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Chapter 9

A Revolution in Favor of Television: WCVB-TV and Robert Gardner's *Screening Room*

Brian L. Frye

What is good television? Today, that is essentially a normative question. Cable television and the Internet effectively provide a free market in television programs, so revealed preferences tell us what kind of television people want to watch. Good television can only mean the kind of television that people should be watching, whether or not they actually choose to watch it.

But until recently, it was also an empirical question. The supply of television programs was limited by broadcast monopolies, which were vulnerable to market failures. With limited competition, broadcasters had little incentive to innovate, and did not necessarily provide the kind of television programs that people actually wanted to watch. It was an open question whether people wanted something different and better.

In 1963, a group of academics and community leaders decided to test the proposition that people wanted better television. They formed Boston Broadcasters, Inc. (BBI) and applied for the license to operate VHF Channel 5 Boston, intending to operate a commercial television station in the public interest. In 1972, after almost a decade of litigation, they won the license and started broadcasting as WCVB-TV.



The original
WCVB-TV logo

During the ten years that BBI owned WCVB, it produced many innovative and unusual programs. Among them was Robert Gardner's *Screening Room*, one of the most delightfully unlikely programs ever aired on a network television station. Essentially, *Screening Room* was a talk show about independent filmmaking. Once a week, Gardner invited an independent filmmaker to show and discuss a selection of films or film clips. But *Screening Room* wasn't just a showcase for independent film. It also introduced a network television audience to intellectual film critics like Rudolf Arnheim and Stanley Cavell, in a uniquely accessible and entertaining way. In any case, it was quite unlike anything one expects to see on network television, then or now.

How was a program like *Screening Room* possible, and what can it tell us about the history of television? Obviously, *Screening Room* couldn't have existed without Gardner, who created and produced the program. But it also couldn't have existed on any station but WCVB. So the story of *Screening Room* begins with the long fight for the Channel 5 license and the creation of WCVB.

The Battle for VHF Channel 5 Boston

WHDH-TV

In 1954, the FCC decided to issue a license for VHF Channel 5 Boston. It received applications from WHDH, Inc. (WHDH), Greater Boston Television Corporation (Greater Boston), Massachusetts Bay Telecasters, Inc. (MBT), Allen B. DuMont Laboratories, Inc. (DuMont), Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc. (CBS), and The Post Publishing Company (Post).¹

The FCC held a comparative hearing, and the hearing examiner awarded the license to Greater Boston.² The hearing examiner also disqualified WHDH because it already held licenses to operate WHDH-AM 850 and WHDH-FM 94.5 in Boston, and was owned by the Herald Traveler Corporation, which published the *Boston Herald* and the *Boston Traveler*, and would decrease the diversification of control of communications media.³

WHDH, MBT, and DuMont appealed the decision, and the FCC reversed the hearing examiner, awarding the license to WHDH based on its "strong showing on all of the local factors" and its "past broadcast record."⁴ Greater Boston and MBT appealed the FCC's decision to the D.C. Circuit, and WHDH-TV began broadcasting on November 26, 1957.⁵

The "Million Dollar Lunch"

In the meantime, the House Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight launched an investigation of the FCC.⁶ On April 2, 1958, it heard the testimony of George C. McConaughy, the former Chairman of the FCC. Among other things, the Subcommittee asked him whether Robert B. Choate of the Herald Traveler Corporation had ever invited him to lunch. McConaughy admitted that he had, and that he had accepted. "We met and talked about various things. He did not say anything about his application except to say that his group had an application pending, and that they were very capable people and he just wanted to tell me that. That's all."⁷

That lunch ultimately caused WHDH to lose its television license, and led to the creation of WCVB. Many people assumed that Choate had bribed McConaughy to award the

Channel 5 license to WHDH.⁸ And in 1961, the D.C. Circuit remanded the case for a new hearing, finding that Choate had attempted to improperly influence the FCC.⁹

The Second Comparative Hearing

In 1962, the FCC gave WHDH a temporary license, and a demerit for bad behavior.¹⁰ WHDH immediately filed a renewal application, expecting to receive a permanent license after a perfunctory hearing. So it was surprised when the FCC invited competing applications. Greater Boston, Charles River Civic Television, Inc. (Charles River), and Boston Broadcasters, Inc. (BBI) filed applications, so the FCC scheduled a comparative hearing.¹¹

BBI was formed by a group of professionals and community leaders in order to apply for the Channel 5 license.¹² It proposed to use the resources of a commercial station to provide the quality programming of a noncommercial station. Its goal was “to create a different kind of TV station,” one that was relevant to “the needs, problems, and tastes of the community: One that brings the best of Boston’s unique local resources as well as those of the nation to television audiences, not by a scattering of programs specifically labeled ‘educational,’ but by infusing the whole schedule with more exciting and meaningful material.”¹³

One of the investors in BBI was Robert Gardner, the founding director of Harvard’s Film Study Center. Gardner helped develop BBI’s proposed programming, based on surveys, demographic studies, committee reports, and interviews.¹⁴ One of the programs BBI proposed was *Screening Room*, which would be hosted by Gardner, and would “provide a showplace for a wide variety of filmed and taped programs which otherwise have no television audience, many of which are produced by students of television and related fields and others experimenting in the art.”¹⁵

In 1969, the hearing examiner awarded the license to WHDH, “not because it is an applicant for renewal but because it has an operating record and its very existence as a functioning, manned station to advance against its opponents, whose promises, after all, are as yet just so much talk.”¹⁶ The hearing examiner also accused BBI of overreaching, criticizing its “exaggerated integration proposal,” its “extravagant local live proposal,” and its “impracticable proposed 24-hour operation,” and commenting, “its promises are permeated by an exuberance which makes one doubtful of their fulfillment.”¹⁷ BBI, Charles River, and Greater Boston appealed the hearing examiner’s decision.¹⁸

In 1969, the FCC reversed the hearing examiner and narrowly awarded the license to BBI. It found that WHDH’s record of past performance was merely average, and awarded the license to BBI in order to increase the diversification of ownership and the integration of ownership and management.¹⁹ After twenty-five years of litigation, the FCC had finally awarded the Channel 5 license.²⁰

WCVB-TV

BBI immediately started raising capital, and by 1971, it had about \$5 million.²¹ WHDH refused to sell its antenna and studio, so BBI rented an antenna from WBZ-TV Boston, and built a studio in a former International Harvester dealership in Needham,

Massachusetts.²² While WHDH was a CBS affiliate, BBI became an ABC affiliate, because CBS limited local programming. The FCC assigned BBI the call sign WCVB and held that WCVB's authority to operate Channel 5 would begin at 3 a.m. on March 19, 1972.²³

On March 19, 1972, at 1 a.m., WHDH signed off for the last time, and at 3 a.m., WCVB greeted its viewers with the following message:

William James once wrote: "If things are ever to move upward someone must take the first step and assume the risk of it." The men and women who comprise Boston Broadcasters Incorporated, and the management and staff of WCVB-TV, now take the first step on a journey in responsible broadcasting that has been nine and a half years in preparation.²⁴

In the 1960s and 1970s, most commercial television stations relied on their monopolies to generate profits. They had no incentive to produce innovative local programs, because they could turn a profit by showing network programs. But BBI promised to use its commercial television station to provide public interest television, and it delivered on that promise. The FCC defined public interest television as original educational programs. From the beginning, WCVB presented an unprecedented number of these, including programs on health, the law, and minority issues, and it presented more every year.

At its peak, WCVB showed about sixty-two hours of local programs per week, far more than any other network affiliate.²⁵ It presented local news programs five times a day, and spent \$650,000 producing a series of Saturday morning children's programs.²⁶ And in 1973, it introduced *Good Morning!*, a news program filmed in the community, rather than the studio, which inspired ABC's *Good Morning America*.²⁷

WCVB's station identification proclaimed, "We want what you want. Good television." The television industry approved, as WCVB was widely considered the best commercial television station in the country. And so did the public, as WCVB was wildly profitable. As the *New York Times* noted, "Since shortly after it was founded nine years ago, WCVB, the privately owned ABC affiliate in Boston, has been winning awards and accolades for its programming. The quality, quantity and diversity of its local programs have prompted people ranging from producer Norman Lear to ABC News President Roone Arledge to suggest that WCVB may be the best commercial television station in America. And in the past several years, it has begun to generate impressive profits as well."²⁸

But WCVB was still a commercial television station, as well as an ABC affiliate. While it focused on local programs, it also showed many network programs, including soap operas, talk shows, sporting events, and sitcoms. In fact, WCVB showed twice as many network programs as local programs.

Essentially, WCVB was a hybrid of a commercial television station and a public television station. Network programs attracted new viewers and enabled it to experiment on local programs. Local programs helped retain viewers, and enabled it to reach niche

audiences. In other words, WCVB's network programs subsidized its innovative local programs, which in turn helped distinguish its brand.

WCVB also focused on identifying and serving public demands. For example, as soon as it started broadcasting, WCVB realized that the public wanted late-night television. Most television stations stopped broadcasting at 1 a.m., when the ratings services stopped measuring viewers. But WCVB got a lot of mail from viewers who wanted to watch television after 1 a.m. So, as an experiment, on September 15, 1972, it introduced twenty-four-hour broadcasting on Friday nights. The experiment was popular, so it was expanded. Soon, WCVB was one of the first twenty-four-hour television stations.

Ironically, while WCVB dramatically increased the availability and diversity of local television programs, it indirectly decreased the availability and diversity of local newspapers. The Herald-Traveler Corporation used the profits from WHDH to support its unprofitable newspapers, the *Boston Herald* and *Boston Traveler*. When it lost WHDH, it couldn't afford to publish the newspapers. It immediately stopped publishing the *Traveler*, and sold the *Herald* to its rival the Hearst Corporation, which published the *Boston Record American*.²⁹ As a result, Boston gained a first-rate television station, but lost two mediocre newspapers.

Robert Gardner's Screening Room

One of the most interesting and unusual local programs produced by WCVB was *Screening Room*, a 90-minute late-night talk show hosted by Robert Gardner, in which independent filmmakers presented and discussed their films.³⁰ *Screening Room* hosted a wide range of filmmakers, including documentary filmmakers, animators, and avant-garde artists. The only common element was that the films were aesthetically interesting and not widely available. The purpose of *Screening Room* was to introduce the general public to new forms of filmmaking, by presenting independent films in a context that would enable people to understand and appreciate their significance. It exemplifies the innovative programs created by WCVB, and its success suggests that other commercial television stations were not satisfying consumer demand.

The Origins of Screening Room

Between 1972 and 1982, WCVB produced eight seasons of *Screening Room*, each season consisting of thirteen 90-minute episodes.³¹ *Screening Room* was one of WCVB's first late-night programs. Initially, it aired on Saturday from 1:05 a.m. to 2:35 a.m., and then it moved to the same time slot on Sunday.³² Ultimately, WCVB produced more than a hundred episodes of *Screening Room*, a few of which never aired.

Screening Room was recorded in the WCVB studio and adopted a conventional talk show format. Gardner would introduce the guest, usually a filmmaker, but occasionally a film theorist or critic. Then he would introduce a film or film clip, and ask the guest to provide some context. After showing the film or clip, Gardner and the guest would discuss how and why it was made, what it meant, and how it related to the filmmaker's other work. They would show and discuss additional films or clips for the remainder of the program. And then Gardner would make closing remarks.

Screening Room was unique to WCVB because no other commercial television station could have produced a similar program; while its format was conventional, its content was not. Other stations produced talk shows about commercial films playing in commercial theaters, but only WCVB would present a talk show about independent films, which most viewers would not otherwise be able to see.

Gardner was the creative force behind *Screening Room*. WCVB produced the program because Gardner was an investor in BBI and a director of WCVB. But *Screening Room* reflected his background as a documentary filmmaker and the director of Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. *Screening Room* not only hosted independent filmmakers and showed independent films, but also insisted on serious discussion of those films. Gardner demonstrated how to read a film critically, by carefully articulating his own experience of the films he showed, and challenging the filmmakers to explain their decisions and intentions.

The Structure of Screening Room

The content of a *Screening Room* episode was quite flexible, depending on the films presented and the direction in which the interview proceeded. But the FCC indirectly required Gardner to devote the majority of each episode to discussion. BBI promised the FCC that WCVB would provide an extraordinary number of local programs, and *Screening Room* was considered a local program because it was produced by WCVB. But the FCC rules stipulated that showing a film produced by a third party was not local programming. WCVB probably could have distinguished the films shown on *Screening Room*, but in an excess of caution, it required the majority of each episode to consist of talk.

The discussion-heavy format of *Screening Room* was an enormous advantage, which has proven historically important. Most of the films shown on *Screening Room* were quite unusual and difficult for the general audience to appreciate and understand. Having the filmmakers available to discuss how and why they made the films helped television audiences to understand and appreciate the goals of the filmmakers. In addition, many of the *Screening Room* programs have acquired substantial historical significance, as one of the few instances in which particular filmmakers were recorded discussing their films in detail.

Furthermore, many early episodes of *Screening Room* included film scholars and critics, in addition to the filmmaker. For example, Gardner invited Vladimir Petric, Stanley Cavell, Gerald O'Grady, and Rudolf Arnheim to participate in *Screening Room* discussions. Gardner also invited Octavio Paz and William Alfred to discuss his own film, *Dead Birds*.

However, Gardner eventually stopped inviting guests other than the filmmaker, finding that conversations generally developed more naturally between two people.³³

Unlike a typical television interviewer, Gardner avoids flip or trivial questions. While his interviews are relaxed, they are not casual conversations. He works hard to engage with each film and to understand the filmmaker's purpose. In some cases, one can feel him

struggle to appreciate the merits of a film. On occasion, he even implicitly challenges a filmmaker's choices. For example, Gardner admits that he did not understand the aesthetic and purpose of Yvonne Rainer's films when she was a guest on *Screening Room*, and that it affected his ability to engage with her work.³⁴

In addition, *Screening Room* materially contributed to the production of independent films, by providing filmmakers with much needed cash. While the budget of *Screening Room* was miniscule by broadcast standards, it was quite substantial for the world of independent film. Most independent filmmakers struggled to make ends meet and many venues paid little or nothing for screenings and appearances. The *Screening Room* budget enabled Gardner to pay his guests about \$1,000 to appear on the program, as well as a rental fee for the films they showed. Often, the filmmakers would make as much as \$1,500 or \$2,000 for their appearance on *Screening Room*, which was quite a substantial amount at the time.³⁵ In addition, they received invaluable exposure to a different and much larger audience than the one to which they were accustomed.

Screening Room Programs

The remarkable range of *Screening Room* guests and films can only be appreciated in context. Gardner was fearless in deciding whom he invited and what they could show. The first *Screening Room* program was taped on December 1, 1972, and aired on January 12, 1973. The guest was John Whitney Sr., an experimental animator best known today for his work on the iconic title sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. But Gardner soon interviewed much more controversial filmmakers.

On May 18, 1973, Gardner interviewed seminal avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage for a *Screening Room* episode that aired on June 22, 1973.

Among other things, Brakhage presented his seminal short film *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), in which he documented the birth of one of his children. *Window Water Baby Moving* is a silent film, in which Brakhage uses unusual visual effects in an attempt to convey the experience of childbirth. Notably, the film presents detailed close-ups of Jane Brakhage's vagina as she delivered the baby. Gardner insisted on broadcasting the film in its entirety, including the graphic images of childbirth; even today, it is unlikely any network station would broadcast this kind of explicit material, no matter the context.

On March 17, 1977, Gardner interviewed Canadian avant-garde filmmaker Michael Snow for a *Screening Room* program that aired on September 26, 1977. Among other things, Snow presented an excerpt from his film *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* (1974). The excerpt that Snow chose to show includes a shot in which a man and a woman urinate into buckets. After the program was taped, the station manager called Gardner to object to the inclusion of the excerpt. When the program



Robert Gardner with Octavio Paz and William Alfred on *Screening Room*



Robert Gardner with Stan Brakhage on *Screening Room*

aired, the excerpt remained, albeit with a black box superimposed over the genitalia of the actors. Nevertheless, one could still hear the sound of the urination.³⁶

And on July 9, 1980, Gardner interviewed French anthropologist and documentary filmmaker Jean Rouch for a *Screening Room* program that aired on November 12, 1980. Among other things, Rouch presented an excerpt from his short film, *Les maîtres fous* (1955), which documents the Hauka movement, widespread in West Africa from the 1920s to the 1950s. Hauka members participated in rituals in which they went into trances, often foaming at the mouth, and performed ceremonial processions that mocked their colonial rulers. *Les maîtres fous* documents a Hauka trance ritual, and has always been controversial because of its shocking imagery. Among other things, it shows the Hauka killing and eating a dog. Gardner's conversation with Rouch is especially rich, given their shared backgrounds as anthropologists and poetic filmmaking styles. For example, Rouch and Gardner have a long discussion about Dogon cosmology and mythology, in relation to one of Rouch's films.

While *Screening Room* presented many films with radical content for commercial television, in another respect the most revolutionary aspect of *Screening Room* was Gardner's willingness to show and discuss non-narrative, formally unusual films that challenged the expectations of television audiences. The most interesting and unique aspect of *Screening Room* was its total independence from and disregard of conventional assumptions about the tastes of television audiences. Gardner presented whatever he considered interesting or important, and assumed that his audience would also be interested.

The Importance of Screening Room

Screening Room was important because of the films it presented and because of how it presented them. Obviously, it introduced a large, popular audience to films that they would not have otherwise known existed and would not have had an opportunity to see. For many people, *Screening Room* offered the closest thing available to a seminar class in independent film, taught by a first-rate professor.

Screening Room also pushed the boundaries of television. Images of childbirth, nudity, and ritual violence all violated FCC guidelines, but Gardner showed them anyway, justifying his decision based on the context in which they were presented. It helped that they were shown in the middle of the night, when more sensitive viewers were less likely to be watching. Still, there was always a risk of repercussions, which thankfully never materialized. The threat of censorship may have indirectly affected Gardner's programming decisions. Several episodes of *Screening Room* were taped, but never aired. In some cases, the decision not to air a program may have been influenced by a concern that the risk of sanctions was too high.

But *Screening Room* was also important because of how it presented films. Gardner modeled a method of hosting a television show that was both conversational and intellectual. He showed that commercial television stations could appeal to real, popular audiences by offering them thoughtful, reflective discussions of art and culture. In other words, *Screening Room* was intentionally and explicitly pedagogical, unlike other commercial television programs. And its success showed that there was real consumer

demand for intellectually challenging programs. That lesson of *Screening Room* went largely ignored for many years, until the fragmentation of mass media gradually lowered the fixed costs of providing video content to the public.

The Reception of Screening Room

Almost immediately, *Screening Room* attracted a great deal of critical interest. Shortly after WCVB introduced twenty-four-hour broadcasting, Bruce McCabe of the *Boston Globe* singled out *Screening Room* as an exemplary late-night program. "The all-night shows are a mixed bag of movies, recycled syndicated offerings and daytime repeats, but two original ideas have developed. One is 'Screening Room,' a weekly showing of avant-garde films from 1:05 a.m. to 2:35 a.m. Saturdays, hosted by Robert Gardner."³⁷

A few months later, Cary Wasserman of the *Boston Globe* enthused, "No modern art has been more widely misunderstood than modern filmmaking. Robert Gardner's 'Screening Room' (WCVB-TV, Friday nights at 1:05) offers one of the few possibilities in the Boston area for seeing significant work of non-commercial filmmakers, and this week will present Stan Brakhage to show and discuss his films."³⁸

Wasserman provided a carefully elliptical description of the content of Brakhage's films. "A Brakhage film almost never relies on traditionally-composed images. Rather there are colors that flash across the screen, novel juxtapositions, images that possess their own subconscious logic ('Window Water Baby Moving') and an underlining of the effect of light and vision on the mind."³⁹ Wasserman pointedly neglected to mention that *Window Water Baby Moving* graphically documents the birth of a child.

Wasserman also commented on the wide range of unusual and important films and filmmakers that Gardner featured on *Screening Room*. "For an audience, Brakhage's films are a chance to see life through new eyes, and hopefully to be forced to define the nature of vision. It should be added that other programs offer highly diverse work ranging from Yugoslavian animation to cinema verite, all characterized by the risk-taking one associates with the non-commercial cinema."⁴⁰

Unfortunately, there is no hard data on the size of the *Screening Room* audience, because the ratings services stopped operating at 1 a.m., but circumstantial evidence suggests that it was substantial.⁴¹ WCVB introduced and expanded all-night programming on the basis of mail response, showing high demand.⁴² And late-night viewers had few other options. Anecdotal evidence suggests that *Screening Room* may have had as many as 250,000 viewers.⁴³

Gardner's Other Contributions to WCVB

In addition to hosting *Screening Room*, Gardner contributed to WCVB in many other ways. As a director, he participated in the governance of the station. But he also created a great deal of original television content. Most notably, he conceived of and created many so-called noncommercials for WCVB. As defined by Gardner, a noncommercial was a one-minute short film in a lyrical style that documented a person's life or experience, without selling or advocating anything, or even expressing an explicit point of view.



Gardner's noncommercials for WCVB generally documented residents of the greater Boston area as they did their jobs or otherwise engaged in everyday activities. For example, in *Policeman* (1973), a white-gloved Cambridge police officer directs traffic and shepherds children across the street, rhythmically waving his hands, as if dancing to the blues harmonica soundtrack.

In *Lobsterman* (1973), a young lobster fisherman hauls up a lobster pot, pulls out a lobster, replaces the bait, and moves on to the next trap. And in *Farmer* (1973), a grizzled farmer mows long grass with a scythe, pauses to sharpen the scythe, and then returns to mowing.

On regular occasions, WCVB would air one of Gardner's noncommercials during a commercial break, rather than a commercial advertisement. In theory, a noncommercial was like a public service announcement without an express purpose. In practice, the television audience must have found them quite puzzling. One can only imagine people wondering what they were intended to sell. In any case, many contemporary advertisements have adopted the oblique, lyrical style of Gardner's noncommercials.

Gardner also produced several programs for WCVB. In 1977, he produced *The Psychic Parrot*, a thirty-minute short comedy directed by Derek Lamb, an Oscar-winning British animator, who later directed animated segments for *Sesame Street*. *The Psychic Parrot* is a parody, set in the living room of a cartoonishly excitable couple watching television as a psychic parrot predicts the end of the world. It combines live-action and stop-motion cutout animation sequences, and ends with a comedic twist. In 1979, Gardner produced *Cost of Living*, a documentary directed by Richard P. Rogers, in which people from different parts of the community and different social classes were asked to discuss the meaning of money. Gardner also produced Rogers's short film *Anthem*, a three-minute collage of images of the American flag, which was intended to be used by WCVB as its sign-off.

The Legacy of Screening Room

Gardner produced more than a hundred episodes of *Screening Room*, most of which were broadcast. Unfortunately, he destroyed the tapes of several episodes, a decision he later regretted. "In the end I felt that some of them just didn't deserve to exist, and so I destroyed them. I should never have done that."⁴⁴



Thankfully, Gardner preserved most of the tapes, and eventually decided to release many episodes on DVD. "I held out maybe thirty, about a third of the ones that I'd done, as being worthy of archiving, and that's what we've got."⁴⁵ According to Gardner, the DVD releases "were edited under my supervision by Grace Fitzpatrick, a very nice woman who understood the project and knew what was worth cutting and what was important to keep.

Basically, she just cut out all the commercials and all the interruptions of the program by the station. Plus there were a few places in the programs when something really dumb was said or when something happened that marred the flow. I don't know whether notes were kept of what was eliminated, but we have the original and we have the result of Fitzpatrick's editing."⁴⁶

The End of WCVB-TV

On July 22, 1981, Metromedia, Inc. announced that it had reached an agreement with BBI to purchase WCVB-TV for \$220 million, more than twice the highest price previously paid for a television station.⁴⁷ At that time, WCVB-TV was producing sixty-two hours of original programs every week, more than any other network affiliate station.⁴⁸ In 1980, WCVB-TV had about \$20 million in earnings on about \$50 million in revenues.⁴⁹ Robert Bennett, the chief executive of WCVB-TV, was a former employee of Metromedia.⁵⁰ BBI agreed to sell WCVB-TV to Metromedia in large part because many of its investors were elderly and wanted to receive a return on their investments.⁵¹ Ultimately, BBI's shareholders received a return of about 120 times their initial investment.⁵²

The sale of WCVB-TV to Metromedia was completed on May 18, 1982.⁵³ After the sale, BBI's public mission persisted for a while. In fact, Metromedia purchased WCVB-TV in large part because it valued its innovative programming.⁵⁴ Much of WCVB-TV's staff, including Bennett, remained and the programming did not immediately change.

However, WCVB gradually reduced its noncommercial programming and became more and more commercial. In 1986, Metromedia sold its television stations, including WCVB-TV to the News Corporation and 20th Century Fox. WCVB-TV was spun-off and purchased by the Hearst Corporation. Today, WCVB's programming is little different from any other network affiliate station.

The history of WCVB and of *Screening Room* reflects changes in the regulation and consumption of television. BBI won its broadcast license because a court quixotically tried to enforce the requirement that commercial broadcasters serve the public interest. The remarkable commercial success of WCVB and its ability to produce unique programs like *Screening Room* suggest that the court had identified a real market failure. Presumably, WCVB succeeded financially and critically at least in part because its competitors were failing to adequately serve the public interest in unconventional television. *Screening Room* exemplified the kind of program that only a commercial station dedicated to the public interest like WCVB could provide.

WCVB was unusual because its ownership and management included artists and academics like Robert Gardner, who participated extensively in its programming. They helped WCVB achieve its goal of providing good television by ensuring that it took creative risks and produced programs like *Screening Room* and Gardner's noncommercials. The example of WCVB suggests that bringing creative and intellectual voices inside the management of a commercial station may help promote both financial success and the public interest.

Screening Room Program List—In Order of Broadcast

Available on DVD from Documentary Educational Resources:

John H. Whitney and Eric Martin, 1973
 Standish Lawder with Stanley Cavell, 1973
 Les Blank with Peter Guralnick, 1973
 Hilary Harris, 1973 and 1979 (same disc)
 Jan Lenica with Jerzwy Soltan, 1973
 Bruce Baillie with Gerald O'Grady, 1973
 Robert Fulton, 1973 and 1979 (same disc)
 John Hubley and Faith Hubley, 1973
 Derek Lamb, 1973 and 1980 (same disc)
 Emile de Antonio with Edmund Carpenter, 1973
 Ricky Leacock with Al Mecklenberg and Jon Rosenfeld, 1973
 Stan Brakhage, 1973 and 1980 (same disc)
 Dick Rogers, 1975
 Suzan Pitt-Kraning, 1975
 Ed Emswiller, 1975
 Alan Lomax, 1977
 Caroline Leaf and Mary Beams, 1977
 George Griffin, 1976
 Robert Breer, 1976
 Hollis Frampton, 1977
 Peter Hutton, 1977
 Michael Snow, 1977
 Yvonne Rainer with Deac Rossel, 1977
 James Broughton, 1977
 Jean Rouch, 1980
 Jonas Mekas, 1981
 John Marshall with James Vorenburg and Frank Kessler, 1973
 (not released on DVD; inquire with DER)

Available for Research in the Harvard Film Archive's Robert Gardner Collection:

"The Films of the Zagreb Studio" with Zeleimir Matko, 1973
 Vlatko Gilic with Vlada Petric, 1973
 Ed Pincus, 1973
 Claudia Weill and Eliot Noyes Jr., 1973
 "Hungarian Films" with Yvette Biro, Gyorgy Kepes, Thomas Renyi, 1973
 Jean Pigozzi with Erich Segal, 1973
 "Homage to Eisenstein: Part I—Dynamics of the Silent Image" with Vlada Petric, 1973
 "Homage to Eisenstein: Part II—Picture, Sound and Color" with Vlada Petric, 1973
 "A Film by Robert Gardner: *Dead Birds*" with Robert Gardner, Octavio Paz, William Alfred, 1973
 Robert Nelson, 1973*
 Alfred Guzzeti, 1975*
 Douglas Davis, 1975*
 Dušan Makaveyev, 1975*

Peter Chermayeff, 1977
 Pat O'Neill, 1977
 "D.W. Griffith Retrospective," 1977
 "*Rivers of Sand*" with Robert Gardner, 1977
 "Maya Deren Retrospective," 1977
 Joan Churchill and Nick Broomfield, 1977
 "*The Nuer*" with Robert Gardner, 1977
 Midge MacKenzie, 1977
 Kathy Rose and John Rubin, 1977
 Wendy Clarke, 1979
 Thomas Harlan, 1979
 John Haugse, 1980
 Juan Downey, 1980
 Michael Rubbo, 1979*
 William Geddes, 1980
 Polish Animation, 1980*
 Dennis Pies, 1980*
 Srđan Karonovic, 1981*
 Willard Van Dyke and Amelie Rothschild, 1981*
 Sidney Peterson, 1981*

Unavailable, Considered Lost:

"Student Films" with George Bluestone, Ted Spagna, Lois Tupper, Maureen McCue, 1973
 Clarke Worwick, 1973
 Tony Ganz and Rhoden Streeter, 1973
 Eila Hershon and Roberto Guerra, 1973
 Ann Hersey, 1975*
 Teri McLuhan, 1975*
 Derek Lamb, 1975*, 1977 (with Grant Munro), 1981
 Johannes Manong, 1977
 Marz Marzenski and Scott Sorenson, 1977
 Dennis Piana with Rufus Seder, 1979
 Vlada Petric, 1979*
 "Yugoslavian Animation," 1980
 Ken Griffith, 1980
 Len Gittleman, 1981*
 Frank Mouris and Caroline Mouris, 1981*

*recorded but airdate unknown (may not have aired)

Notes

1. In Re Applications of WHDH, Inc., 22 F.C.C. 767 (1957).
2. CBS asked the FCC to dismiss its application before the hearing began, and Post withdrew its application before the FCC decided the case. *Massachusetts Bay Telecasters, Inc. v. F.C.C.*, 261 F.2d 55, 57 & n.1 (D.C. Cir. 1958).
3. In Re Applications of WHDH, Inc., 22 F.C.C. 767, 770 (1957).

4. *Ibid.* 767 (1957). Four Commissioners voted for WHDH, one abstained, and two dissented.
5. *Massachusetts Bay Telecasters, Inc. v. F.C.C.*, 261 F.2d 55, 65–66 (D.C. Cir. 1958); *Greater Boston Television Corp. v. F.C.C.*, 334 F.2d 552, 554 (D.C. Cir. 1964).
6. Sterling Quinlan, *The Hundred Million Dollar Lunch* (Chicago: O’Hara, 1974), 5.
7. *Massachusetts Bay Telecasters, Inc. v. F.C.C.*, 261 F.2d 55, 66 (D.C. Cir. 1958). Quinlan, 5–6.
8. *In Re Applications of WHDH, Inc.*, 22 F.C.C. 767, 771 (1957); Interview with Dr. Leo Leroy Beranek by William Lang at Cambridge, Massachusetts, October 28, 1989, at www.aip.org/history/ohilist/5190_2.html. (Why were they permitting new applicants? They discovered in 1962 that it looked as though WHDH had put on the fix, as they kept putting it—that is, a bribe to the chairman of the FCC to get their license. His name was McConnaughy.)
9. *Massachusetts Bay Telecasters, Inc. v. F.C.C.*, 295 F.2d 131, 132 (D.C. Cir. 1961).
10. *In the Matter of WHDH, Inc., Boston, Mass. Greater Boston Television Corp., Boston, Mass. Massachusetts Bay Telecasters, Inc., Boston, Mass.*, 33 F.C.C. 449 (1962).
11. *In the Matter of WHDH, Inc.*, 16 F.C.C.2d 29, 30 (1966). *Greater Boston Television Corp. v. F.C.C.*, 444 F.2d 841, 845 (D.C. Cir. 1970). Greater Boston appealed the FCC’s decision to give WHDH a temporary license, but when Choate died on December 21, 1963, the D.C. Circuit remanded the entire case to the FCC. *Greater Boston Television Corp. v. F.C.C.*, 334 F.2d 552, 554 (D.C. Cir. 1964); *In the Matter of WHDH, Inc., Boston, Mass.*, 16 F.C.C.2d 1, 3 (1969).
12. *In the Matter of WHDH, Inc.*, 16 F.C.C.2d 29, 165–70 (1966).
13. Leo Beranek, *Riding the Waves: A Life in Sound, Science, and Industry*, 167 (2008).
14. *In the Matter of WHDH, Inc.*, 16 F.C.C.2d 29, 167 (1966).
15. *Ibid.* 29, 203 (1966).
16. *In the Matter of WHDH, Inc., Boston, Mass.*, 16 F.C.C.2d 1, 8 (1969)
17. Beranek, 169–170.
18. *In the Matter of WHDH, Inc., Boston, Mass.*, 16 F.C.C.2d 1, 4 (1969).
19. *Ibid.* 1, 13–15 (1969).
20. Leo Beranek, the president of BBI, compared the proceedings to “Dickens’s satires of the worst meanderings of the English legal system during Victorian times.” Beranek, 174.
21. Tony Schwartz, “Metromedia Seeks TV Station,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1981, at D2; Beranek, 173.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Beranek, 179; *In Re Applications of WHDH, Inc., Boston, Mass. for Renewal of License*, 33 F.C.C.2d 432, 434 (1972).
24. Gary Fogelson and Michael Hutcherson, “Change the Channel: WCVB-TV 1972–1982,” installation, Apex Art, New York (2011).
25. Tony Schwartz, “Some Say This Is America’s Best TV Station,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1981, at D1.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. Dudley Clendinen, “Sales of 2 Boston TV Stations Are Making History and Millionaires,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1982, at 11.

30. Tom Cooper, "Screening Room" (DVD Review), *Film Quarterly* 73 (Fall 2005), 59.
31. Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary and Avant-Garde Cinema* (2014), 65–71.
32. Bruce McCabe, "C&W Smasheroo," *Boston Globe*, February 18, 1973, at B21; Bud Laughton, "Highlights," *Boston Globe*, July 1, 1973, at B7.
33. MacDonald.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. McCabe.
38. Cary Wasserman, "The Films of Stan Brakhage," *Boston Globe*, June 21, 1973, at 66.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. McCabe.
42. *Ibid.*
43. MacDonald.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. Tony Schwartz, "Metromedia Takes Control of Station," *New York Times*, May 19, 1982, at D4.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. Clendinen.
53. Schwartz.
54. *Ibid.*