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## Television - The Dream and the Reality

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# **TELEVISION**

THE DREAM AND THE REALITY

by ROBERT SHAYON

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ference again. There *are* more responsible elements in the broadcasting industry, who are genuinely hoping that they can use the present climate as an opportunity to win some real gains for broadcasting "in the public interest, convenience and necessity." But there are also elements who are genuinely hoping to ride out the storm. They expect the American public to lose interest, to switch attention to the next big headline story that comes along, to lapse again into apathy, boredom on the subject, or even to the feeling of "Well, there's no business like show business," and "What's wrong with a little fun anyway?"

These people will hedge, drag their feet, temporize as long as they can, hoping for the storm of public indignation to blow itself out. And just as in real life, there are not only "the good guys" and "the bad guys," there are also the "gray guys," the people in between, the people who may say as Paul said: "The good that I would I do not, and the evil I would not, that I do." These are the men and women enmeshed in TV's complex dilemmas. The real problem is not how to polish up the minor surfaces of television's blandishment and deception, but how to refashion its architecture so that the image it presents to thoughtful individuals is mostly positive instead of largely negative.

Let us assume that, in its period of grace, responsible elements in TV will want to do something about improving the situation to prevent legislation. What is the heart of the dilemma which they face?

The essence of the matter is "circulation." Circulation is what networks sell. Circulation is what the sponsor wants. Circulation is what is offered by the individual station owner who holds the licence. NBC's first advertising rates on radio were \$120 per hour from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. and \$60 from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Now they are more than \$50,000 per hour in the evening on TV and more than \$25,000 an hour during the day. What brought about the jump? Increased circulation. *The Saturday Evening Post* sells circulation. So does *Life Magazine*. So do the *Reader's Digest* and the *Saturday Review*. The articles, the stories are merely means to achieve that circulation for the advertisers. It is the same in TV. TV is the biggest advertising medium of all because it can supply the largest circulation at cost per thousand. In

order to achieve maximum circulation, the networks and the sponsors seek programs that will attract the greatest number of people at economically significant times. Even the broadcasters will agree that as you achieve greater circulation, you flatten out the curve of sophistication. You reach the commonality of most minds most of the time.

Now the popular mind is the least informed about the realities of the external world in which it lives: it is the most given to the gratification of the moment and to the impulses of the short run in life. It tends to be the most immature. All this is familiar broadcasting jargon; not even the commercial broadcasters deny it. They argue that you have to lead the common mind to the uncommon things in the life of the mind, but that you cannot do this without at the same time holding their attention—and to hold them you must follow them.

Paradoxically, following and leading at the same time is what the commercial broadcasters claim they are successfully doing for the good of the nation and, of course, for the good of the industry. There is no better broadcasting system in all the world, they tell us. People who speak of changing the system really wish to inflict the snobbery of the intellectually elite; a minority snobbery, on the healthy, normal, mass, democratic cultural illiteracy of the majority. Some broadcasters go further. They contend that any hope we may have for uplifting audiences culturally in this country depends directly on the maintenance of the commercial system. Eliminate the high-rated westerns and the crime shows and the situation comedies, they say, and you destroy all significant potential for getting information and enlightenment and cultural uplift to the masses. A network executive urged this point very recently at a meeting of educators.

Now TV's big circulation periods, TV's bread and butter, are in prime evening hours. Last year, in his notable address before the Chicago meeting of the Radio and Television News Directors, Edward R. Murrow urged the sponsors to pick up part of the tab for the presentation of serious, informational and cultural programs in prime evening hours. He acknowledged that the networks couldn't afford to pay the whole freight themselves. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Murrow left CBS for a year's sabbatical. Perhaps there was some connection be-

tween the lack of response to his appeal and his sabbatical. At any rate, give or take, more or less, there have been no more prime-time informational specials this year than in the year before.

Competitive mass advertisers are committed to circulation. They *cannot* lead and follow at the same time. They can only follow where the circulation leads them. They have no message for their audience except their sales message. In fact, they must go looking for a message in program terms. They must shop for a program. And in buying a program message for the common mind, they follow the conventional method of telling the common mind what it wishes to hear, giving it the familiar, the pleasant, the non-disturbing, the unsophisticated. A leader appeals to the common mind's awareness of the real world. A follower appeals to its dreams.

Now what are the sponsors saying about circulation, since the quiz scandals compelled them to make some public statements about the matter—something they have been traditionally reluctant to do? In Hot Springs, Virginia, the Association of National Advertisers met on November 9. This organization has 653 members, including the nation's leading television advertisers. They did not absolve sponsors from the blame of the quiz shows. They announced, "It is our responsibility to see that every aspect of television with which we are connected meets our obligation of fair play to the public." They spoke of an immediate inventory of advertising, including factual support for accuracy and the techniques used in its preparation. Then, according to the *New York Times*, someone introduced the subject of turning complete control of program content over to the networks.

If the networks were to have control, the sponsors would merely purchase ads in the same manner they do in newspapers and magazines, without having any voice in the shaping of the medium's content. Henry Schachte, executive vice-president of Lever Bros., was quoted as commenting: "You could get a heck of a debate going among people right here on this subject." Edwin W. Able, vice-president for advertising for the General Foods Corporation, asserted that certain conditions would have to be met by the networks before he would agree to such an arrangement. "Under the pres-

ent method of television programming, the advertiser takes the financial risk," he added. "If the networks are to take over show selection, then we would want certain guarantees we do not now have." He indicated that such revisions might include some type of guarantee as to the size of the audience watching the sponsored shows. This would be comparable to the circulation guarantees offered to advertisers by newspapers and magazines.

What these sponsors were saying, in other words, was that they are buying circulation. They pay the going rates and take the risk of achieving circulation at present because they have a voice in the shows. But if they were to be denied this voice, if they were allowed merely to buy space, they would have to insist on circulation guarantees—the rates according to the circulation delivered, rebates and all. This means that if they sponsored a show and its rating fell below the network's guarantee, they would get part of their money back. Are networks in the business of returning money to advertisers any more than newspapers and magazines? Rates are based on guaranteed circulation. Will the networks willingly agree to cut back their profit potential in order to put on informational and cultural broadcasts in prime times? Networks are not only concerned with single time periods, say the half hour between 8:00 and 8:30, but also with the periods immediately before and after, with cycles of time. Networks have been known to reject a sponsor's chosen program because it lost part of the audience which it inherited from the preceding program.

Networks sell circulation—not fragmented, but "back to back" and as continuous as possible and as high as possible. On November 11, in the *New York Times*, there was this story, also from Hot Springs, where the National Advertisers were meeting:

Advertisers are not interested in relinquishing their present role in television network programming.

This was the consensus among leading company advertising executives interviewed here. . . .

Although some major advertisers acknowledge that they are giving this proposed revised operation "some thought," virtually all said they wanted to stick with the present system.

A major advertiser, who asked that his name not be used, said:

"Actually, if you are running your company in an ethical manner, you should take more of a role in programming, rather than less."

John Barlow, who is in charge of corporate advertising at the Chrysler Corporation, was emphatic in his insistence that there be no change in the present manner in which companies buy TV programming.

"Surely there are a lot of things wrong," he said, "but getting the advertiser out of the picture is not going to help.

"Our top executives are vitally interested in seeing that nothing in bad taste gets onto a program we sponsor and I am on hand at the network to see that necessary changes are made before the show goes on the air."

Al Hollender, a vice-president of the Grey Advertising Agency, who was a speaker, denied that "advertisers control shows." "There is a big difference between involvement and control of a show," he asserted.

"We think it is important for an agency and advertiser to be involved to make certain that they are getting a return in terms of the corporate image they want to project, in relation to the money they are spending."

Advertisers generally contended that since they were bearing the financial burden for the shows, they should have a voice in what was put on the air.

The advertisers, then, apparently are willing to tidy up the house, but they are not willing to give up their circulation voluntarily. Thus far, we have been mentioning the networks and the sponsors, neither of whom have any legal responsibility under the law for what is broadcast, except for obscenity, libel and lottery. What of the man who has that responsibility—the licensee, the individual station owner? In all the reams of copy written during and following the recent hearings, the local station owner was Mr. X, the missing man. No one called him as a witness. He made no statements to the general press. He was monitored, however, by the alert weekly trade paper of show business, *Variety*. On November 3, while the Washington quiz show hearings were warming up to Charles Van Doren, the Broadcasters' Promotion Association convention met in Philadelphia. These are the gentlemen who publicize the programs which are broadcast locally. They develop the audiences in their



local communities for what the networks originate. They are vital control-points of information. Newspaper readers in all the cities learn what's on the air mainly from their local listings and ads. The convention was addressed by Louis Hausman, director of the newly formed TIO, Television Information Office. This organization, in *Variety's* phrase, is the industry's "new propaganda wing." It's out to shape TV's corporate image more affirmatively in the public mind.

Hausman praised TV's overall performance, labeled the quiz shows "a single, narrow area of programming," and spoke of television's good intentions. I quote now from *Variety*:

At the same time, he took the station men to task for taking public affairs shows for granted. "Sometimes I think many of us are too prone to consider our public affairs and cultural programs as laudable in their way, but not very important. . . . There is no question that as far as the immediate profit and loss statement is concerned, these programs may not be as impressive a factor in your financial statement as the staples of entertainment."

He asked for the re-examination of the amount of publicity being given to public affairs and other prestige shows.

"Obviously, as far as network-originated programs are concerned, you can't promote these programs unless your station is carrying them. It is of little value for a network to create and originate programs of this kind if only a relatively few stations clear time for them."

The president of a regional network, at the Philadelphia convention, also said "the local stations must face up to the clearance problem on quality programs from the webs."

What was the reaction from the local station representatives to this inter-family conflict among the broadcasters? A *Variety* reporter quizzed the promotion men and he reported as follows:

The talks and proposals centered around TV's dark hour of the quiz scandals seemed to stir wide disinterest among members of the Broadcasters' Promotion Association.

The general feeling seemed to be, "I'm just out there at the local station helping to pump it through. Let

the boys in New York worry about it" (which is exactly the way someone put it).

The relative calm of the promotion men, compared to the sensitive concern of networks and Madison Ave. could stem from public reaction. Stations are getting mail on the quiz mess. Most of it is for forwarding to the webs. A good deal of it is asking for the return of axed shows. This, of course, may only be a reflection on the quality of the folks who write in.

There's not much chance that promotion managers will be diverting funds from tight budgets in competitive situations to plug the small-audience public service and quality web shows, as was suggested. Few if any of the BPA members believed that better clearances for culture would in any way clear the muddy impression left by quiz fixing—prime time or any other time.

The confession of Van Doren was a good conversation piece in the hospitality suites. But most of the promotion men were hoping to get away tomorrow with a couple of ideas that would raise their station's audience, not its image.

The circle of circulation is complete. The sponsors *must* have circulation. The networks have to plead with their affiliates to risk circulation in presenting informational and cultural programs, and the gentlemen at the local switches are worrying today about the same things they've always worried about—circulation. Before we point the finger at the circulation-minded broadcasters, let us ask ourselves what we would do in their place.

The situation was mournfully put in philosophical perspective in the Sunday New York *Times* of November 8, by that wise Washington observer, James Reston, who wrote on the editorial page:

Charles Van Doren, brooding on the mysteries of life at his Connecticut farm this week-end, can scarcely be more puzzled or gloomy than the capital of the United States.

There is an overwhelming feeling here that somehow we have lost our way. Nobody seems to know just how or why, but everybody feels something's wrong.

It is not only the TV quiz scandal, but the steel strike that has given an impression of haphazard greed, and a system debased and out of balance.

The problem is not primarily the weakness of a

Charles Van Doren. It is that the struggle for power and money has become so savage that even the leaders of the institutions concerned are trapped in the system.

Frank Stanton of CBS and Robert Kintner of NBC are high-minded men, but they lost control of the boys who will do anything for a fast buck. Dave McDonald of the steelworkers' union has to get more money for his men every time a contract ends or lose control of his union; or so he thinks. The leaders of big steel are fighting for bigger profits and control of their mills, and in the whole process the public is manipulated like a bunch of boobs.

How ironic! The nation looks to the TV industry for discipline, for self-restraint, when every other special interest group in the nation, caught in the competitive web, seems incapable of exercising self-restraint. In all this, television says: "We are young and immature. Give us time. We will grow up. Why should we be expected to behave differently from all the other media which worship circulation?" Why, indeed? Except perhaps because the air is federal and the spectrum is limited. The broadcasters constitute a quasi-public utility, using what belongs to all of us for their corporate gain. The press, to which they compare themselves in social responsibility, is not spectrum bound and does not use federal property. And the one thing the broadcasters are reluctant to recognize is the fact that as you feed the popular taste, you perpetuate it at the level you find it.

A revelatory key to the whole affair may be found in The Television Code of the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters. Under the heading of "Advancement of Education and Culture," paragraph 3 states: "Education via television may be taken to mean that process by which the individual is brought toward informed adjustment to his society." Now I ask: What is the precise meaning of "informed adjustment to society"? The word "adjust" suggests to me "being in harmony with," and the word "informed" means "knowing the facts, being educated and intelligent." Educated, intelligent and in harmony with the prevailing order of things in television—"informed adjustment." Is that not an accurate description of the mental and moral experience on TV of an American citizen known as Charles Van Doren?

"Informed adjustment" means to me the commonality of ideas, the commonality of ideas means circulation—big circulation—and big circulation means commercial broadcasting. You must understand I speak more in sadness over the state of things than in condemnation. My entire adult life has been given to working in radio and television—as a writer, director, producer and critic. I began before World War II in a strictly commercial phase of the industry. I produced wild comedy shows, participation shows and quiz shows. As the war advanced upon us, I became involved in information and propaganda documentaries and bond drive shows. I experienced intensely and creatively the power of broadcasting for a nation gripped in the consensus of a global struggle for survival. Those were the days when Ed Murrow thrilled the United States with his nightly greetings from flaming England: "This is London." When the war ended, many hoped that broadcasting would maintain its war-time public affairs concern and go on to mature consideration of the realities of the post-war world. But the return was to circulation and the commonalities of broadcasting. TV did not change radio's patterns, it merely intensified them under the pressure of the most compelling circulation medium of all, sight and sound and color in the home.

As a parent of two little girls, I watched with growing concern the impact of TV's parade of violence, frivolity and informed adjustment on my own daughters. I could merely wonder what its impact was on other children in homes where parents made no effort and had no capacity to counteract its influence. As a citizen, I observed the realities of the external world in Europe, Asia and Africa, and contrasted them with the general vision of life in television's dream. A courageous program was broadcast last week by CBS, called "The Population Explosion." It dealt with this grim problem of over-population chiefly in India. It was neither pleasant, popular nor frivolous. It was an attempt to deal maturely with the spectre that stretches over our propensities for entertainment and luxury. It was presented in the East at the margin of the prime-time period. I wonder how many local stations across the nation carried it, even though it was sponsored courageously by B. F. Goodrich and General Electric.

The networks tell us that audiences who are concerned about such programs should be willing to watch them in the times they can be scheduled. This is the Carnegie Hall theory: that you can't expect to go into the public market of entertainment at your time and find good music. You must go to Carnegie Hall. Of course the obvious fallacy is that at the time someone else is going to the Roxy theatre, I can go to Carnegie Hall. The two forms are competitive. On television, they are not competitive for time. But this is more than a matter of serving the tastes of the alleged cultural minority. Does not the popular, dreaming mind need, for reality's sake, to know the potential violence residing all over the world in masses which are hungry? Eighty-five percent of India's children (I believe the figure was) were going to sleep hungry every night—while an advertising agency man in New York was telling the producer of "The \$64,000 Question" that the blonde who opened the doors of the isolation booths for contestants, "should look svelte and be dressed in white from head to foot, a look that should be long, thin and sleek and create talk." The best intentions of the broadcasters under the commercial system may be dreams—and the implacable reality may continue to be circulation.

So much for the possibilities of reform within the TV industry's own house. What are the realities underlying the talk of federal legislation to compel changes? The record of the FCC is plain, and so are its character and sympathies. At this moment, it is still wrestling with the question of whether or not it has the power to rule over matters of program content. According to a newspaper report on November 11, "the FCC plans to make a survey of its own powers . . . a broad, new inquiry into its authority to control programming." Let us assume it discovered, what many people think it should have found out a long time ago—that it does have powers in this respect. The rule-making procedure of the FCC is well known. It announces it is going to rule in a matter and invites testimony from all interested parties. This takes a few years. Then the FCC goes into conference and considers what to do. This takes more time. Then it announces its proposed rules and gives the industry an opportunity to comment on them. This takes still more time. Then it rules, and the possibilities of court action

appealing its rule are wide open, as they surely would be if the commission ever ruled on drastic reform. How long would it take to get any change? And would it all be obscured by the march of bigger headlines anyway? The FCC files are filled with self-study material, including the celebrated Barrow report proposing licensing of the networks, which was never acted upon.

As for Congress, bills *may* be offered in the coming session. But when moral posturing gives way to sober considerations of introducing sanctions into the realm of traditional free enterprise, especially where free speech is allegedly concerned, there are likely to be second thoughts. And many Congressmen are themselves either owners of radio and television stations or connected with newspapers which in turn own stations. It may be noted that Representative Oren Harris, chairman of the House Committee on Legislative Oversight, which is running the present investigations, was the Congressman who introduced a resolution opposing a trial run for pay television. One newspaper stated recently, "There is evidence that the House Committee under Representative Harris is almost embarrassed by its success. . . ." It fired its energetic first counsel, Dr. Bernard Schwartz (who laid the basis for both the Adams and the FCC inquiries). Since then it has tended to concentrate on the immediately sensational rather than on the long-range inquiry into the regulatory agencies.

Nor is it only the traditional bias of Congress for keeping government out of the realm of ideas which is likely to slow down legislation of meaningful character. There is also the very real problem of writing good legislation in this highly-charged business of the communication of ideas. Much of the early New Deal legislation ran into trouble in the Supreme Court not only because it represented a major shift to the left in American politics and economics, but also because, under the stress of the emergency situation which President Roosevelt and the Congress inherited—the need for getting things done quickly—the early big laws were poorly drawn with respect to the precision of their language. Can Congress decide what proper program balance should be in sponsored television? Does it have the necessary wisdom and experience in such difficult matters? Legislation reform will take time. To leave matters ambiguously worded in

public utility operation is a tradition. The phrase "in the public interest, convenience and necessity" is an old legislative chestnut, not invented for the Communications Act but inherited from time-honored and multiple state laws. It is deliberately worded that way because Congress had no experience on which to base anything more specific. And the intensity of Congressional efforts is at all times related to public interest. Politicians tend to swim with the flood tides, not in the backwashes of public attention.

This is the reality. There will be resistance to change—strong and natural. Resistance of the powers of reason, vested interest and emotion. And the general public, without the information or the compulsion to act, may continue in apathy or even in satisfaction with the present situation. TV ratings are just as big as ever. There is no sign that because of the quiz expose, the public has cut down its regular viewing habits. But organizations like yours have accepted the job of leadership. You keep yourselves informed and you inform others. In spite of all the negatives I have deliberately sketched out, the public climate *has* changed with respect to TV. It can never be what it was before the storm broke.

Against this changed climate, your work will be inevitably more significant. And the public will be more receptive. But the times present a challenge to you, too. It is no longer enough to criticize the broadcasters in general terms. History, unexpectedly, has made your point for you, made it more spectacularly than you have ever dreamed it could be made. It is time you attempted, along with the rest of us, to decide on some answers. This is why your forthcoming summit meeting in Spring can be a great contribution. From Santa Barbara, California, comes a report that the Fund for the Republic, in its Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, has set up a project to study and appraise the mass media. There are other such projects going up. Ferment is great. But you people have been studying for a generation. You ought to be ahead of the parade. Precisely what do you want? You can help by making up your mind. And there are a few basic questions to which you must address yourself.

1. Are you willing to have the federal government enter the broadcasting picture—and on what terms? Are

you prepared to accept the proposition that government sanctions will mean placing limits on the profits of the broadcasters?

2. Are you prepared to answer the charge that any cutback in national advertising over television seriously endangers our consumer-oriented economy? That more than ideas and entertainment is at stake, but also jobs, prosperity, taxes and even national security?

3. Do you want a BBC rival to the commercial networks? Should the Communications Act be rewritten? Or do you wish merely to patch up the commercial networks?

4. How shall we go about upgrading the character of the FCC commissioners? By getting not only lawyers, but men and women of cultural distinction into the picture? Should this body be changed by law to separate its quasi-judicial authority in determining channel awards from its rule-making authority?

5. Do you wish Congress to give the FCC authority over the most important road block of all—namely, the use of the VHF and the UHF channels? We talk about limitations of channels, and yet the truth is that only about one-fourth of the more than two thousand channels available in the United States are being used today. We do not have a true, nation-wide television service.

You must give leadership in deciding what to do about this. Hindsight has shown that the FCC made a mess of the original channel allocations. Millions are invested in present VHF licenses. Should these be taken away—and under what conditions—from present owners? The big obstacle is that receivers are not being manufactured in enough numbers to receive UHF as well as VHF stations. The FCC has authority to regulate the standards of transmitters, but not of receivers. Shall the FCC be given this authority? Shall manufacturers be required to build all sets with UHF as well as VHF? Can we take channels away from the military, who grabbed up the cream in the early days?

These are very real, unpublicized problems, but they stand in the way of getting the kind of television to which you are committed.

The country needs a master plan of its broadcasting service, in radio as well as TV. You must take a hand at leadership. The fault of the broadcasters is that they



allow themselves to be directed by an opinion which they do not attempt seriously to direct. The job of the leader is not to harmonize his followers, to obtain a consensus among them, and then give expression in action. The job of the leader is to see that the *right* consensus is reached. What is the right consensus? I don't know. But I have some philosophical guideposts. When you sum it all up, I think that what I don't like about commercial broadcasting is that it addresses itself to what I am, instead of to what I could be. It assumes that I am smaller than my possibilities. It manipulates me instead of giving me the warm, human respect of addressing me from its complete moral and intellectual manhood. It lessens itself when it talks to me, and it lessens me generally.

In 1946, when American TV was still an infant gleam in General Sarnoff's eye, a textbook was published called *Here Is Television—Your Window to the World*. The introduction was written by an educator. He agreed that when you watch television, "*You are there*, to all intents and purposes." But to what intent, to what purpose, he wondered. And he proposed as follows:

Let it be our intent, in the words of Joseph Conrad, that "... one may perchance attain to such clearness of sincerity that at last the presented vision of regret or pity, or terror or mirth, shall awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other, and all mankind to the visible world."

This is a good dream, I thank you for working to make it a reality.