign on *Twenty-One* was over, Ken Jennings embraced his celebrity as a trivia storehouse and has made a career out of being a game show contestant since then. Jennings became a member of "The Mob" on *I vs. 100* and tried to thwart the success of contestants in three different episodes between October 2006 and February 2007. In fall 2007, he won another \$100,000 on *Grand Slam*, a "super tournament" between sixteen of the biggest money-winning contestants in game show history. (Thom McKee, from *Tic Tac Dough*, was there, too, but was eliminated in the first round.) Jennings beat a panel of fifth graders, proving he was smarter than them, to become the winningest game show contestant ever in October 2008. He was rewarded by being the featured Guest Expert lifeline in twenty-two episodes of the syndicated daytime version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* And, of course, Jennings returned to *Jeopardy!* for the 2005 Ultimate Tournament of Champions as well as to compete against a super-computer during a special three-day IBM Challenge as recently as February 2011.

In his 2006 memoir/trivia history book, *Brainiac*, Jennings detailed his experiences as a *Jeopardy!* contestant and put his winning streak into common-sense perspective: Jennings had always been fascinated with trivia since childhood and had watched game shows on television

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<sup>134</sup> Jennings first appeared on *Letterman* on June 11, 2004, after he had won his first eight *Jeopardy!* matches. Jennings lost to Zerg on November 30, 2004, and appeared on *Letterman* the same night. A catalogue of Jennings' appearances is found at <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1668506/filmseries#tt0159881>.

for most of his life.<sup>135</sup> He had participated in Brigham Young University's college quiz bowls, for which he had been required to memorize the same types of information that he would be asked on *Jeopardy!*, and he had studied the growing number of guidebooks and almanacs that provided tips on how to be a winning big-money game show contestant. After his first win, Jennings then had the benefit of being familiar with the signaling device, which he claimed was his biggest advantage over his competitors. In addition, *Jeopardy!* uses questions from a relatively limited number of quiz bowl categories; inevitably, over the course of Jennings' winning streak, similar questions were eventually repeated. There was no mystery to Jennings' success; he had—luckily—just been in the right place at the right time to become a contestant, and he had made the most of it when given the opportunity to play.

Jennings contextualized the 1950s quiz craze as part of the history of human fascination with trivia but referenced Redford's *Quiz Show* when discussing Charles Van Doren and the television fraud.<sup>136</sup>

[W]hen people today talk about the quiz show hysteria of the 1950s, they don't remember the top-rated *Question*. Instead they probably picture the WASP patrician and the schlubby Brooklyn Jew facing off on NBC's own isolation booth knockoff, *Twenty-One*. The 1995 film *Quiz Show* (directed by Robert Redford, who received a fishing pole for his own 1958 appearance on the game show *Play Your Hunch*) cannily used the rigged quiz shows as a metaphor for America's gradual disillusionment with authority and received truth: the Kennedy assassination, Vietnam, Watergate. If not for Redford's film the quiz show scandal would barely be remembered today...

As a result of the outcry, quizmasters and producers were drummed out of the TV business for decades. No one fell further than Van Doren, who spent a year protesting his innocence and dodging subpoenas before finally admitting his guilt to Congress...

The producers knew that the appeal of their shows lay in audiences *actually believing* the furrowed brows, the beads of sweat, the puzzled concentration. Trivia mastery was key to these shows. Audiences were playing along with the questions themselves, and wouldn't have settled for the simulacrum of intellect and suspense that they were, in reality, watching...

The biggest giveaway [that the shows were rigged] for me is that both contestants [Van Doren and Stempel] give improbably complete responses to every question, middle

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<sup>135</sup> Jennings, *Brainiac*.

<sup>136</sup> Jennings provides the 1995 home video release date for the film, rather than the 1994 theatrical release date.

initials and all, which you would never do with casually acquired knowledge. In *How to Get on Jeopardy!...and Win!*, I learned that you should always limit your answer to a famous person's last name only, thus avoiding the chance of screwing up the first name. Stempel and Van Doren didn't get that memo...Fifty years too late, I've blown the lid off of these crooks!<sup>137</sup>

Jennings recognized Redford's *Quiz Show* as the dominant narrative about Van Doren and the events leading up to the 1959 scandal and re-affirmed their 1990s historical connection to national traumas of the 1960s and 1970s. Jennings' information about the 1950s participants and events, however, contains some factual errors, including Stempel was from Forest Hills, Queens, and not Brooklyn; the quizmaster and producer (Barry and Enright) were in exile for less than one decade, not "decades"; Van Doren did not dodge subpoenas for a year; and the majority of the audience was not terribly offended by the simulacrum of intellect and declared that they had been entertained by it. The discrepancies may be insignificant details by themselves, but they come from a source that presented them as the truthful context of a grander story, and when added together, they change the context of the scandal by forgetting what the scandal was actually about—commercial television and the government-regulated broadcasting industry's responsibilities to the public. Jennings invokes the cultural memory of Van Doren and the high-stakes quiz shows in the context of trivia, which briefly touches the original issues concerning the relationships between education, entertainment, and television. The historical popularization of trivia, however, overlooks the social accountability of media and government institutions—beyond the fact that punishments were meted out and twenty wrongdoers paid for their wrongs. Furthermore, Jennings establishes the difference between the "crooks" and the detective who scoured the clues for evidence. (In fact, according to Jennings, anyone who watched the Stempel-Van Doren matches closely could see that the fix was obvious, from the beginning.) The

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<sup>137</sup> Jennings, *Brainiac*, 75-78. Emphasis in original.

effect is that Jennings' narrative links himself to the television quiz show narrative while distinguishing him from Van Doren, in particular. Jennings, in other words, is the "real deal."

By the mid-2000s, it was clear that the twenty-first century's big-money game shows would have relatively short life spans and that they were not remotely like the originals had been in the 1950s. NBC's revamped *Twenty-One* had lasted only nineteen episodes, until 28 May 2000, before the network decided against ordering any more. *Millionaire* had left the ABC primetime airwaves in 2002 (although it would continue in daytime syndication with Meredith Vieira as host), but would occasionally reappear—with much fanfare—for a limited special engagement, such as for *Who Wants to Be a Super Millionaire?* (twelve episodes aired in 2004) and the Tenth Anniversary Special (eleven episodes aired in August 2009, following the release of the Academy Award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* in theaters).<sup>138</sup> CBS, which had the fewest successes in the quiz show comebacks, thrived off a new type of game—reality “game-docs,” such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother* (both of which, more than a decade later, remain reliable audience attractions for the network).

A number of journalists—and Ken Jennings—complained of the “dumbing down” of quiz shows for primetime consumption.<sup>139</sup> In a post-9/11 world, it was again important to have an intelligent public, but whereas the 1950s shows were deeply associated with concerns about American education, the shows of the twenty-first century seemed to reinforce another message entirely: *You did not need to be smart, as long as you could get rich*. Several journalists declared that there was no need for producers to go to great lengths to prep the contestants with questions

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<sup>138</sup> *Slumdog Millionaire*, Dir. Danny Boyle (Fox Searchlight, 2008) included the Indian version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* as an important part of the plot.

<sup>139</sup> Max Frankel, “Seeing Is Always Believing,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2003, WK11; Michael Maloney, “Gameshows Survive but in Different Form,” *Variety*, March 25, 2002, A26; Mark Roth, “Smart and Dumber,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 22, 2007, C-1; and Alessandra Stanley, “It’s All About Hottitude and Tweaking ‘Reality,’” *New York Times*, February 13, 2003, E1.

and answers because not only was it officially illegal to do so, but also the game show hosts only asked the sorts of everyday questions that anyone could know by turning on their televisions (and increasingly, their computers) to any network news program or entertainment gossip show, or by reading *People* or *Entertainment Weekly*. Suddenly, there was nostalgia for the difficult questions and the inspiring display of intellect from the old-time primetime quiz shows. “Come back, Charles Van Doren! All is forgiven,” wrote Lewis Grossberger in *Mediaweek*.<sup>140</sup>

In July 2008, Charles Van Doren broke his nearly half-century silence about his appearances on *Twenty-One* in 1956-57. The *New Yorker* published “All the Answers,” in which Van Doren gave his account of his participation and reflected on the ways he had been represented in mass media since his congressional testimony. The details about his experiences in 1950s television remained consistent with his statement to the House subcommittee, and as the rigging itself had been explained in detailed congressional testimony and by journalists, academics, and filmmakers over the course of fifty years, there were few revelations in Van Doren’s piece. One exception was an exchange between Al Freedman and Van Doren at dinner prior to Van Doren’s New York County grand jury testimony. Van Doren explained that Freedman had told him, “There’s a lot at stake. Jack [Barry] and Dan [Enright] are selling the company to NBC. I don’t know the details, but I think there’s a couple of million dollars...They’re counting on you.”<sup>141</sup> It was more than he had ever said publicly before, but there is no bombshell or smoking gun, so to speak, only glimpses of the contexts that lead someone to make choices that affect the course of one’s life.

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<sup>140</sup> Lewis Grossberger, “Easy as ABC,” *Mediaweek*, September 6, 1999, 52.

<sup>141</sup> Charles Van Doren, “All the Answers,” *New Yorker*, July 28, 2008, accessed July 29, 2008, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/07/28/080728fa\\_fact\\_vandoren](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/07/28/080728fa_fact_vandoren).

In the interim between 1959 and 2008, Van Doren lived a productive, relatively quiet, family existence. He turned down offers to consult on the PBS American Experience documentary about the quiz shows as well as on Redford's *Quiz Show*. Van Doren wrote that he saw Redford's film and "did enjoy John Turturro's version of Stempel," but was most troubled by the closing scene, which indicated that Van Doren never taught again. Despite a seventeen-year-career at Encyclopedia Britannica, authoring dozens of books, and being an adjunct English professor at the University of Connecticut Torrington, Van Doren and education remained disconnected from one another in cultural memory. It was as though he—and his story—had taught us nothing. The disconnect is most apparent when Van Doren writes of the privacy of writing, where he "can sit with my thoughts without having to respond to people who say, 'Aren't you Charles Van Doren?' Well, that's my name, I say to myself, but I'm not who you think I am—or, at least, I don't want to be."<sup>142</sup> The distinction between who he is and who everyone else thinks he is, is a real side-effect of the cultural memory that has been created about him. And it raises the question: how does one contend with mass media cultural myths that have become more true than reality?

Blogging for the *New York Times Opinionator*, Stanley Fish was one of the few to raise provocative questions about Van Doren's *New Yorker* piece. Fish wrote:

I don't intend this analysis as a criticism of Van Doren who has undergone and survived experiences most of us have been spared and few of us could have recovered from. Quite the reverse. Whatever temptation he succumbed to in 1956, in 2008 he refuses the temptation to make an exemplary lesson out of what happened. He does not cast himself as a victim, or as a reformed villain or a misunderstood hero, three narratives that are quite popular in these days of compulsive self-discovery. Now in his 80's Van Doren still hasn't discovered himself (do any of us?), still hasn't been able to plumb the depths of his motivations for actions that remain unfathomable, even to him, especially to him. The best thing about the essay is its refusal to claim self-knowledge while still desiring it.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Van Doren, "All the Answers."

<sup>143</sup> Stanley Fish, "None of the Answers," *New York Times Opinionator Blog*, August 10, 2008, accessed December 19, 2008, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/10/none-of-the-answers/>.

In commenting on Van Doren's desire to be someone other than the cultural memory version of himself, Fish critiqued, "It's that last bit—'at least I don't want to be'—...[that] makes the essay at once maddening—because it tantalizes without finally delivering—and affecting—because you sense that the author is not playing a game or laboring to reclaim a lost honor, but trying, as best he can, to live out a life."<sup>144</sup> Since 1959, Van Doren has *survived* the cultural memory of him, and at the end of the day, perhaps survival is the only fulfillment of the American Dream most of us will ever get.

## 5.5 TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

Charles Van Doren's fame and subsequent fall from television grace are preserved in headlines about a young, well-bred, charismatic university instructor who charmed millions of trusting Americans through his appearances on a quiz show and then told the public he had lied to them. The story seems to stop there, as there are few public Charles Van Doren triumphs after 1959. His accomplishments and prolific contributions to human social and cultural knowledge do not make the highlight reels; remaining are only the images of his defeats, the unraveling of an icon, a constant rewinding and fast-forwarding of his route to exile. Buried beneath the typefaces and news announcers' voiceovers is a story about the television industry's influence on other mass media and their own government overseers, as well as a story about mass media's disregard for its public—even widespread public opinion—when it interfered with their agendas and their

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<sup>144</sup> Fish, "None of the Answers."

conceptions of the ideal audiences needed to support national advertising sponsorships and a commercial broadcasting infrastructure. Instead, in American cultural memory, Van Doren's representation in relation to the scandal symbolizes individual responsibility while obscuring the social aspects of citizenship and the responsibilities public institutions have to that citizenry.

In the weeks immediately following Charles Van Doren's congressional statement, his father Mark Van Doren wrote personal letters to friends, including Joseph Wood Krutch and Margaret Clark, that remarked on the drastic difference between the personal outpourings of public sentiment for Charles and the media constructions of the scandal.

Since [the congressional hearing], these letters from strangers, by the hundreds and the thousands; sermons in pulpits; discussion hours on radio...and in general a sort of universal soul-searching, not sentimental or foolish but really serious. It is enough to make Charlie stagger under it, though he has not done that...The correspondence is of course a burden, but I think it is good for him to hear what people (not the newspapers) think and that they do think. I don't mean that they all think the same things. The range itself is impressive.<sup>145</sup>

The dominant cultural memory of Van Doren and of the quiz show scandal, however, relies on presumed audiences that did not necessarily exist. Mass media's relative disregard for the public most affected by the scandal is shown through the virtual absence of the audience of citizens who were so crucial in propelling the quiz show genre and its instant everyday celebrities to national attention. In later media accounts, in particular, scant attention is paid to a range of public responses or to any consideration of the public's deeper understanding of the scandal's elemental contexts. While a few of Van Doren's colleagues have reintroduced their personal recollections of the quiz show scandal era into the public record, less widely known are the ways in which the scandal—and Van Doren, as its primary symbol—inspired television viewers, students, and

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<sup>145</sup> Mark Van Doren, "To Joseph Wood and Marcelle Krutch," in *The Selected Letters of Mark Van Doren*, ed. George Hendrick (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 226.

ordinary citizens around him. In mass media, the “facts” of how audiences responded to the scandal—or demonstrated their outrage—were reduced to vocalizations of right and wrong, for or against. Pitting two sides against one another blanketed the larger social complexities of the scandal that *thousands* of individuals expressed in writing. Furthermore, through standardized media recollections of the events, the quiz show scandal became simply a tale about individual responsibility—instead of a tale about institutional responsibility *to* individuals. The “scandal” of the 1950s primetime television quiz shows is not that the public was aghast at the deception but that the public could not contend with mass media institutions and was effectively erased from the narrative.

From a modern perspective, we have to remember that Charles Van Doren’s story takes place in the schizophrenic American version of the 1950s, an era fraught with stark contradictions in recollections about Cold War society that have been largely overshadowed by a misrepresentative, nostalgic myth of public complacency and simpler times. As much scholarship has shown, the fifties were anything but simple. It was a decade of intense social confrontation as the country grappled with national issues of gender, race, and equality, and parallel international issues of sovereignty, accountability, and supremacy. From a modern perspective, we have to remember that celebrities provide examples of how audiences are imagined by popular culture producers. Charles Van Doren is but one example of how the media—through a selection of narratives spread publicly by popular mass media in their incessant self-promotion of the importance of popular mass media—can mask the difficulties presented by socially complex audiences. The underlying narrative of the quiz show scandal in mass media remains fairly consistent, but there are fluctuations in the story details overall, and

these “glitches” highlight the relationship between the narrative and its contemporaneous political, social, and cultural concerns.

The next time big-money television quiz shows return to the primetime broadcast schedules and the cultural memory of Charles Van Doren is inevitably invoked—in synch with their next product cycle—we should wonder what federal broadcast regulations will be poised for extinction or will make it easier for a handful of profit-minded corporate conglomerates to show-and-tell citizens what to value, and to surveil the effectiveness of their messages. The demographics of the next batch of winners will undoubtedly tell us whose consumer buying power is cherished by advertisers. The contestants’ successes and failures will be intended to show us that everyone is equal, that everyone has the opportunity to get a once-in-a-lifetime chance at winning easy money for the store of popular culture trivia in their heads (placed there, no less, via media conglomerate products), and that successful people are telegenic and good-spirited, even when they fall short of the prize. The formats of the programs will reinforce the blind objectivity of rules and tell us that “it’s nothing personal,” but everyone must be in it for himself. In all the quiz craze hysteria, we may even forget that the 1959 television quiz show scandal was the last good opportunity to alter the function of television in the U.S.

What we need to remember is that the myth of Charles Van Doren is one example of complicated and elusive history, bound in continuous power struggles over collective memory and transmitted to the public through mass media, where everybody has a story, and that story can—and often does—have an infinite number of authors. We need to remember that the history of our Van Doren cultural memory continues to be about the concerted shaping of public representation in the media and, in essence, of history itself.

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