

NEW YORK FORUM

ABOUT MEDIA

TV Editorials:
A Last Whimper

By Joan Konner

WE DO NOT WISH to let the death of television editorials go unnoticed. Quietly they are slipping into the sea of television commercialism, with no markers at the site. With them hand-in-hand goes their partner, the editorial reply by opposing viewpoints, but they lived a useful if pedestrian life, and someone should speak a proper eulogy.

The television editorials themselves are not such a terrible loss. Even in the best of all broadcasting worlds, they might have died of natural causes. Exercises in collective thinking, products of a mechanical, merchandising mind, they were written and delivered with all the style and inspiration of hired hands doing the

dinner dishes.

Too often they dealt with issues of marginal and even uncontested concern, and there is and always will be some cognitive dissonance between a pleasantly friendly face on the screen, or even a person of distinct character, and the tag line that says, "This represents the view of the management of this station." In the extreme one felt, at best, amusement at seeing a woman, or a minority, serving as a mask for an all-white male management whose position of power lay in commerce and profits.

But granting all that, and granting no greater purpose would have been served by so-called better production values, which cost much more, the "ed," editorials, together with the "op-ed," opposite editorials, produced a modest public dialogue that recognized the community of the station and its viewers. Their presence gave a human face and voice to the impersonal eye that dispenses our daily diet of news and entertainment, and even if fleeting and faint, there was enough information and caring to be the

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stuff of responsible and respectable journalism.

In addition, the replies were the only opportunity offered by stations to talk back to television.

While the men and women who appeared were often not camera-friendly, their commitment to some home-grown value or view, their passion to persuade and their refreshing sincerity outweighed the quality of their performance. They were the instruments of community feeling, which are the lifeblood of a political system that is getting too contrived and remote for its own good or ours.

There is no doubt now that broadcast editorials are an endangered species, not only in New York City but nationwide. In the last two years alone, the membership of the National Broadcast Editorial Association has gone from more than 200 members to 79. Only three New York City stations still carry editorials — WCBS (Channel 2), which has slipped them out of prime time, and WOR (Channel 9) and WPIX

— Continued on Page 44

NEW YORK FORUM

— Continued from Page 42

(Channel 11), continue the tradition. WNBC (Channel 4) stopped airing editorials in the fall. WNYW (Channel 5) took them off the air even before Rupert Murdoch took over, and WABC (Channel 7) hasn't aired one in two years.

The trend is symptomatic. Stations are run by businessmen, not newsmen, even though news is part of their business. Editorials cost money to produce, and they bring no financial return. In fact, they may at times have angered a client or a consumer, and station managers care less about the editorial line than the bottom line. Finally, deregulation has taken its toll. Station managements no longer feel compelled to give airtime to community affairs programming.



Greeley

Editorials, as we know them, have their roots in the early days of American newspapers when editor-owners were vital forces and visible figures, up to their inky elbows in the affairs of their cities and towns. Outspoken editors and publishers like Benjamin Franklin, Horace Greeley, William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer were distinct and recognizable individual molders of public opinion who could haunt the sleep of candidates or topple a political leader.

Even at newspapers, bigness has ended such intimacy and identifiability. Editorial writers (of which I was one too long ago) are employees with institutional voices, and the evidence is that editorial pages today change few votes and have little impact.

It is the op-ed page that flies the flag of personal journalism and signed opinion and, on occasion, stirs the political pot.

Television stations never developed a strong editorial tradition for many obvious reasons. Television, by definition, is expensive high tech. There were no one-man stations, no Ben Franklins or Joseph Pulitzers of TV. The law actually

discouraged TV editorializing. To have done otherwise would have made the thickets of "fairness" even more tangled and unruly than they have been. And the potential for abuse by an owner who is unscrupulous or ignorant (or both) is real.

But stuffiness and lack of imagination are not a legal requirement, and electronic letters to the editor can popularize and perhaps invigorate public discourse. We might ask why a station editorial is a necessary precondition for opening the microphone to the public. We might wish the dialogue were more compelling. We certainly wish that editorials dealt more with values and new ideas and took more risks.

But even without that better of possible worlds, the opportunity for every person to have a say is too important to allow it to pass casually. We can at least observe a moment of silence for the passing of editorials, and especially the editorial reply, for without them we get yet a little further from government of and by the people, who need a voice not only in the voting booth but in the media that more and more influence it.