

## Media Events

### The Live Broadcasting of History

By Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz.  
Cambridge: Harvard University Press,  
1992. \$29.50 cloth.

Powerful social chemistry happens when great public events are transmitted live, direct, instantly to television screens in millions of homes. A public ceremonial is transformed into a unique, singularly potent community of the moment when it is electronically transferred from the agora to the stage of television's "great

hall," as the late Bud Benjamin of CBS News called the interconnected vastness of national and worldwide TV. A domestic audience of 200 million and a global audience of more than twice that "attended" upon such media events as the Kennedy funeral and the Apollo XI moon mission.

Dayan and Katz argue that this partnership of actors on a public stage, electronic communicators, and an audience transfixed at the tube-face comprises far more than another voyeuristic "show" and has reverberations that resound long after the spectacle ends. In fact, these historic moments could not have happened *without* television.

It is the character of these televised public spectacles that the authors set out to define, classify, and examine in *Media Events*. In so doing, they recognize a phenomenon that transcends the status of mere "pseudo-event," in Boorstin's dismissive phrase.

Instead, they see televised media events as "festive viewing," as a new and unique "narrative genre" that bonds and authenticates society, that arrests and deflects the viewer from his or her daily routine, that "commands attention universally and simultaneously in order to tell a primordial story about current affairs." The most dramatic of these events "appear at moments of crisis and speak to a conflict that threatens society," such as the Kennedy funeral or the "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia.

The authors argue that it is the mediating "addition of the broadcaster as a third party to the contract" between the event sponsors and the audience "that most clearly differentiates media events from public ceremonies prior to the era of radio and television." These dramas inhabit the grey area between "play and reality." With the baton of a video director's flamboyance, they are translated into an aesthetic of the monumental, with their special kind of visual rhetoric, "their uninhibited reliance on special effects, striking compositions, montages, and juxtapositions."

What happens to a public event, the authors ask, when it is celebrated collectively at home? How does the viewing experience of media events differ from the "genres of the everynight?" How do the various power establishments which stage, air, and view these media ceremonials contractually interact to control the event? One of the great paradoxes of a media event, according to Dayan and Katz, is that, on the one hand, it "depoliticizes society, both because it keeps people at home and because it contributes to the false illusion of political involvement," and that, on the other, television "may substitute for the experience of 'being there.'"

Perhaps both the greatest service and the greatest problem of *Media Events* is its contribution of a typology for the critical examination of this television genre. Dayan and Katz classify the types as Contests (the Olympic

Games, Hill and Thomas before the Senate Judiciary Committee), Conquests (Sadat in Jerusalem, Pope John Paul II confronting the Polish leadership in Warsaw), and Coronations (which also includes state funerals).

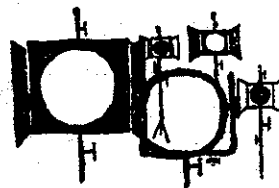
But this critical classification system tends to truss up the authors in a framework that seems somewhat restrictive and forces them at times to slip their own taxonomic traces. "Our corpus," they write, "is limited to ceremonial occasions" which are preplanned, and therefore "exclude major news events."

To draw a line of scholarly convenience between the media event as ceremonial and as a journalistic expression of the conversation of our culture seems artificial indeed. The presidential debates, Sadat's "conquest" of Jerusalem, the moon shots and shuttle launches are not only television "monuments" but belong to a historic realm of shared experience that cannot be contained by Dayan and Katz's three C's. Should we not add a fourth category, Consequence? A fifth, Calamity? Shouldn't the unplanned interruptive thrust onto the screen of rioting at the 1968 Democratic Convention and social chaos in Los Angeles be included in the grammatical "rules" of the media event? Doesn't the influence of television's role as *participant* as well as carrier merit inclusion and examination?

Insightful and important as this present treatment is, Dayan and Katz would do well to consider broadening their definition of the media event to encompass television's ability to provide live coverage of the unexpected and the unplanned. The urgent news event of transcendent importance may evade convenient classification as contest, conquest, or coronation, but nonetheless achieve a stature that, "commands attention universally and simultaneously . . . to tell a primordial story about current affairs."

JERRY M. LANDAY

■ Jerry M. Landay teaches at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; he is a documentary producer and a former news correspondent for CBS and ABC.



This one  
has to be written  
pre-Hawaii  
but there it is.

8/1/94

THE PUBLIC TELECOMMUNICATIONS NEWSPAPER

# Current

Current August 1, 1994 21

## Tenors II: PBS's descent to 'odd-lots rummage sale'

By Jerry M. Landay

I expectantly tuned in WILL-TV, Urbana, to view *Three Tenors II*, Round 1, on PBS. What I saw instead was the public television counterpart of the commercial TV extravaganza "The Night of O.J. Simpson." It was noncommercial TV's ultimate descent into live-events frolic that marks the end of civility and good taste on American commercial television as we know it.

The Simpson coverage brought us cops, chase and choppers. PBS gave us kitsch, kamp and kulture, as Dodger Stadium was converted into the largest begging bowl in history. Both came from Los Angeles—Mediapolis—the capital city of overstatement, the center of the industry that has made a fortune out of trivializing greatness and hyping the banal.

Both productions gave us scenic theater—Simpson, a panoramic sweep of the freeways; Tenors, tons of living rain forest seemingly flown fresh from the Amazon. Both drenched us in that placebo of American self-doubt, an orgy of celebrity: cutaways of Bush looking lost, Hope looking dazed and Sinatra nearly falling down with amazement, as I did, with Carreras, Domingo and Pavarotti rendering "My Way."

The stupefied audience viewing with me laid bets that we'd shortly see a cutaway two-shot of Rush Limbaugh and Jerry Falwell seated in the center section, triumphantly waving American flags over the ultimate descent of PBS to the level of an odd-lots rummage basement.

All that was missing in the tenors' inappropriate but predictable movie medley was a section of Disney Delights, climaxed by the Mickey Mouse Club theme song.

We didn't have Connie and Dan. We got a world-esteemed fiddler, Itzhak Perlman, transformed into a stuttering play-by-play announcer, clumsily hawking t-shirts between innings, and WHY? Willo Carey, with cloying adjectives—"great" and "exciting" and "unbelievable" and "thrilling" and "superb"—spilling continuously from her lips as though issu-



Hosting the extravaganza were an esteemed fiddler, "transformed into a stuttering play-by-play announcer," and Willo Carey (above), who produced streams of cloying superlatives.

ing from a runaway Xerox machine.

I tend to forgive the three tenors their highly visible scores and music stands, though some musicians in the audience complained they should have rehearsed enough not to need them. They *did* give everything they had, in a very ambitious program, and I guess they needed the scores. But the whole escapade would have been better if they had shown restraint about singing "Moon River" by merely saying, "We don't do that."

It appears there's no place for restraint in this flashy new world of live TV Circus. I suppose a decorous Hugh Downs chatting informatively and intelligently with a charming and informed Beverly Sills would never have done. I guess that junking the forest and the fountain and putting the money into English subtitles of the foreign-language lyrics would have

been deemed too educational. I suspect that reducing the endless fundraising pitches to several elegant preproduced spots—say, eloquent appeals by Bill Clinton, Bob Dole and Ronald Reagan—together with a series of running supers with phone numbers, would have been deemed insufficient.

But I have a dream. Actually, several dreams. In one of them, a group of national leaders stands in centerfield at the start of the event and announces that a coalition of American corporations and foundations has raised a \$2 billion endowment for PBS, reducing its dependence on corporate tithes, its exposure to political straitjackets and its reliance on public panhandling.

In another dream, President Clinton or Vice President Gore stands in the same spot and announces he'll ask Congress to dedicate the billions that the government raises in spectrum auctions to public and community radio and public television. And I have the dream that the time to lobby courageously for such security is now.

For, if the onslaught of the right-wing nativists succeeds in destroying Bill Clinton, I expect it will be Rush Limbaugh hosting the next L.A. stadium spectacular and introducing the Three Televangelists—Falwell, Robertson and Bakker.

I have come across an introduction by Aldous Huxley to the 1946 edition of his *Brave New World*, in which he lists the conditions for making people adore servitude. One of them is "a substitute for alcohol and the other narcotics, something at once less harmful and more pleasure-giving than gin or heroin."

Methodically it's turning out to be American television, and that public TV has abandoned its good taste and joined in the narcotizing game with all the others—to its very great loss.

Jerry M. Landay is an associate professor at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, where he writes on television topics and teaches electronic journalism. He is a documentary producer and was a news correspondent for ABC and CBS. Current welcomes reader reactions.

*Don S. Fy1*

# Telecommunications: Clinton's Historic Blunder

By Jerry M. Landay

The failure of President Clinton and Vice-President Gore to temper the rampant power of the commercial broadcasting and telecommunications industries will be seen by historians as one of the most profound blunders of the Clinton-Gore Administration. For this, it shares culpability with the bipartisan majority in the Congress. The free-market jargon used by both to promote the gospel of "competition" on the "Information Superhighway" and over the airwaves will be seen in retrospect for what it is — the largest collective corporate giveaway to monopoly interests in the nation's history.

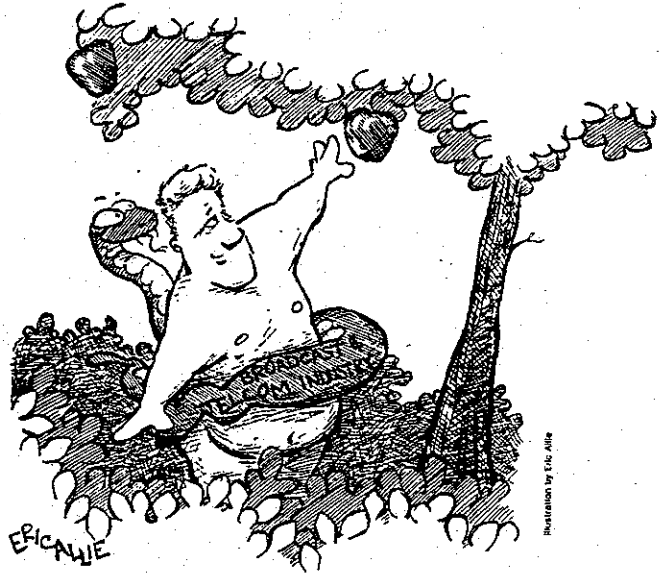
Despite the apparent transparency of their amusement content, the tele-screen and the radio speaker are opaque to listeners and viewers for what they really are: an expression of unparalleled political, cultural, and economic power — over public opinion and the public mood, over our political life, over the quality of American culture, over the value formation of our children, and over our spare time.

Combined with the computer, they are the electric knowledge bridge into the Information Century. The Administration has sold out Clinton's "Bridge" to the highest bidders. Multi-million-dollar expenditures by the telecommunications and broadcasting industries in campaign contributions and lobbying activities have elevated them into the top ranks of Washington special interests. Their emissaries stand beside the throne. Peter S. Knight, a telecommunications attorney, ran the Clinton-Gore re-election campaign. Roy S. Neel, president of the United Telephone Association, which lobbies intensively on telecommunications policy issues, was a key assistant to Senator Gore, and later served as his vice-presidential chief of staff. Greg Simon, chief policy adviser to the Clinton Administration on telecommunications, has resigned to step through loopholes in lobbying restrictions on ex-bureaucrats and accepts assignments to further industry causes.

With antitrust enforcement paralyzed before a pandemic of mass telemedia mergers, radio and television ownerships serve as the cash cows for media conglomerates to accumulate vast con-

solidations of influence, content production, distribution, access, patents, and control over the primary pipeline to the public mind. The Clinton Administration has proffered this power to private interests in four ways:

- By reversing its decision to construct the national electronic information infrastructure as a federal "interstate" system oriented to the public interest — to schools, libraries, and other vital public and human services. The Administration altered that vision of the Internet into a largely corporate odd-lots basement, and was immediately rewarded by huge infusions of campaign cash from the telecommunications industry.
- By the Presidential signing of the 1996 Telecommunications Bill, a deregulatory disaster disguised as a spur to competition, which is actually speeding the process of vertical integration of fewer than two dozen telecommunications overlords — from telephones to radio and TV stations to cable and direct-broadcast satellites. They are quickly becoming the only voices in town.
- By high-pressure auctions of portions of the publicly-held electromagnetic spectrum to providers of customized personal services, a one-shot gimmick to pour billions into the Treasury's general fund to balance the federal budget. The tragic and wasteful decision to auction, rather than lease, this electronic public parkland for short-term political purposes will have profound long-term consequences for the nation's commercial and cultural life.
- By capitulation to the broadcast industry in giving away, without charge or public payback such as free political time, public channel space for advanced digital television to existing holders of broadcast licenses and to networks, an astronomical corporate handout to vested network and station interests. As communications scholar Robert McChesney of the University of Wisconsin has concluded: "By any known theory of democracy, such a concentration of control over media in so few hands, especially hands that are often at odds with the needs of democratic political culture, is a severe problem."



Had this lucrative public property been loaned to media corporations on annual lease, dedicated billions would have been invested in the new electronic commonwealth. The resulting funding pool would have underwritten an American public telecommunications sector second to none in the world:

- It could have created a permanent trust fund for a truly independent public broadcasting service and for equipment to carry the system handsomely onto cable and into the digital epoch.
- Dedicated funding from spectrum leasing could have created a fund to underwrite the costs of universal access and service to the Internet and the Web — as well as equipment — for the poor and for rural users, for school children, libraries, community educational networks, police, fire and local government services. Instead, to help underwrite these services, the FCC will likely allow local phone companies to substantial-

ly increase their rates to all consumers. • Dedicated levies from leases of the public spectrum to commercial mass communicators could have underwritten a National Endowment for Telecommunications, which would fund creative and innovative educational and cultural fare by independent producers for children and adults, as well as outlets for noncommercial community voices.

When he first saw a flickering demonstration of TV at its unveiling in 1938, the late E.B. White wrote prophetically that "I believe television is going to be the test of the modern world... We shall stand or fall by television, of that I am quite sure." President Clinton has made his choice. We shall have to change it, or suffer the consequences.

*Jerry M. Landay is Honors Prof. emeritus at the University of Illinois, a writer-lecturer on media-democracy issues, and a former ABC and CBS news correspondent.* ■

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## OPINION/ESSAYS

*Washington hands old-line TV networks gains over cable  
and telecom rivals — at the viewing public's expense*

## It's a Winning Year for US Broadcasters

by Jerry M. Landay

**T**HIS has been a lush spring for the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), perhaps the finest in its 74-year history. The NAB, the chief lobbying arm of US television and radio networks and most of the nation's broadcast stations, has accumulated a string of triumphs that reserves "old technology's" standing as the towering power of media amid the putative gates of digital change. It is as though the White House, the Congress, and the courts conspired in favor of the sailing vessel and the binnacle to put off for decades the engines of steam and jet propulsion. Because of NAB victories, broadcast firms are poised to win the new-technology competition for mass audiences in the tele-industrial epoch against the behemoths of the telephone, cable, computer, and satellite communications industries. Network owners — Westinghouse, Disney, General Electric, Fox — are able to use their cash cows as a wedge into leadership of the age of new media. They are diversifying by acquiring cable and Internet

properties, and moving aggressively into global television. In recent weeks:

- The Federal Communications Commission predictably voted to give each of the nation's 1,500 TV stations, most of them commercial, new channels for advanced digital television and other uses. Though the broadcast spectrum is, by statute, public property, the government exacted no quid pro quo from the for-profit operators. Stations can claim the new channels at once, simply by saying they want one. Network stations in major markets must agree to start broadcasting digital signals within two years.

- The Supreme Court, in a 5-to-4 decision, affirmed the law holding that cable systems must carry the signals of local television stations. Amid a scramble for scarce channel space, the cable industry lost its argument that it had a First Amendment right to decide how to dole out its territory. The justices thus maintained a competitive edge for broadcasters, preserving the large audiences that cable delivers to traditional broadcasters.

- The broadcasting industry

celebrated the first anniversary of the Telecommunications "Reform" Act, which the NAB succeeded in expanding from a set of ground rules for competing telephone enterprises into a giant Christmas tree for the easy acquisition of radio and television stations. The act has touched off a

**Broadcast firms have pushed to triumph over the giants of the cable, telephone, computer, and satellite industries.**

race toward monopoly in broadcasting that is likened to the Oklahoma land rush.

All this has lifted the NAB, already a powerhouse, to the top of Washington special interests. The NAB, together with major broadcast interests, paid \$9.5 million in campaign contributions and lobbying expenditures over the past 10 years to win what Common Cause calls "the largest corporate welfare giveaway" in US history.

The NAB was founded back in 1923 by pioneer Chicago radio stations. They wanted to mount a defense against claims by ASCAP, the society that represents the rights of composers, that the stations owed fees for the privilege of playing ASCAP music. The NAB countered with a claim that what the stations were doing was a charitable act that boosted music sales for the songwriters.

Through seven decades, tactics have not changed, but rhetoric has gotten even slicker as the stakes have grown. The NAB is the successful promoter to mass media of what it calls "free broadcasting," even though each man, woman, and child in America pays substantially for air and cable amusement via advertising costs buried by sponsors in the price of their consumer goods and services. The NAB is the prime advocate of the supposed First Amendment rights of its members to air virtually whatever they wish, though the Founding Fathers had citizens, not media corporations, in mind when they wrote the Bill of Rights. Now the NAB has achieved its ultimate aim of essentially nullifying the legal

obligation of station owners to serve the public interest in return for their broadcast licenses.

The NAB cries about the high costs of digital conversion and attacks the accuracy of a ratings system that shows an ongoing erosion of network audiences. It leads the charge against parents, children's advocates, and educators who complain about violent programming. It does so brashly, knowing that its influence has probably given broadcasters a lock on evolutionary changes in electronic mass communication.

The electron is to the tele-industrial epoch what oil, steel, and coal were to the age of heavy industry. And dominance over electronic party lines carries with it unparalleled political, cultural, and economic power — over public opinion, the public mood, our political life, our spare time, the education and value formation of our children. The question now is whether what's good for the NAB is really good for America.

■ *Jerry M. Landay is Honors Prof. emeritus at the University of Illinois and a former ABC and CBS news correspondent.*



# Put the Masses Back Into Mass Communications

by Jerry M. Landay

THE prime irony of the "digital revolution" is that the new technologies breed disconnects and silences. These social consequences are explored in David S. Reynolds's nourishing "cultural biography" of poet Walt Whitman, the 19th-century bard of America.

Reynolds's point of reference is the intense participation between public figures and the public that marked American popular communications of the 1840s and 1850s, a precommercialized "mass media culture in which Americans often entertained themselves and each other," a time when the endgame of human contact was the direct experience of the contact itself.

Then, "entertainment" was not a synonym for shallow amusement, aimless diversion, or manipulation. The word entertainment described the intense bond between performer and audience — politicians and partisans, orators and auditors, actors and patrons, pastors and congregants. The barriers were down. The charismatic Rev. Henry Ward Beecher filled his Plymouth Church in Brooklyn with thousands for his Spirit-driven sermons. He told his architect to extend the pulpit to move him closer to his listeners: "I want the audience to surround me, have the people surge all about me."

Futurists who extol the promise and profitability of interactive new media will find in Professor Reynolds' pages a cultural baseline for the democratic nature of interactivity in Whitman's time. Contact between politician and voter was a brisk confrontation, in an "agonistic arena," in

which candidates were measured by their ability to engage in "animated conversation" with challengers and to lay hecklers low with bolts of reasoned argument or a verbal *coup de grâce*.

Voter turnout in those interactive days ran as high as 80 percent. Contact was direct. Passion was embraced as part of a game "of perfect furor" in which "listeners and viewers expressed their praise and displeasure with the greatest possible noise" — at concerts, lyceums, theatre, the opera. High culture flourished alongside low, and interpenetrated all classes and forums. Whitman is portrayed "spouting Shakespeare atop omnibuses, declaiming Homer and Ossian at the seashore, and humming arias on the street."

## One-way political 'debate'

Today, profound feeling has been muted by the scientific requirement of "objectivity and balance." Interactive political discourse is muffled by electronic separation. Millions sit in passive silence before a flickering, one-way barrage of political ads, electronic monologues mounted not by the principals themselves, but by their seconds — faceless advertisers and invisible narrators who lob negative ads, heedless of the loathing they've bred among citizens. The electronic "debate" is restricted to what Democratic and Republican media consultants and spokesmen have to say, but the only real discussion of how to reconnect the voter with the process comes from side-eddies of political concern, voices such as that of Ross Perot, whom mainstream writers brush aside as "crazy."

Political scientists and pollsters try to

unravel with statistics the "mystery" of why citizens, who have been bypassed by the media revolution, continue to opt out of the process. But a reading of "Walt Whitman's America" quickly dispels the mystery. "I pass so poorly with paper and types ..." the poet wrote, "I must pass with the contact of bodies and souls."

Whitman, a journalist as well as a poet, understood the force of the mass-media revolution exploding in his day into myriad newspapers fed by new technologies and an ideologically diverse array of publishers, editors, and writers: "Everywhere their influence is felt," he said. "No man can measure it, for it is immeasurable."

Media's influence remains "immeasurable," but we can intuitively sense the effect on "bodies and souls" of the one-way mass communications of our own time. A viewer in a sea of millions talks back to her television set. But no one listens. One-way mass media has for a century and a half conditioned us to be still and just listen, and we have increasingly held our tongues. Ratings services measure the popularity of offerings, but the choice is limited. Viewers and, increasingly, readers of journals that mimic television are given not what they want, but what they have been trained to expect.

As participation in a vibrant cultural dialogue has been stilled, so has participatory association in the democratic process. In critical instances, technology and policy have been used to thwart democracy, not to advance it. Telephone answering machines are used by many businesses and government offices to erect fire walls between the principals and the public. Tele-

phone operators have been replaced by unwanted Muzak tunes, played over the phones into unwilling ears, to tell us we're still on hold. Music performers amplify their sound in public space by all but swallowing the microphones; huge loudspeakers snuff out intimacy and interactivity.

Telemarketers invade our homes at dinner time, hardly affirming "family values." Public access to public airwaves and cable is denied to all but those who can pay for it. Telecommunications companies actively oppose efforts to ensure universal access and service to the Internet and the World Wide Web.

## Let's get truly interactive

How can we exploit new technologies to preserve and broaden rather than stifle democratic interactivity? Are there imaginative ways for machines to revive a semblance of the participatory culture that flourished in Whitman's America?

Digitized America must somehow start talking publicly about putting people back in the communications process. Mass media, the telecommunications establishment, and our political leadership must bring their immense power to arousing interest in vibrant public communication, a role that goes beyond mere public relations and consumer ads to the informing of mass consciousness about the vital ties between participatory culture and democracy, and how technology can strengthen them.

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CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR 7/22/76

# Don't Make Public Television Stations Commercial

By Jerry M. Landay

**A** SIGNIFICANT but little-noted drama is speeding toward a resolution in Pittsburgh and Washington. It highlights the single most troubling motif in American mass communications — the relentless erosion of public space on radio and television.

Ronnie Dugger, former publisher of The Texas Observer, refers to the commons in which the governed and their governors interact as the "demosphere." In ancient Greece, the demosphere was the public market, the *agora*. In colonial America, information and ideas about public business were exchanged in the coffee houses. Librarian of Congress James Billington notes that in France in 1789, the cafes and open spaces of Paris's Palais-Royal constituted the "forum of the people" where "reform moved through revolt to revolution."

So-called advanced media notwithstanding, it's over the air — on radio and television — where, surveys make clear, the American "demosphere" resides. In this electronic space, for better or for worse, most American children get their first deep immersion in "media-ated" reality, and most of their parents, more than 80 percent, get most of their news and information about the world. But in America, the conversation has largely become a one-way process, and the space is shrinking.

American public broadcasting was established in 1967 as the electronic alternative for discussion and documentary reportage on issues of public importance, along with cultural, educational, and minority fare. The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) were to create the space that the commercial broadcasters thought too unprofitable to provide. They chose to manage the "wasteland." We counted on public broadcasting to provide the demosphere.

But politicians denied the system a stable funding

source, forced it to increasingly depend on corporate largess, and assaulted its presumption to intelligence and independence from the status quo.

In Pittsburgh, the assault on the electronic demosphere has now resulted in a move to transform WQEX, one of two public television stations in the city, into a commercial station. Jerrold Starr, who is leading a coalition campaign to reclaim WQEX, argues that if the effort succeeds, some 80 metropolitan areas that, like Pittsburgh, have multiple coverage by noncommercial public stations could be affected. "If we lose on WQEX," Professor Starr warns, "the others are immediately put



**PBS's Pittsburgh affiliate, WQED-TV, is trying to sell off its sister station, WQEX, to commercial interests. The FCC is processing the deal with a haste that short-circuits the normal process of public scrutiny.**



at risk. What the FCC does on WQEX is precedential. Ironically, the campaign to commercialize WQEX's Channel 16 is being engineered by Pittsburgh's primary public television station, WQED, which holds the license to WQEX. WQED has accumulated a debt of between \$12 million and \$16 million, largely through mismanagement, critics charge. WQED has unwisely chosen to retire that debt with the help of the estimated \$30 million to \$60 million that commercial operators are expected to offer for its sister station's valuable channel. Because the law prevents the sale of a channel designated noncommercial, WQED is petitioning the FCC

to "de-reserve" Channel 16, reclassifying it for commercial resale, or to let it swap Channel 16 for Channel 40, already designated commercial. Channel 40 is owned and operated by Cornerstone Television Inc., a religious broadcaster with right-wing political and Christian Coalition connections. In a complicated maneuver, Cornerstone would in turn sell the newly assumed channel to commercial interests and split the take with WQED.

The deal is being processed by the FCC with haste that short-circuits the normal process of public scrutiny. Pennsylvania's two Republican senators, Arlen Specter and Rick Santorum, attached an extraordinary, unnoted provision to the FCC's funding that lets the agency approve the deal "without conducting a rulemaking or other proceeding." Pittsburghers who oppose it were given only 11 days to file comments and were denied the usual public hearing. The commissioners' accelerated decision deadline is July 25, only three weeks after the deadline for the filing of written comment.

WQEX was established to provide complementary "educational" programming that did not duplicate WQED's offerings, but for a time emphasized community, instructional, and minority fare. WQED's schedule features national PBS programs that appeal to "an upper-middle-class audience" and to the corporate underwriters on whom the system has become so dependent. The community mission of its neglected orphan-station WQEX has been ill-served under WQED's management. But this neglect, critics argue, should not be used to justify WQED's case.

Six commercial stations currently supply programming from the "wasteland" to Pittsburgh. Is yet a seventh worth the risk to the embattled demosphere?

■ Jerry M. Landay teaches "Issues in Television" at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana.

OPINION/ESSAYS

*The FCC has capitulated to the mega-businesses that dominate TV today. It wasn't always so.*

# Murdoch Ruling Stretches Meaning of 'Public Interest'

By Jerry M. Landay

**N**EWTON N. MINOW, author of the oft-quoted and unheeded "vast wasteland" speech, likes to ask his audiences, "What is the most important educational institution in America: (a) Harvard, (b) Yale, (c) Columbia, or (d) none of the above? The answer, of course, is (d).

The real educator is television. "More people learn more each day from television," Mr. Minow points out, "than from any other source."

**FCC's early mandate**

In the early 1960s, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) under Minow's chairmanship threatened to strip stations of their coveted licenses unless they obeyed the law to operate in the public interest. As trustee of this powerful "tele-university," the FCC briefly got it right. To Minow, the public interest meant simply serving the public good.

To chairman Reed Hundt's present-day FCC, four communications lawyers and a former commercial broadcaster, the "public interest" means serving powerful conglomerates whose only allegiance is to their collective purse. The FCC's latest atrocity against the public-interest standard is waiving a "technical" violation of the law by the irrepressible Rupert Murdoch, letting him keep control of the eight core stations of his Fox Network and sparing him a \$200 million tax bill.

The law says foreign interests may control no more than 25 percent of a station. But Mr. Murdoch's Australia-based News Corporation owns 99 percent. Its newspaper and broadcast web now stretches across to more than two-thirds of the globe. The commissioners ruled unanimously that all he need do to keep Fox intact is convince them that a waiver is in the public interest. This should be no problem for a mediarch with a history of mastering the delicate art of "waiving" himself through more impassable political gates than the Scarlet Pimpernel.

For the FCC, there seems to be

no question that it's in our interest to preserve for our culture and our kids a network that has, in the "public interest," brought us "The Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers" and "Melrose Place," and has no news and public affairs department.

**'Public interest' twisted**

In the late 1920s, the FCC's predecessor, the Federal Radio Commission, adopted regulations that forced hundreds of noncommercial stations off the air in favor of an industry dominated by networks and paid for entirely by advertising. Since then, the legal requirement that stations operate in the "public interest, convenience, and necessity" has been twisted to mean literally that what

great "tele-university" in our lives.

The FCC has capitulated on efforts by parent, teacher, and citizen groups to lay down mandatory requirements to air high-quality educational programs. The drive has faltered before industry arguments that stations have a First Amendment right to feed children what they choose, an interpretation Thomas Jefferson and James Madison hardly could have had in mind.

**FCC has failed to act**

Quello has led the charge against reform, even though he told a trade journal in 1993 that, regarding kidvid, the public interest should take precedence over First Amendment claims. The FCC has proved equally impotent

in dealing with the inflammatory tilt to the right of talk radio hosts and the sleaze and prurience of Howard Stern. It has failed to address demands for a spectrum-fee levy on broadcasters, who get access to lucrative public frequencies for nothing. Such revenues could help end public broadcasting's dependence on a politically fickle Congress.

House Speaker Newt Gingrich's Progress and Freedom Foundation reportedly got the FCC's at-



is best for the corporate owners is best for the public.

That's why the oldest and most powerful sitting commissioner, James Quello, a professed Democrat who has behaved consistently like a Republican since his appointment in 1974, could declare in preserving the so-called fourth network: "The record unequivocally shows that Fox is operating in the public interest."

Why? Just take a peek at it. Mr. Quello ran WJR Detroit and was a vice president of Capital Cities Broadcasting, now owner of ABC, before joining the commission. A staunch supporter of Presidents Nixon and Reagan, Quello helped shepherd the Republican crusade to deregulate the industry in the '80s, reducing the public-interest standard to rubble.

The result: FCC finds itself powerless before the mediarchy as it confronts a set of paramount issues affecting the place of the

attention on the Murdoch case by blueprinting a drastic FCC overhaul. Mr. Gingrich, of course, has a lucrative book contract with Murdoch. President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore sidestep champion-healthy mass telecommunications and criticize excessive violence on the commercial airwaves, but sidestep real changes. They might well consider countering Gingrich by appointing a Citizen's Commission on Broadcasting and Cable that would supply its blueprint for the great "tele-university" and resurrect the public interest on the air. It could start by calling for the appointment of real citizen-viewers and citizen-listeners to membership on the FCC.

■ Jerry M. Landay, a former CBS and ABC news correspondent, teaches issues in television at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana.

Christian Science  
Mon. 1/17/95

# Educating Young Minds About the Power of TV

By Jerry M. Landay

**C**OMPLAINING about commercial TV has replaced baseball as America's national pastime: bashing and killings for viewers of all ages, pulpy romances, the politicization of the talk-show circuit, and commercial clutter. Presidents complain, congressmen decry, churchmen declaim. Nothing happens. We keep on watching - and complaining.

Television has become the most powerful human force in the daily lives of Americans. TV content influences events and the way we perceive them.

A new movement for media literacy argues otherwise. In classrooms, teachers' training workshops, adult study forums, and homes, the campaign for media literacy is a quiet but pervasive response to the growth of commercial media power. The media literacy movement provides the counterforce that empowers viewers, listeners, and readers to become media-wise; to bring a critical eye and ear to what they see and hear, and to talk back to the tube.

In the summer of 1993, there was one national teacher-training workshop in media literacy. This past summer, there were 15, including a week-long institute that I attended at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., with 60 others, which included mostly public school teachers who were bringing media education to classrooms. Media literacy education is based on these principles:

a) TV reconstructs reality for an editorial purpose. Research confirms that if we watch more killings on commercial television than we encounter in daily life, we perceive a mean and violent world, and react accordingly to such policy issues as fighting crime and building jails.

b) Behind everything that commercial TV airs is profit. The objective of the product is not to amuse or inform, but to deliver large, targeted audiences to sponsors as a commodity, in exchange for sales dollars.

c) Competitive pressures among them drive media to amplify what they carry beyond its significance. For example, the synergy of news-magazines interacting with television news produces imitative coverage of Newt Gingrich, O.J. Simpson, and other sensations of the moment. Economic imperatives limit diversity on the tube rather than enhance it.

d) Media filters set the public agenda and influence behavior. When

newsmagazines are preoccupied with drugs, so is television, and so is the public. If the major heroes on television are sports figures and cops, Nobel prize-winners earn only a passing glance in our culture.

Media literacy studies engage the gears of the conscious, critical mind. They teach viewers of all ages not to imbibe video mindlessly by the hour, but to make selective viewing choices and to "deconstruct" and examine what they've seen, to increase awareness to how messagemakers influence or manipulate.

While media literacy classes consider newspapers, magazines, and films, they tend to emphasize television, now the most powerful dispenser of media messages.

In the classroom, media literacy is sometimes taught as a stand-alone sequence. But more often, it's inte-



grated into English, math, and social science courses.

In more and more public schools, children are gaining mastery over the medium by learning how to produce television ads and programs in their schools. Since all TV is educational, the point is not to demonize it, but to underscore its positive power to work for society.

On the adult level, media literacy workshops involve the sharpening of critical viewing skills, and the development of shared family-viewing routines.

Media literacy also informs citizen action - activities such as campaigns to improve local cable and station programming or to influence government and industry communications policies.

France, Spain, Canada, Britain, and Australia have made media education a school requirement for years. "American educators," says Prof. Renee Hobbs of Babson College in Wellesley, Mass., "have tended to trivialize media culture and demonize television. But media culture now is our culture. We need to bring critical viewing skills to American classrooms, and arm adults to reinforce those skills at home."

A leader of the media literacy

movement is the Assembly of Media Arts of the National Council of Teachers of English, based in Urbana, Ill.

In many schools, media literacy begins at the elementary level. Pupils do critical viewing, then discuss the contents and techniques used in what they've seen. They're made aware that digital technologies mean that photographs can be changed as easily as text, to produce images as untrustworthy as loaded words.

They study nightly news programs, comparing their editorial content with the newspaper's, and decide which stories most accurately reconstructed the events. They discuss issues such as why TV newscasts are saturated with O.J. Simpson coverage at the expense of more meaningful stories.

At a middle school in Billerica, Mass., students are screening and decoding TV advertising. They study the "hooks" that sponsors build into Saturday morning toy and game ads designed to turn them into "I wannas."

Through an Ad Lab, Billerica high school students have produced TV campaigns against smoking, violence, and sexual harassment, which have been aired over the classroom system and local public-access cable.

On the adult level, staff specialists for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charlotte, N.C., conduct church-based programs

that offer adults group guidance on how to parent in the TV age. They teach other media trainers to expand the work.

At University High School in Urbana, Ill., producer Jay Rosenstein teaches a course in documentary appreciation and production. Students analyze content and structure, then produce their own documentaries, which have been aired on the local public television station.

Opposition to media-literacy education springs from a number of sources: those who suspect that video literacy merely converts a classroom into a viewing theater, or who fear that critical thinking may alter the power balance in American society.

Communications scholar Neil Postman of New York University has a succinct response:

"Some people would say that media education is radical. That depends on what you mean by radical. If you believe that education is about not only making a living but making an intelligent life, then media literacy is radical in the best, most constructive sense of the word."

■ Jerry M. Landay teaches "Issues in Television," at the University of Illinois, in Champaign-Urbana.

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Lastly, let me as he will have the wi the courage to stay somehow, somehow power of words a words are more om ever before, to div pierce to the truth, us all.

Thank you all,

Christian Science Monitor

7/24/91

# TV Violence: Let Parents Decide

By Jerry M. Landay

**P**OLITICIANS from the president on down are trying to get their friends in the commercial television business off a very hot seat. They're proposing that set manufacturers be required to install a so-called "V" (for violence) chip that would empower parents by letting them electronically snuff out programs coded as unsuitable for children.

A bill to this effect has already passed the Senate. Politicians see the V-chip as a face-saving way for an industry without a conscience to pretend it has one.

Program producers are dragging their feet on formalizing a rating system that would electronically code programs as too violent or prurient for children. Under the proposed system, producers would rate their own work, as the movies do. Critics liken that to letting the foxes decide who gets into the henhouse. Others complain that the V-chip would undermine the free-speech rights of the industry. Market *über alles* advocates haul out the Big Government scarecrow, insisting that responsible parents don't need Washington to tell them what to do.

The clash among these three competing interests — free enterprise, the welfare of the young, and the First Amendment — obscures common sense. It is always useful on such matters to talk to Peggy Charren. The patron saint of "vidkids" proposes a sensible way through the rhetorical mist: Have the parents, not the industry, rate the programs and decide what to block from their home screens. Ms. Charren is founder of Action for Children's Television and is largely responsible for congressional passage of the Children's Television Act of 1990.

Charren says she would scrap the V-chip. She proposes instead that manufacturers install an electronic "scrambler" in their sets. The scrambler chip is already in some advanced digital sets and could be adapted to

our analog sets. While the V-chip gives the power of choice to an outside party, the scrambler allows parents to decide. Using a remote keypad, they could convert specific programs to hash by selecting what channels to scramble and what times to scramble them — similar to setting a VCR to record a specific program.

Customarily, it's the rightful province of the parent to decide who's welcome at the hearth and when to bar the door. The Charren scrambler would extend parental discretion to producers of sleaze. It overcomes the

problem of having either the broadcast industry or a government agency decide what is violent, indecent, or obscene. Parents would, as parents should.

The scrambler would deal neatly with the problem of defining violence and discriminating between gratuitous "tebrutality" and the necessary instruction of a child about life. With a scrambler, parents could discriminate between the appropriateness of stories with a violent edge on the evening

news and "Diagnosis Murder," or between Ken Burns's "Civil War" and "NYPD Blue." Parents hesitant about making the choice could base their scrambling judgments on zapping charts formulated by peer groups of their liking: the national PTA, the local church, or the American Family Association, for example. Scrambling as a parental right would render moot the issue of a corporate producer's First Amendment rights.

Parents must persuade the holdouts among the five Federal Communications commissioners to stop dithering and impose channel usage, or spectrum fees, on TV stations that refuse to sensibly schedule quality children's programs. The proceeds would be dedicated to "kidvid" on those stations that will.

■ Jerry M. Landay teaches at the University of Illinois, writes and lectures on television issues, and is a former network journalist.



**It's the province of the parent to decide who's welcome at the hearth and when to bar the door.**



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# Hijacking the I-Way - What It Will Cost You

*How a 'stealth' telecom bill slid through Congress*

By Jerry M. Landay

THE most important social legislation of the session is receiving so little public attention as it moves through the congressional mill that it's being called the "stealth bill." The Telecommunications Act of 1995 is so sweeping that every American who owns a television set or radio, reads a newspaper, uses cable, a telephone, or a computer will be affected.

The bill will influence what we'll pay for our telephone facilities, as our demands for telephone lines to access on-line computer services expands. It could touch off a new surge in our cable rates, which federal regulators only recently brought under control. The bill will shift the balance of power from local TV stations to their networks, further diminishing the range of local programming we receive; eliminate smaller cable systems that serve much of the nation; and concentrate the range of program choices and editorial voices in the hands of even fewer producers and distributors.

There's a struggle of titans between competing telephone interests over key provisions of the bill. There have been extraordinary departures from the democratic process. Perhaps because they have a direct stake, the networks' news reports give it virtually no heed. The mainstream press quarantines the story to the business pages.

The bill rewrites the core body of law, dating back to 1934, that regulates the communications industry. The so-called "reforms" will loosen the rules under which the \$200-billion-a-year industry that owns America's long-distance and regional phone companies, cable television systems, many newspapers, and radio-television enterprises will battle for dominion in the new digital order.

The industry began spreading huge amounts of money among the congressional campaigns before the last election - nearly \$7 million in the 1993-94 season alone. With the start of the new session, the philanthropic tilt has moved from the Democrats to the Republicans. Special favors have been reserved for members of the House and Senate Commerce committees, which have jurisdiction.

In a highly irregular stretch of the dem-

were permitted to write large sections of the legislation. One of them, Peggy Binzel, is credited with the bill's marked pro-network tilt. She is vice president for government relations of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, which owns the Fox network.

The Senate overwhelmingly passed its version of the bill in June. The House was scheduled to debate its far more generous version this week.

After the House Commerce Committee had voted overwhelmingly to report it out, the regional Bell companies complained to Speaker Newt Gingrich about certain provisions governing their entry into the long-distance business.

JEFF DANZIGER - STAFF



According to Capitol Hill sources, Mr. Gingrich asked committee leaders to make substantial changes. They were quietly inserted in the bill without formal resubmission to members.

In an angry letter to Gingrich, Sen. Bob Kerrey (D) of Nebraska asked "how this practice squares with your long-stated desire to change the way government does business." The letter received little attention.

Aside from the damage it's wreaked on the democratic process, the bill's most serious flaw is its double standard. It promotes competition in telephone services among established media interests, which experts say will produce

lower rates for consumers of telephone services. But the provisions all but choke off competition in television and radio - bad news for citizen-consumers who seek a multiplicity of voices on the air and on cable. It dangerously limits ownership of the stations and cable systems to those enterprises with the ready cash to snap them up - notably, the phone companies, established media conglomerates, and the networks.

There are goodies for the cable business, too, where caps on cable rates are to be swept away, with systems able to charge whatever the market will bear. Purported safeguards are without teeth.

President Clinton has indicated he may veto the bill as it stands. Meantime, there should be no question about the democratic leanings of the Congress - of, by, and for the people. The people, in this case, are those who own and operate telecommunications conglomerates.

# Why Networks Are Hot Buys

*Christy Science Monday*  
8/10/95

By Jerry M. Landay

**I**N September 1926, a full-page ad announced the birth of the first permanent broadcasting network, NBC. It pledged that the network would convert the radio set from a mere "plaything" to "an instrument of service." What networks have been serving ever since are primarily the needs of business. As twin transactions worth \$25 billion showed last week - ABC's takeover by Disney, and CBS's purchase by Westinghouse - networks have remained massive instruments of commerce, pop culture, and social management. These corporate crown jewels have retained their value despite dips in the business cycle and the competitive challenges of new technology.

In the late '20s, networks spurred the sale of radio sets; in the '40s, they mobilized us for war; in the '50s, they bonded us to TV consumerism; and now, as the spearheads of huge tele-entertainment conglomerates, they supply the cash, content, and distribution machinery for the export of the "American dream" to the world. Second only to aerospace, screen content is America's main cash crop. The combusive powers of network alliances are nothing new. Westinghouse was a member of the consortium that founded the Radio Corporation of America, which sired NBC. ABC, a struggling network of only 14 TV stations in 1953, was saved by a compact that put Walt Disney's hugely popular "Mickey Mouse Club" on the air each Sunday night. In turn, ABC sunk needed capital into a Disney dream called Disneyland.

By the early '90s, many media soothsayers were predicting the demise of networks. Competition from cable and computers, coupled with recessionary cycles, eroded the networks' revenue stream, while their share of tuned-in TV homes slid from 90 percent to 60 percent. Rupert Murdoch, the Merlin of networking, cast miraculous enchantments on Washington that brought his upstart Fox net-

work into the competitive circle. Audience erosion has since leveled off, and the return of good times has resurrected the network business. "Up-front" advertising sales for the fall program lineups broke records last year - even for CBS, the invalid of the network business. Networks bring to their buyers:

■ **Cash.** Government policies and legislative "reforms" are raising the limits on the number of radio, TV stations, and prime-time programs that networks can own and are extending their prime-time income by one hour each night.

■ **Reach.** Networks still deliver the largest audience to advertisers of any mass medium at the lowest price - some 60 million homes nightly. Their initials are among the most familiar of brand names.

■ **Stations.** Networks bring their affiliated stations to the deal, some of which they own and operate in larger markets. These "O&Os" are extremely profitable, with returns of 40 percent to 50 percent common.

■ **Diverse holdings.** ABC, for instance, owns two ESPN cable

networks, which loft sports programs to 150 countries, including China and India, as well as eight daily and 140 weekly newspapers.

■ **Social stability.** Networks define acceptable boundaries of taste, trends, ideas and issues, expert opinion, and even self-definition. Their ads legitimize and reinforce the impulse to buy.

In his 1976 Oscar-winning movie "Network," the late writer Paddy Chayefsky envisioned his fictional Universal Broadcasting System as the spearhead of "a college of corporations inexorably determined by the immutable by-laws of business." With Chayefsky, we're forced to wonder about the beauty of bigness in the commerce of culture. Network content, with all its reach, has hardly ignited a great American renaissance.

■ *Jerry M. Landay, a former ABC and CBS news correspondent, writes on media issues.*

## OPINION/ESSAYS

**Networks supply the cash, content, and distribution for the export of the 'American Dream.'**

# Why Networks Are Hot Buys

By Jerry M. Landay

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## OPINION/ESSAYS

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Christian Science Monitor  
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## OPINION/ESSAYS

# Laying a Nest Egg For Public Television

By Jerry M. Landay

**A**MERICAN democracy is a see-saw struggle between the collective good sense of the people, the innate distrust of their leaders, and the sales pitch of big business to both.

There is an extraordinarily important variation of this theme on Capitol Hill, where a quiet bipartisan effort is gathering momentum to create a trust fund for public broadcasting. Twenty-seven years after the birth of what Fred Friendly called "this wonderful, poor starving child," there is just a chance that the only sensible radio-TV programming instrument left coast-to-coast could be set free from the tyranny of political paranoia, especially the congressional brand.

The leaders of NPR, PBS, Public Radio International, and public television stations have proposed the idea. There are, of course, devils in the details: how to capitalize the trust fund and who'll control it.

Sadly, elements of the public broadcasting community are warring over the issue.

Ironically, prospective liberation for public broadcasting springs from right-wing efforts to fly it into the ground on a fiscal "glide path to zero." A veritable tidal wave of public protest, mainstream media, has produced more mail than threats to cut Medicare. Startled members of Congress confront a political minefield at the grass roots. Some believe they have a popular mandate to reverse course and relaunch non-commercial broadcasting on a "flight path" to fiscal independence.

Among others, the respected Richard Durbin (D) of Illinois, describes a popular backlash extending well beyond the "Barney" clique to his rural Republican voters, some of them self-described members of the National Rifle Association, demanding that Congress resist the move to cut a program service they deem vital. It includes farm reports aired regularly by local public radio stations.

House Speaker Newt Gingrich, author of the "zero out" phrase that found a place in history, has now tried to blunt the backlash. On the PBS interview series hosted by Charlie Rose, he said last month: "We do want to keep the public broadcasting system. I think that by emphasizing the cut ... I sent exactly the wrong signal."

How this sea change is translated into policy is the tricky part, because Washington often resists doing the right thing, especially when the public finds it to be right.

A capital pool of between \$5 billion and \$6 billion would be needed for a trust fund to produce the interest income to replace the \$300 million annual federal share of what the system needs - about 14 percent of its total budget. Compare this ongoing

bargain with the \$1.27 billion that NBC recently bid for the rights to just two upcoming Olympic competitions.

Advocates of a trust fund propose that the capital pool come from an annual levy on commercial broadcasters for the lucrative licenses they receive from the federal government; another source would be so-called one-time transfer fees on the sale of radio- and TV-station licenses from seller to buyer. A brisk trade in commercial stations is expected to flow from deregulation provisions of the congressionally rewritten federal communications law.

Newton Minow, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission under President Kennedy, is one of the leaders of the campaign to dedicate trust fund resources to wholesome and intelligent children's programs. "It's time to enforce the bargain," he declares, under which commercial broadcasters "signed up to be a public servant and a public trustee." If commercial broadcasters are unwilling to serve the public interest, they should pay the public broadcasting system to do it.

There's mounting pressure on Republican leaders to create such a trust fund. Texan Jack Fields, chairman of the House Telecommunications Subcommittee, is on record against using federal "taxes" to cap-

**Ironically, prospective liberation for public broadcasting springs from right-wing efforts to fly it into the ground.**

italize the fund - but won't say whether he defines the proposed spectrum fee as a tax.

Also now studying the trust fund is Sen. Larry Pressler, chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, who once invited private enterprise to snap up pieces of the public sys-

tem. He faces a brisk reelection challenge next year in South Dakota, where a popular bumper sticker reads: "Support public broadcasting. Privatize Pressler."

Fields, Pressler, and Gingrich have assured the culture vultures who support them that they will "wean" public broadcasting from federal appropriations. The trust fund would allow them to satisfy that pledge and let the system flourish. But they face intense counterpressure from the well-off commercial industry. The broadcasting industry has been singularly resistant to shame. The National Association of Broadcasters is the most persistently powerful lobby in Washington. Other broadcasters understand that their news value to network and local newscasts hinges on their willingness to go along.

Given a persistent GOP history of seeking to control public broadcasting, and a Democratic history of failing to provide a sensible way to pay for it, there is little reason to believe Congress will do the right thing on the trust fund - except, perhaps, for one factor: the voice of the people.

■ Jerry M. Landay, a former ABC and CBS news correspondent, writes and lectures on media issues.

9/5/91

OPINION/ESSAYS

# Thoughts From Another 'Newt' on Free Speech, TV

By Jerry M. Landay

THE commercial television industry is reading its constitutional rights to parents and critics across the land. It's telling them in no uncertain terms that the Founding Fathers gave the industry the right to transmit whatever it pleases to America's young.

Broadcasters have raised their constitutional shield against public discontent over the fouling of the airwaves - discontent that has tripped flares on Capitol Hill. A Congress ever artful in appeasing broadcasters while indulging their critics is being forced to do something. It seems certain to append to its final overhaul of the telecommunications law a requirement that setmakers install V-chips in new TVs.

Someone - no one quite knows who or how - is supposed to create the ratings system that will let parents activate the chip and zap programs they don't want their children to watch. Several zealous senators are trying to ban violent programs from airing at times in which children watch and to fund a quarterly "report card" that would cite offending stations and sponsors.

Whipping out the Bill of Rights, the president of the ABC TV network, David Westin, says that all of this raises "substantial constitutional problems regarding the First Amendment, which protects us from government intrusion in free speech." The National Association of Broadcasters calls it "piling on" to build "an unprecedented federal censorship bureaucracy."

Citizens, for whom the right was enshrined, recall that the intent of the founders in promulgating the First Amendment had absolutely nothing to do with the sanctioning of economic interests to engage in the exploitation and social conditioning of the young. It dealt with monumental matters such as political expression and freedom of worship.

Furthermore, citizens recall that freedom of speech is not absolute - least of all when it presents "a clear and present danger" to others. The young, for instance? You can't foment treason. You can't defame people. You can't shout "fire" in a crowded theater.

Political speech carries privilege that commercial speech does not. You can't publish pharmaceutical ads that make deceptive

claims. You can't take liberties with "tombstone ads" that offer securities to the investing public. You can't put cigarette ads on the air, because, the courts ruled in 1971, in balancing free speech against the public good Congress had a rational basis for its ban. Public ownership of the airwaves gave government reasonable power to regulate electronic messages because radio and television advertising possesses characteristics that give it undue influence, especially over the young.

Only last month, in an opinion written by conservative James Buckley, the federal appeals court in the District of Columbia, for precisely the same reason, found that "the government has a compelling interest in protecting children under 18 from exposure to indecent broadcasts" between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m.

Lay citizens troubled with the deformation of the Bill of Rights by commercial kidvid producers have a learned ally in Newton N.

the public-interest standard relates to children, the youngest of whom are illiterate, all of whom are "financially, emotionally, even physically dependent on adults, then we will never figure out what it means anywhere else."

Flipping the omelet again, industry lawyers and right-wing think-tankers have transformed the free-speech principle into the freedom to profit at any price. As they construe it, efforts to make broadcasters serve the public interest are, in effect, violations of their right to free expression. Minow cites examples in which the industry has used the hallowed free-speech right to gag free speech. In November 1992, Peter Chrisanthopoulos, president of a network front organization called the National Television Association, hectored sponsors of TV Turnoff Day: "Participating in national boycotts is an infringement on the networks' First Amendment rights."

I visited with Minow, and asked him a lawyerly "theoretical": how Thomas Jefferson, an author of the Bill-of-Rights, might have responded to that.

"Had he lived in the time of TV," Minow said, "he would have insisted that it treat public issues in a balanced way. Our protection of children, our dedication to free speech, and to a free market, have gotten out of balance. He would have wanted the industry to redress that balance in favor of all citizens, but especially young citizens."

Jefferson founded our first public university, the University of Virginia, demonstrating at the start the linkage of the First Amendment to the public interest. Serving the interest of the young is organic to the American future. Minow reminds a listener what the late Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said to petitioners: "You are all confused about what you may have a right to do under the Constitution, and the right thing to do."

The Buckley decision on indecency, children, and television is headed for the Supreme Court. In a major test, the justices will have the chance to resanctify a hallowed right intended for citizens, not runaway commerce, while underscoring the civic responsibilities to which the founders tied that right.

■ Jerry M. Landay is professor emeritus at the University of Illinois.

**Had Jefferson lived in the time of TV, Newton Minow said, 'he would have insisted that it treat public issues in a balanced way.'**

Minow. Mr. Minow is the former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission who, back in 1961, failed to shame broadcasters with his "Vast Wasteland" speech. Now he has framed his concerns in an important book, "Abandoned in the Wasteland: Children, Television, and the First Amendment" (Hill and Wang).

Minow reveals to readers that the words he most wanted Americans to remember in that speech were not "vast wasteland" but "public interest," which broadcasters vow to serve when they receive a license to operate on a public frequency. In a master flip of an Orwellian omelet, the industry has succeeded in planting the myth that the public interest is anything that serves the corporate interest, without regard to what we used to call civic responsibility.

Minow passionately demurs: "The public interest meant and still means that we should constantly ask: What can television do for our country, for the common good, for the American people?" If we can't figure out how

*Media-merger irony: weaker  
information in the Info Age*

## When Bigger Means Less

By Jerry M. Landay

**M**ICKEY MOUSE and Peter Jennings will report to the same top boss. Tom and Jerry and Road Runner are teaming up with Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd. This news lends an air of fantasy to the latest frenzy of media megamergers. But if one studies the sheer throw-weight of these planned amalgamations, there is every reason to worry about the antidemocratic nature of this unopposed rise of *mediarchy* — and the unreassuring sense of a Clinton administration without a policy to address it.

From the Sherman Antitrust Act in 1890 to the Celler-Kefauver Antimonopoly Act of 1950, Congress designed safeguards to prevent firms from merging with other firms if the effect was to substantially lessen competition and create monopolies.

Trust-busting was spawned by the excesses of the Industrial Revolution, and the efforts of tycoons to corner such industrial markets as oil, sugar, steel, locomotives, and farm equipment. The order breaking up American Telephone and Telegraph in 1984 recognized that the same rationale is valid for the Communications Revolution. But the only flicker of recognition from Clinton's Justice Department is its interest in perhaps restricting Microsoft's plan for tying in access to MSN, its on-line network, for millions of buyers of Windows 95.

In this information age, export of Windows 95 and thousands of hours of movie and TV content such as "Jurassic Park" and "Bay Watch" helps America's trade balance. Goods built on electrons make up one-sixth of the domestic economy.

### Cash cows that menace

Oligopolies that seek to control both electronic content and distribution "pipelines" are cash cows. But they also menace democracy. They have enormous power to manipulate thought and emotion, woo weak wills with voyeuristic wants, and sculpt the way we look at reality. We've been slow to understand their influence in a consumption-driven world.

The marriage of mediarchies involving Turner Broadcasting and Time Warner will create the globe's largest amusement-and-news enterprise. It pools Turner's Hanna-Barbera cartoon library with Warner's Looney Toons to create the world's most extensive and lucrative treasury of cartoons. It merges the interests of the two largest cable systems in the US — Time Warner cable and John Malone's Tele-Communications empire (TCI), which owns 21 percent of Turner. These two entities enter nearly half the cable homes in America. Producers who can't persuade these systems to air their programs won't

make it on cable. Independent artists will confront a crisis of access.

CNN and the Time family of magazines share common news audiences and cross-promotional interests. Westinghouse Electric and CBS together own 15 television stations, which deliver programs and advertising to a third of American TVs. Sumner Redstone, chairman of Viacom (with its MTV) and Paramount Pictures, also owns National Amusements Inc., which controls 1,000 movie screens, and Blockbuster, the largest renter of movies on tape.

The bulk of what we see, hear, learn, sing, play, rent, and consume will shortly be controlled by a dozen corporate entities within this mediarchy. Some anticipate that economic shakeout will reduce that dozen by half by the year 2000.

### Buying for profit, not quality

Opinion surveyors report that 80 percent of Americans learn most of what they know about the world from TV news. But we see ABC effectively capitulating to the makers of Philip Morris cigarettes on its news reports about nicotine levels in cigarettes, a matter that extends from teenage habits and health to press freedom. ABC apparently chose to clear its decks for acquisition by Disney.

We're told that Disney and ABC will create a chain of ESPN sports bars, and air Disney programs in children's viewing hours, because that would "offend no political position." Michael H. Jordan, chairman of Westinghouse, made it obvious that his interest in buying CBS is to acquire the stations it owns, not to revive its news division. The aim is not to serve the public interest, but to optimize profit and minimize risk.

We are left totally in the dark on how President Clinton will confront the greatest trend toward monopoly in a century. In 1941, NBC was ordered to divest itself of one of its two networks, the Red or Blue, to promote diversity on the air. The "Blue" became ABC. Subsequently, and for much the same reasons, movie studios were ordered to sell off the movie houses they owned. MCA was told that it could not be a producer while also serving as talent agent. And ITT was kept from buying ABC because ITT's international interests were held to compromise the credibility of the network's news. Today all this case law seems to have been overlooked — though Justice reportedly is examining unspecified aspects of the Disney-ABC deal.

The president faces what may be a crucial test of his place in the democratic history of this republic.

■ Jerry M. Landay, a former TV-radio journalist, is professor emeritus at the University of Illinois.

9/27/98

Computer owners are getting less service than ever from manufacturers, and advertisers eye their home screens as the next frontier beyond radio and television

# It's Time for a 'Wetware' Rebellion

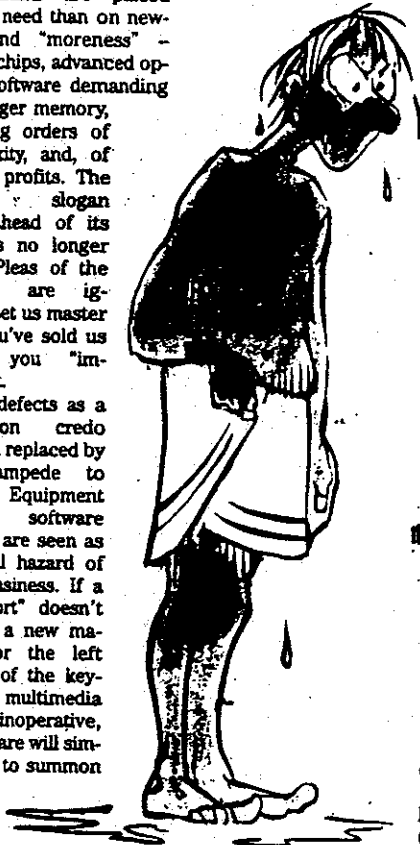
By Jerry M. Landay

**T**O the computer trade, you and I are "wetware." In order of priorities, we come fourth after "hardware" and "software" - and "adware."

In the lingo of the industry, wetware is us - the human beings who make up the market for computer technology. Wetware is clearly a pejorative term, reflective of an attitude in which change, regardless of its wear and tear on flesh and blood, is a fruitful commodity. User-friendliness is but a memory of a kinder, gentler era.

Premiums are placed less on need than on newness and "moreness" - swifter chips, advanced options, software demanding ever larger memory, galloping orders of complexity, and, of course, profits. The satirical slogan "days ahead of its time" is no longer funny: Pleas of the wetware are ignored. Let us master what you've sold us before you "improve" it.

Zero-defects as a production credo has been replaced by the stampede to market. Equipment and software "kluges" are seen as a normal hazard of doing business. If a "com port" doesn't work in a new machine, or the left channel of the keyboard or multimedia player is inoperative, the wetware will simply have to summon



of an ISDN digital data-voice line at my home brought the installer back so often that the dogs came to view him, tails wagging, as a member of the family.

Configuration procedures require black belts and grand masters. I must deep-six my screen-saver program because it sends the entire array into a spasm. I commit a technical gaffe with my printer, and the screen jolts me, flashing: "FATAL ERROR!" On the World Wide Web, I receive such inexplicable messages as: "Second instance of an exe with multiple writable data segments." How can you respond when you

Beyond hardware and software issues is the matter of purpose. Alaina Kanfer, a social scientist at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications in Urbana, Ill., where young coders devised MOSAIC, the first web interface, has surveyed wetware. She finds they were at first drawn to long-distance computing by the novelty of browsing, then stayed to experience the utility and ease of e-mail, and now increasingly use the Internet and the Web for information and research - from the latest satellite weather maps and forecasts to the Statistical Abstract of the United States.

Advertisers see it quite differently than do the wetware. Sugarplums dance in their heads, dreams of vast profits and power - the lures that brought sponsors in droves first to radio, then television.

Edwin L. Artzt, the outgoing chairman of Procter & Gamble, the soapmaker that is the largest spender of ad dollars in electronic media, told a conference of fellow advertisers that the challenge of new media is, bluntly, control and access. On one-way television, making soap operas as ad carriers was one thing. Exploiting the interactive Internet is another.

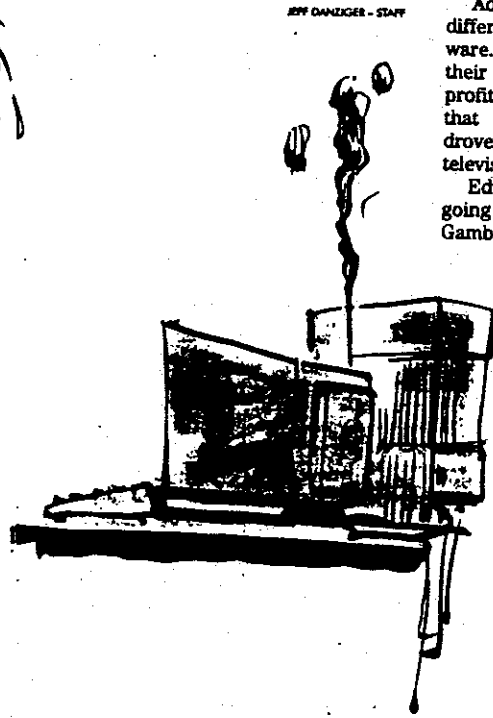
"As long as we were guaranteed virtually unlimited access to the vast majority of people's homes," he told representatives

of NBC and GM and others, "we had no reason to be concerned about access to programming. Now we do.... Content is king.... We have to develop it, we have to share in its ownership, and we have to market it through the channels" that are "most effective and most efficient."

Nielsen and Arbitron TV-ratings services are now devising tools to measure Internet users, the better to help the commercial culture manipulate content to dominate new media. The history of radio and television in America will repeat itself, unless citizens become conscious and democratically active, defining our needs online both to marketmakers and legislators, and reserving a substantial public parkland in cyberspace.

Otherwise, we will have to be content with what we're given.

■ Jerry M. Landay, a former ABC and CBS news correspondent, is professor emeritus at the University of Illinois.



can't recall the first instance?

Back-up procedures for hard disks require as many as 60 diskettes. A new piece of equipment has been devised -

a tape backup machine costing more than \$500. Upon installation, my screen signals that there's been a data blockage of some undecipherable sort. The manual is simply of no use. The manufacturer is in Colorado, a long-distance call. An automated voice replicator tells me that a human being will be available in an hour, if I care to hang on - while AT&T keeps toting up the phone bill. The company never responds to e-mail.

The local retailer says that he'll send a techie right over - at \$65 an hour. I recruit a young computer whiz at \$25. After four intensive hours of trial and error, he discovers the kluge, a minute error in the parallel port address. There's no way I could have found it myself. What will poor people do? An ever more meaningful question.

UPS and ship it back. Software is released with the bugs still in it. The wetware can always get a remote "upgrade" from the seller by "ftp" (which has nothing to do with flowers by wire), assuming they know how to ftp. (The acronym, incidentally, means "file transfer protocol," a way of moving files between computers on the Internet.)

Manuals, barely scrutable by tradition, become less comprehensible still. Some come unbound, with binder holes unpunched. Free 800 lines to connect wetware to technical support have been shut down as needless overhead. A firewall of voicemail and e-mail and faxmail has been interposed between wetware and emergency first aid. Help desks need help and rarely phone back. The balky installation

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By Daniel S.

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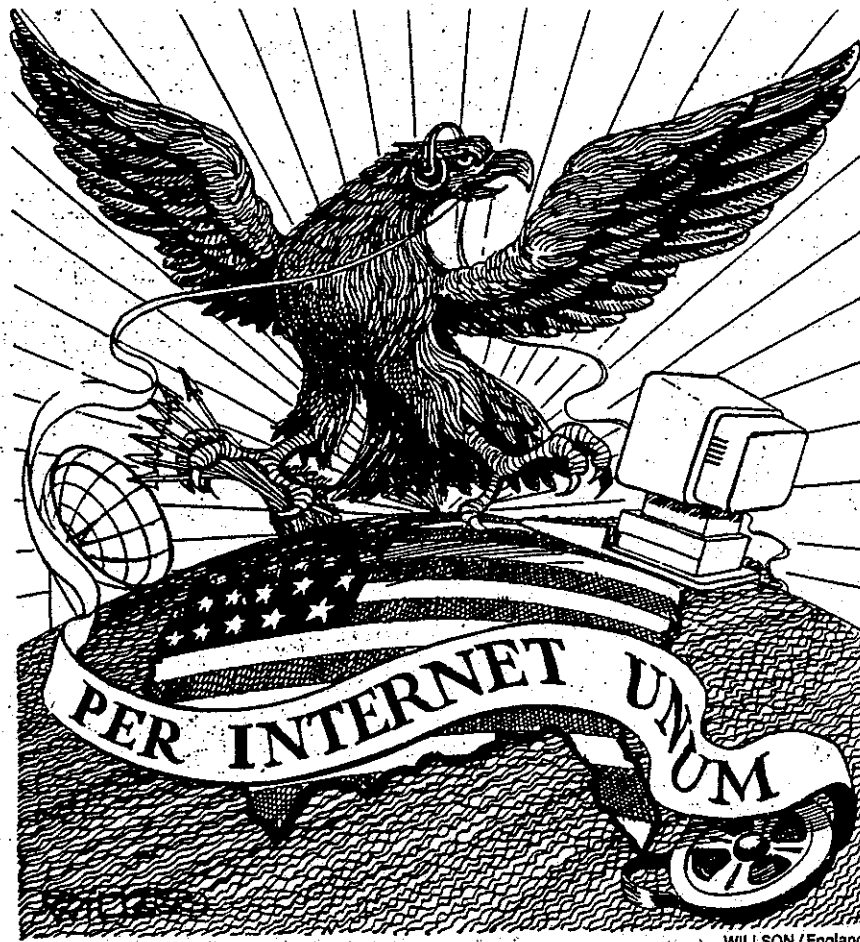
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Cartoonists & Writers Syndicate

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## America, the electronic

*Jerry M. Landay, a former correspondent for ABC News and CBS News, is professor emeritus at the University of Illinois.*

**W**HETHER we'll be governing ourselves electronically is a far more relevant question today than when Ross Perot first suggested it four years ago. He said that democracy might be better off if we citizens bypassed our elected representatives and conducted democratic business directly through electronic town meetings. We would cast binding votes on major matters by pushing a keypad directly, on line.

The question leaps into sharp relief as we approach the 1996 elections, and growing numbers of citizens of this political democracy sit at their computers and search for issues and interactive voting sites on the World Wide Web. On VOTELINK recently [<http://www.votelink.com>], which says that it is "building a global mind one vote at a time," you could cast a vote on such questions as: Should Congress keep hands off Medicare? Is the Republican Congress reading the public wrong? Tallies are published weekly.

A web site for George, the new political magazine, asked browsers in its weekly poll how they felt about President Clinton's recent statement that we were in a funk and then published the results (58.8 percent agreed, but 73.9 percent said that by the end of the week, no one would remember that he said it).

VTW, Voters Telecomm Watch [<http://www.vtw.org>], self-described as an organization of interested volunteers, briefs web browsers on federal telecommunications legislation that



**JERRY M. LANDAY**

it deems a threat to civil liberties, and it issues action bulletins to mobilize voters to lobby Congress. How long will it be before similar forums achieve official standing? To prepare, we can study presidential documents at the White House [<http://www.whitehouse.gov>] and read the text of legislation pending in Congress [<http://www.thomas.gov>].

We already have growing examples of "direct democracy" in action. Talk show hosts have mobilized listeners to phone or fax members of Congress and have actually influenced legislation. Voters have cast ballots in state and local initiatives and referendums to impose term limits and tax caps. Call it teledemocracy, push-button democracy, or electronic democracy, those of us with the means to access the system are swept on an electronic tide toward new ways of interacting and doing business. Many mass-comm futurists are calling the trend "inexorable."

There's cause for concern. The quality of citizenship is directly linked to the quality of the information that we receive. Good newspapers vanish. Television news is tied to sensational images rather than vital issues. TV ownership is increasingly concentrated in fewer hands. Those who can't afford computers can't access the system. On-line participation by state and local governments is limited, as a Republican Congress shifts more responsibilities and funds to them.

Reform is needed if the soil is to be seeded for an "inexorable" electronic republic. Grossman and others suggest computer tax credits for needy Americans. The public broadcasting sector should be strengthened and digitized. Civics education, along with ongoing courses in the sharpening of critical judgment, should be required.

Finally, the telecommunications industry needs to assume greater responsibility to the public interest. Otherwise, to paraphrase the late Ed Murrow, it will all be a scramble of wires, lights, and chips in a box.

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# Nations grow from stories

By Jerry M. Landay

The power of the storyteller was well understood by the Scottish patriot and writer Andrew Fletcher: "If I were permitted to write all the ballads," he said, "I need not care who makes the laws of the nation."

Fletcher understood that the creative mind of the storyteller is the seat of a nation's soul and the shaper of the public mind. Story is the most potent teaching tool humans have. Through the ages, story in whatever form — parable, folk tale, novel, documentary, theatrical film — has made meaning about life, love and work.

Stories have defined our values, transmitted experience and introduced children to the attributes of character, ethical behavior and conflict resolution. Stories propagate social capital, symbols, models of decent behavior. Stories are our magic carpet for a traveling intellect.

"A story provides a structure for our perceptions," said New York University's Neal Postman. "Only through story do facts assume any meaning whatsoever. Without air, our cells die. Without a story, our selves die."

"I think of communications as the great storytelling process," wrote scholar George Gerbner, "that guides our relationship to each other and to the world."

Who communicates America's stories today? Our most popular storytellers are not balladeers but the six broadcast-network program providers. On a given prime-time evening, the stories they tell reach 47 million American homes, or 80 million people — a third of the population.

The people view these stories for four to seven hours a night. Seventy-five percent of the sets in use on an average night are tuned to network-affiliated stations, and to cable channels that relay network programs.

What kinds of stories do they tell us? The ones that network executives and advertisers believe will deliver the maximum number of "eyeballs" to the "buy" messages each program contains, especially women consumers between the ages of 18 and 49. (Who will tell stories to the bulk of the population, those over 50?)

On ABC's "Grace Under Fire," one story is about whether Grace's son gets the crew cut he demands. She opposes it. In the end, the ornery husband OKs the kid's short hair without her knowledge. Meantime, new black neighbors assault Grace with stereotypical one-line insults.

On NBC's "Seinfeld," George and Jerry worry about whether their current partners are faking orgasms. Jerry asks Elaine to give him another chance to prove himself.

On "Third Rock From the Sun," the space aliens decide to get a more revealing look at human relationships by watching couples make out. "Frasier" wants to win back the girlfriend who left him at the altar. "John Larroquette" and a friend visit a plastic surgeon to get her breast size reduced and to make him look younger.

These stories are really about nothing, except what we all think we want, and how we can get it — reinforcing the generic "buy" signals of the ads.



What kinds of stories are we not told by our commercial television storytellers? Stories that may involve us in the real business of society and the spirit, and distract us from the commercial "sell." I suggest a few plot lines:

A presidential candidate agonizes between accepting badly needed campaign funds from a tobacco company and declaring his support for strict governmental controls on nicotine to keep young kids from becoming addicted. His wife smokes, and has cancer.

A senior corporate executive has his loyalty tested, when he anguishes that planned layoffs by his company will cripple the economic health of the home city, striking hardest at the ghetto. His longtime friend — a striking labor union member — will have his job filled by an imported non-union worker.

A high school music director has a vision — to let her choir perform in the great cathedrals of Europe. She cajoles the entire community into helping her raise the travel funds for it.

You'll never find such stories in TV Land. The stories on American public television are all from Great Britain. The stories that commercial TV tells us are snuffing out the American mind and suffocating American cultural brilliance.

A study by Professor Robert Putnam of Harvard University indicts prolonged com-

mercial television viewing as the single most important culprit in the decline of citizen participation in American civic life. "A democratic civilization," writes Umberto Eco, "will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection, not an invitation to hypnosis."

President Bill Clinton may jawbone an errant mass telemedia industry into going along with the "V-chip" and telling non-violent stories. It is a decoy, designed to take our eye off a new telecommunications act that vastly enlarges the power and reach of commercial networks and stations, and lets the paralyzing power of their non-stories penetrate more deeply still into our souls.

The issue is not just excessive violence, but the violence done by the commercial teleculture to civilized life in America, such as when the Federal Communications Commission continues to resist the cry of parents and educators for just three hours of quality children's programming weekly.

Television storytelling is simply too important to be left to corporate advertisers, with their distortion of First Amendment rights to inflict whatever stories they wish on American children and the American mind.

Landay, a former correspondent for ABC and CBS, teaches "Issues in Television" at the University of Illinois, and is a member of the Intergovernmental Cable Commission in Urbana.

# Kidvid makes basket cases

By Jerry M. Landay

The Federal Communications Commission and the commercial television industry have found it hard to do the right thing for America's children. This emphasizes, as nothing else can, what's wrong with the American system of commercial television and radio. We treat it just like any other business, instead of a fundamental human process. When, as a business, it treats kids like a commodity, it endangers our most important national treasure.

After more than a year of squabbles among the five FCC commissioners over workable rules for better children's TV programs, more than 100 members of Congress, under pressure from their constituents and their consciences, have petitioned them to get on with it. The row is over a rule that would require television stations to broadcast at least three hours of quality programming for children each week in convenient viewing hours, as a precondition for the renewal of their licenses to broadcast over publicly owned frequencies.

Three of the five members of the commission, along with most of the industry, have been furiously resisting the idea of "quantitative standards" for such powerful mind-food, though other sensitive industries have accepted similar standards for years — in food and pharmaceuticals, for instance.

The broadcasters argue that good programs scare away ratings, sponsors and profits; that "big government" has no right to tell broadcasters what to do; that the First Amendment gives broadcasters the constitutional right to peddle whatever trash they want to kids.

Commercial television folks don't say so publicly, but they also fear that if they do the right thing for America's young and accept quantitative standards, they will only invite a general reversal of deregulatory policy and a return to federal oversight of broadcasters' obligations to the "public interest."

These arguments are faulty and self-serving. They equate political speech, which the First Amendment was written expressly to protect, with protection of the shallow, manipulative, and often violent content of "kidvid" programming, a mutilation of original intent that ought to be challenged vigorously in court. Their argument denies any responsibility of public licensees to the welfare of the young. Their implicit argument assumes that the corporate leaders of Hasbro and Mattel Toys, Toys 'R Us, General Mills, Disney and Kellogg are by default culturally more qualified to decide what video content is best for kids than parents, teachers, religious leaders, or even socially responsible

children's programmers such as those who have created "Sesame Street" or Barney.

To the credit of the latter, a study at the University of Kansas shows that preschoolers who watched such PBS educational fare as "Sesame Street" performed better than the norm when they entered school. Those who watched commercial kidvid and adult fare did worse.

One FCC commissioner, Andrew C. Barrett, has now resigned to get out of the line of fire, leaving the agency stalemated between two members who favor tighter, quantitative guidelines and two opposed. One of the latter, veteran Commissioner James Quello, a former broadcaster, was so upset by the testimony of citizens' groups at a 1994 hearing that he questioned the right of citizens to lobby their government at all.

"Public interest groups have not been appointed bargaining agents for the public at large," he told them. "You're promoting your own private version of the public interest." Of course, the broadcasting business and its defenders at the commission have been promoting the narrow private interest of the industry, for years.

The stand of this lucrative business is a disgrace. It places a "kidvid" enterprise worth some \$700 million a year, exclusive of global syndication and merchandising revenues, ahead of the nurture of America's posterity. If the issue of "family values" has any value beyond that of a political hot-button, then the crisis of values from which America ostensibly suffers can be laid at the doorstep of an industry whose only values are ratings and profits.

For President Clinton, the political lessons of this standoff at the FCC are clear. With one vacancy on the commission, and with Commissioner Quello's term expiring in June, the president has a chance to make the commission more responsive to needs of the kids and adults who take large doses of TV daily. He must fill the vacancies with — and Congress must confirm — two citizen-representatives aware of the priceless social capital that young video viewers represent. No more broadcasters and communications lawyers are needed on the FCC.

And a pampered industry must ask itself how long it can rail against government regulation, while continuing to act against America's best interests without it.

*Landay, a former news correspondent for ABC and CBS, teaches "Issues in Television" at the University of Illinois, and is a member of the Urbana-Champaign Cable Commission.*

*Concepts like public service, once cherished,  
are out the window under deregulation*

## The Rush to Gulp US Radio Stations

By Jerry M. Landay

THE surface glamour faded long ago from radio. But Americans keep as many as five or six sets in the house and use them regularly. Don Imus, Rush Limbaugh, and Garrison Keillor remind us that television hasn't stripped all the glory from the medium or its revenues - totaling \$11.5 billion in 1995.

The radio stations that CBS owns - 39 of them - grossed a half-billion dollars last year. Like the printing presses in the Federal Mint, commercial radio stations in America churn out cash in prodigious amounts. Returns of 40 to 50 percent yearly are not uncommon.

Multibillion-dollar mergers and acquisitions in the telephone and television-based industries spawned by the new telecommunications law have stolen our eye from the land rush now under way in Radioland. A vast consolidation of ownership has begun among America's 10,000 commercial stations. Just two months after passage of the law erased the limits on the number of radio stations a single owner may acquire, a station-buying blowout is justifying critics' fears that the law is not spurring competition, but monopoly. An industry that once had to base its license renewals on service to a station's community has been let off the hook by Congress and the president.

Rita Zanella, a media analyst at Gruntal & Co. in New York, predicts that eight or 10 big station groups will eventually control the entire broadcasting industry. "You control pricing," she told the Chicago Tribune. "You eliminate your competition and have greater control over what you can charge."

To cite just a few examples of the radio land rush, Jacor Communications Inc. of Cincinnati spent nearly a billion dollars in February to acquire 26 radio stations and two television stations. Jacor now controls 62 percent of the radio revenues in the Cincinnati market, nearly half the Denver market, 30 percent of the Tampa market, and a quarter of the radio business in Portland, Ore. In a single deal worth \$1.2 billion, announced earlier this month, the Sinclair Broadcasting Group of Baltimore acquired 34 radio stations in 27 markets, along with a group of television stations, becoming a miniconglomerate in a single bound.

With the purchase of three stations in March, Citadel Communications Corporation now owns seven of the most powerful AM and FM stations in

Albuquerque's 36-station radio market. That includes KKOB, which blankets much of the southwest, and the city's only classical music station, KHFM. Arthur Schreiber, a former manager of KKOB and a veteran of the radio wars, predicts that Albuquerque's classical-music listeners will soon find themselves without choice on the air. "It's hard for me to believe that Citadel can meet its debt service by continuing to play classical music on a station that cost it \$5.6 million," says Mr. Schreiber.

The federal government is essentially licensing the drive to bigness. Station brokers predict that 1996 will be the most lucrative year ever for station trades. In a deregulatory environment, small, aggressive companies such as Jacor and Citadel can become mass-comm players in a single bound, with lenders anxious to supply cheap money.

**B**UT radio isn't just any business. Radio is an essential part of our civic capital. It speaks over publicly licensed frequencies to millions of listeners, at home, at work, and on the road. In the past stations were more than juke boxes. They provided breaking news and weather bulletins, specialized information for farmers, investors, community organizations, local governments, and emergency services. Before the start of deregulation in the 1980s, owners were limited to seven AM and seven FM stations, to ensure diverse voices and dispersed power.

The new barons of radio are absentee owners who convert their stations from local presences into cash cows for instant milking, their values ballooned for trading to the next buyer. The name of the game is to avoid being the "last sucker" stuck with debt if recession hits.

Radio, once the most trusted news

source in America, has increasingly abandoned the role of local service-provider. Newsrooms in many stations have been cut to the bone - one or two readers, Schreiber says, "ripping and reading" news and weather supplied to all clients by a single news source, the Associated Press.

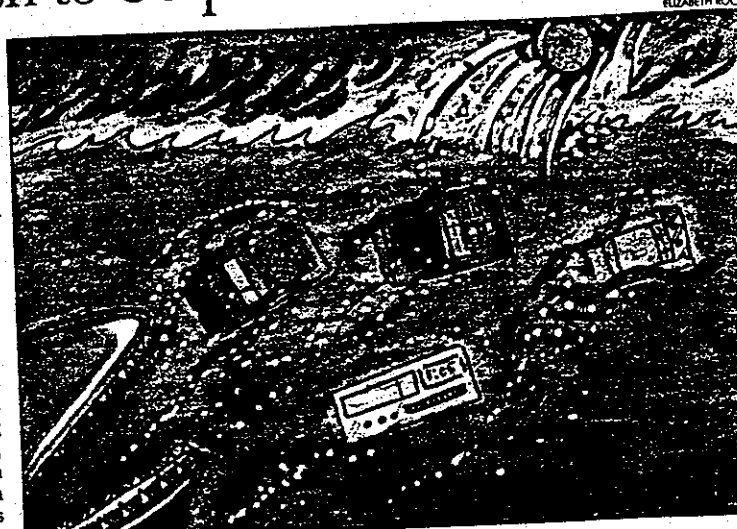
There is teeth-gritting sameness in the music they play, as dial-twisters who have traveled long distances in a car can testify - various shades of rock and country music.

Before deregulation, the Federal Communications Commission required buyers to hold their stations for at least three years before resale, to ensure local commitment. In the new environment, a wheeler-dealer can theoretically turn his station over as soon as the FCC approves the purchase. Media writer Ken Auletta was told by the head of a station ownership group: "It's commodity trading to us. We don't know [our] community. We're short-term players."

The fundamental question is unavoidable: Is mass communications solely a growth game for entrepreneurs, banks, and Wall Street, or is it also a social partner that justifies its existence by living up to its civic obligations? The late Donald H. McGannon, a respected industry leader in the 1950s and '60s as chairman of the Group W (Westinghouse) Stations, was a businessman with a vision who told his staff: "If we do the right thing in our cities and towns, the money comes." They did - and it did.

The times have changed. But not the relevance of McGannon's vision. Undoing the damage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 will be difficult, but it will have to happen.

■ Jerry M. Landay, a former broadcast journalist, writes and lectures on media-democracy issues at the University of Illinois.



ELIZABETH ROCK

## The Phonics vs. 'Whole-Language' Debate

Regarding the front-page article "As Reading Scores Plummet, States Get Hooked on Phonics," April 18: As a preschooler, my daughter had basic reading skills, having been taught by the old tried-and-true method of learning the sounds of the letters, and then sounding out words by hooking the phonetic sounds together.

But upon entering first grade, my daughter began learning the so-called "whole language" method, a system we did not understand at first.

Within several months, my daughter's reading skills had deteriorated to the point where she could no longer read properly. In whole-language teaching, reading "horse" for the word "house" is good enough because the words almost look the same. Words are read as whole "pictures," rather than as sounded-out parts.

For my daughter this led to a deep frustration with school. We soon moved her to a small private school, where phonics-based reading was taught. There, instead of being coded as a "special needs" student, my daughter developed into a successful and enthusiastic reader and writer.

I question the motives of the major advocates of the whole-language method. A system that has spawned an entire industry of expensive teaching systems, experts, counselors, and gurus has a lot to account for when it maintains a better than 20 percent failure rate.

Wayne Mutchler

Peterborough, N.H.

### LETTERS

The Monitor's recent efforts at reporting a balanced picture of current educational philosophies and practices dangerously simplifies the enormity of the issues at stake in the field of education today.

As an educator with 11 years experience on the front lines in a classroom every day, I consider myself to be a "whole language" teacher, and I can assure your readers and writers that whole-language techniques and instructional strategies build strong readers and writers who are able to read for meaning and who are able to write expressively and intelligently.

Contrary to public opinion, the issue has never been one of phonics versus whole language. Phonics is a small piece of the larger puzzle of learning to read text for meaning. Whole language, on the other hand, imparts a much broader understanding of how the learning of language occurs. Within the spectrum of whole learning, there is room for the teaching of phonics and spelling. (And phonics and spelling are being taught.)

The reverse, however, cannot be said. If states mandate phonics as the primary method of instruction, there will not be room for meaningful reading and writing within the limitations of that framework.

How is it that state legislators, with no teaching experience and limited knowledge of the professional issues in the field of education, feel perfectly free to mandate instructional strategies? This is a matter of deep concern to me. Professional educators research, practice, and refine their craft in their own classrooms and with their own students. It is the height of ignorance for legislators to look at test scores and assume that phonics is the answer to the problems in education today.

Cathy Maxam

Ellet, Maine

Your letters are welcome. For publication they must be signed and include your address and telephone number. Only a selection can be published and none acknowledged. All letters are subject to editing. Letters should be addressed to "Readers Write" and may be sent by mail to One Norway St., Boston, MA 02115, by fax to 617-450-2317, or by Internet e-mail (200 words maximum) to OPED@RACHEL.CSPS.COM.

NPR Commentary  
Jerry M. Landay  
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Without the manufactured hype of slogans, hatchets or hot buttons . Voters assess a candidate's character -- for THEMelves.. **With appropriate modification**, that's the model for political reform in the United States.

We can expect to hear that the idea is unconstitutional. The First Amendment protects political speech. But we're not talking about political speech, here. The issue is commercial speech, which hawks politicians like tubes of toothpaste. In recent decades, the courts have given commercial speech more protection than it deserves. Defenders of the democratic process must now press that issue with a series of vigorous legal tests.

Democracy is not about consumerism. It's about citizenship. I'm Jerry Landay.

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[Jerry M. Landay teaches ISSUES IN TELEVISION at the University of Illinois and writes on media-and-society issues. He is a former network journalist -- ABC and CBS-News. He was also chief of the Group W Foreign News Service and chief political correspondent.]

NPR Commentary: Getting Big Money out of Politics-by-Television  
Copyright 1996  
by Jerry M. Landay  
Aired on *All Things Considered*  
Tuesday, 4 June 1996

Putting dollars ahead of voters is hardly what healthy democracy is about. Nor is choosing our leaders like brands of toothpaste. Nancy Kazcak of Chicago, a state legislator, kept careful notes on what SHE had to do -- to run in a Democratic primary contest for Congress two years ago. For her, running really meant SITTING -- with a telephone headset on her ears, and a funding consultant at her elbow -- 13 hours a day, trying to raise money. Her daily target was to raise an average of four thousand dollars a day to pay for her campaign. Kazcak spent 75 per cent of her time, n o t shaking voters' hands, n o t researching issues, but dialing for dollars. Candidates like Nancy Kazcak are dialing for dollars again this campaign season. The average price tag for a House seat this year may reach a million dollars, give or take -- and that's the average. Senatorial candidates must raise at least eight times that. Three out of four campaign dollars goes to pay for broadcast air time, largely television. In 1994, candidates at all levels spent \$355 million on television alone.

Reforming the system means getting big money out of politics. That means, getting big political cash off the air. And that means. banning paid political spots -- the great voter turnoff of representative Democracy.

NPR Commentary  
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The commercial television and radio industry distributes its lucrative content over PUBLICLY owned frequencies and on cables strung along PUBLIC rights-of-way. But, outside of a bit of free time for so-called debates, which usually produce more smoke and heat than light, politics has been a big profit center for broadcasters.

The news that the networks, under pressure, are now willing to give up bits of airtime free to Presidential candidates in 1996 is a tentative step toward public responsibility. But it's only a step. The gesture does nothing to help so-called "lesser" candidates -- like Nancy Kazcak -- candidates for legislatures, governorships, the U-S Senate and House. They will have spent something like a half-billion dollars on radio and television before the elections of 1996 are history. And most of THAT will buy thirty-second advertising spots -- the Great Turn-off of the American political process. Nothing, but nothing, sends voters fleeing from the process more than TV ad clutter.

The entire political game of pay-to-play has to be replaced by a system of free air time. In Great Britain, broadcasters allot free air time to parties, which dole it out to candidates, not for spots or sound-bites, but sensible discourse by the candidate him or herself about issues. Sensibly.

# On Cable, Making Room for the Same Old Stuff

By Jerry M. Landay

**T**HERE'S one variety of M&M that can be less a treat for the taste buds than a torment for the body politic.

This observation refers to the two telemedia bruisers Murdoch and Malone. Rupert Murdoch's constellation of TV properties, including the Fox Television Network, spans two-thirds of the globe. John Malone is the overlord of TCI, the largest collection of community cable systems in the nation. In this age of mortally busted antitrust, when the M&M duo gets together, you can bet it's not to render close harmony on "Bringing in the Sheaves."

It is, in fact, to advance their mutual corporate interests at the expense of the public interest. In this case, the victim is C-Span and C-Span II, the two public affairs networks that together comprise the only national civic resource left in a cable TV jungle where the dumb-down culture of corporate marketeering reigns. C-Span's congressional coverage, policy discourse, and literary interviews are among the few surviving expressions of sheer intelligence that television offers.

## C-Span bumped aside

The audience of the two C-Span cable networks is overwhelming. Twenty-two million Americans watch them weekly for an average of more than six hours a week. A new survey of C-Span viewers finds that 9 out of 10 of them go to the polls.

The trouble, in a nutshell, is that cable systems must pay C-Span 6 cents per subscriber to bring the service to us. But Mr. Murdoch is willing to reverse the process and put 11 cents per

head into the pockets of those same cable providers to carry his new Fox News Channel instead, a far-right rendition of the world that masquerades as an objective news service. Mr. Malone, no blazing icon of liberalism himself, is in financial trouble, the self-wounded victim of overextended ambition. His cable service, which is wired to nearly 1 in 4 cable homes, is in a severe cash crunch. TCI, with assets valued at \$28 billion, is some \$13 billion in debt.

Every needful tele-tycoon must come to the aid of his needy

fellows. Murdoch has loaned \$200 million to help Malone out of his hole. With it goes a five-year option to buy a 20 percent interest in Fox News. In gratitude, Malone is awarding scarce channel space to Fox News in many of the communities he has cabled. To make room for Fox News, Malone has kicked C-Span or C-Span II off 11 systems so far. In moves unrelated to Fox, Malone has bumped or reduced cable time for the two C-Spans in a total of 53 other TCI cities. C-Span researchers figure that 2-1/2 million subscribers have been affected

since August.

Instead of dispassionate congressional coverage by the C-Spans, these hapless viewers, without being consulted, will either get to see the Rupertized version of the world, or no C-Span at all. Members of Congress have some thinking to do. They cherish being seen on C-Span, but their pro-monopoly media policies have helped derail it.

## Other TCI casualties

The two C-Spans join such other casualties on TCI as Comedy Central and the WGN Super-

station. They have not delivered either the ratings or profits that Malone demands.

But weren't variety, diversity, and choice the blazing promise that television by cable was supposed to offer the viewing public? Weren't we promised a multi-channel paradise for a multiplicity of tastes and needs? Jazz? Independent film? Documentaries from other parts of the world? A spicy panorama of news and views across the political horizon? Instead, commercial cable is a video nerd's nirvana of network reruns - a clone-works for the drivelized output of Hollywood's mass manufacture machine: "Bonanza" and more "Bonanza," "Murder She Wrote" and rewrote.

## Insipid fare

This is what an orgy of deregulation and total indifference toward the relentless march of monopoly in mass communication have brought us, from Reagan through Clinton: the monocultural tastelessness of Murdoch and Malone, Westinghouse, Disney, and Time-Warner/Turner, too. What's at stake is American mass culture - and, thus, much of the life of our civilization.

A duly elected government is allowing a handful of media-archs to control both the programs and the pipelines that distribute them. The result is a nightmare of monopoly power over our conversation of culture and a crisis of intelligence and taste in this country. Washington's, and America's, total indifference suggests it can only get worse.

■ Jerry M. Landay, a former ABC and CBS correspondent, is honors professor emeritus at the University of Illinois.



# The Public Has a Right to Make 'You're on the Air' Fair Again

By Jerry M. Landay

THE national debate over bully-boy radio in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing has missed the point: It's time to revive the "fairness doctrine."

The law holds that broadcast frequencies are a public resource and that licensees must serve the interests of the public — all the public. But in 1987, major lobbying organs of the broadcasting industry, conservative congressmen, and ideological front groups such as Sen. Bob Packwood's National Campaign for Freedom of Expression abolished the fairness standard.

Promulgated by the FCC in 1949, it declared that stations had an obligation to "afford reasonable opportunity for the discussion of conflicting views on issues of public importance." The public had a need to be fully

informed. Owners had no right to monopolize their stations with their own, or anybody else's, point of view.

The intent of the fairness doctrine was to expose a democratic audience to a reasonable range of viewpoints — not necessarily in equal doses or on the very same program. Nor was the public's access to the air to be solely dependent on the ability to pay.

President Reagan's first chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, Mark Fowler, led the campaign inside government to eliminate the fairness doctrine, declaring: "We've got to get away from this public trusteeship notion that has confused us or so many years."

He and his allies argued that the doctrine had a chilling effect, that the regulation actually discouraged stations from airing controversy. They were right, of course. But only in the sense that healthy discourse on the air through discussion and debate, documentaries, and editorials did not produce the high ratings they wanted. What was chilled was the essential aim of the industry — to deliver the most "ears and eyeballs" to sponsors.

The promotion of "fairness" so troubled some station operators, religious broadcasters, and advertisers who tended to equate controversy with conspiracy when the issues were raised by those to the left of them.

In the 1960s and '70s, citizens

coverage, exclusionary practices by religious stations, and paid special-interest advertising on smoking and nuclear power.

Voting to abolish the fairness doctrine in 1987, the Reagan-dominated FCC covered its action with slippery logic. In promoting discourse, they argued, the doctrine actually *contravened* freedom of speech and no longer served the public interest.

As a result, the door has been virtually slammed on popular discussion programs on radio and television stations. They no longer editorialize. And radio is now clogged with ideologically

controlled. Mr. Limbaugh launched a phone blizzard to choke off a congressional attempt to recodify the fairness doctrine. He called it a plot to "hush Rush."

Freshmen GOP congressmen honored Limbaugh and his colleagues for shaping the Republican victory in the 1994 elections. In January, House Speaker Newt Gingrich rewarded them with makeshift studios in the Capitol basement, where they enshrined the Contract With America while lambasting the president's State of the Union address.

Tele-mobocracy has aired instant hearsay, factoids, and distortions impossible for a listener to question or a researcher to correct. "Nobody," Limbaugh has declared on his show, "ever said talk radio is about democracy."

The death of fairness has stifled diversity. A multiplicity of voices on talk radio fails to guarantee a multiplicity of views. Redress lies not in censorship or the gag, but in the re-activation of the fairness doctrine, the implementation of the public interest standard, and an FCC with the will to strip away licenses for noncompliance.

President Clinton has a direct stake in the battle. The power of the broadcast lobby notwithstanding, those who aspire to the next Congress ought to promise nothing less than the return of democracy to the air.

Scholar-novelist Umberto Eco notes that "a nation belongs to the persons who control its communications." In this nation, that ought to mean the people.

■ Jerry M. Landay, a former network journalist, teaches issues in television at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana and is writing a book on the subject.

## TO OUR READERS

The Opinion/Essays Page welcomes manuscripts. Generally, those published are no more than 900 words in length, and 600-word pieces are especially welcome.

The authors of articles we accept will be notified by telephone within 24 hours of our decision. Others will be notified by postcard. Send manuscripts by mail to Opinion/Essays, One Norway St., Boston.

## Clinton Leaves Pledge To the Republicans

REMEMBER how the president told us a few months back that he now was engaged in a Great Debate with the Republicans? Maybe it's time to evaluate that debate. As of now I would say that the Republicans keep scoring points simply because the issue — how best to run the government — is one they continue to address effectively while Mr. Clinton and the Democrats haven't been at all persuasive.

The reason? Well, it is clear that the federal budget proposal — how money should be spent and what programs to keep — is central to this whole debate. But while both the House and Senate Republicans have come up with plans to put our financial house in order, the president provides little except criticism — and a veto threat. He tells the Democratic leaders in Congress that "this is not the season" for him to come up with an alternative proposal — that it will have to come later after the Republicans work out their differences and embrace a single plan.

In the meantime, while indicating he is working on a plan and that he thinks balancing the budget within 10 years will be a part of his proposal, the president's strategy seems to be "Let the Republicans stew in their own juices." Up to now that approach has not been enough to win the Great Debate.

True, the Republicans in their adventures in budgetry aren't wallowing in success. By getting out in front they have also got out in the open. The president and the Democrats charge that the GOP plans are "cruel" in their cuts of social programs. And a public that had apparently sent a "less federal government" message to Washington in last November's elections now seems to have had some second thoughts. A new poll shows that some 55 percent of Americans have become unhappy with the Republicans' budget plans.

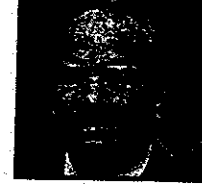
It's an old story. The same people who vote to cut spending take a contra view when they find that spending reductions are going to mean less money or benefits for themselves. A good example: those people who first hailed the idea of reducing Pentagon spending by shutting down military bases. They then became upset when the military base nearby their community was chosen to be wiped out by government decree.

But several leading papers and magazines usually accounted to be liberal now are giving the Republicans credit for being "responsible" on the budget. They do, indeed, find the planning flawed: Cuts in Medicare and welfare are too deep; the block-grant-to-the-states proposal is wrong-headed. But they do concede that Gingrich, Dole, and company are doing the right thing in trying to move forward with a plan to balance the budget.

WHEN will the president feel it is the "right season" to push forward with an alternative budgetary plan? We would guess that he will paw the ground for some time before that happens — if it ever does. For now, at least, he seems more comfortable in trying to reshape the GOP initiatives. He seeks to make his mark on that legislation by opposing the tax cuts which the Republicans say are for the middle-income groups and which Clinton and the Democrats say are for the wealthy. And he apparently seeks to hold together as much as he can the social programs put in place by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson.

All this has left a president who isn't doing too well in the Great Debate. Yet as I write this I see Clinton's popularity rating, which not too long ago was down to about 43 percent, has risen to the upper 50s. Maybe politically the president is making the right moves. The trip to Russia seems to have helped his ratings — as did the way he responded to the Oklahoma City bombing. Maybe his flailing away at the Republicans for lack of

GODFREY SPERLING



For now, at least, the president seems more comfortable in trying to reshape the GOP initiatives than in putting forth his own.

But why, they wondered, couldn't some programs be targeted to *them*? After watching fund drives, they figured it was because their generation has no money.

# College-agers rediscover (and like!) PTV

By Jerry M. Landay

Some of Generation X's best and brightest recently had a consciousness-raising encounter with network and public television. The results suggest, to me at least, that it's vital for PBS leaders and planners to think about what these college teens think—and the opportunity they represent.

PBS lost them after *Sesame Street*. I discovered them in the "Issues in Television" class I teach to undergraduate Chancellor's Honors students at the University of Illinois.

I gave them a critical viewing assignment that reconnected these nearly-twentysomethings with public television. Their experience was something akin to their first kiss: delight and surprise, relief that their elders had misrepresented the dangers of indulging, and confusion and concern about the experience.

In the reports and discussion that followed, the students described their PBS viewing experience as a rediscovery. A number said they'd previously avoided deep immersion in public TV because of what they'd heard from parents and peers—namely, that PBS was "notoriously boring." Not true, they found. They acknowledged they liked quality television. For instance, many of them found *Are You Being Served* genuinely funny, and *MacNeil/Lehrer* enriching and informative.

One typical student comment: "Being a chronic channel-surfer and a rather indiscriminate television viewer, I have not watched PBS too often. However, after a good night of viewing, I intend to watch more."

But why, they wondered, couldn't some of the product be targeted to *them*? Their perception—after critically viewing on-air fund drives—was that their generation is ignored because, putting it bluntly, it has no money. They were put off by the begathons they watched, which seemed tasteless and out of character with the lofty aims of the service. As they saw it, the loss of viewers scared away by these drives, is a grievous bill to pay for the pledged funds.

Their critiques project a sense of confusion about PBS's identity. Is it about serving the public interest or about finding ways to raise cash? If it truly serves American cultural needs and tastes, as it claims, then why is so much of it British? And why is it, a number wondered, that PBS pays so little attention to advertising and promoting its wares that "we have little idea of what's on?"

I urged the 19 honors students to bring their full consciousness to the experience as they logged and critiqued programs, ads and promotional spots during four-and-a-half hours of commercial network television. Several weeks later, I asked them to watch public television and do the same.

They reported that the evening marathon of commercial network-watching left them "tired" and "exhausted," and their brains "fried" by a "bombardment" of more than 130 commercial spots and program promos. They all said they'd never before been aware of all the blows to the head they'd had to absorb.

When they subsequently were exposed to public TV, virtually all described it as an act of deliverance. "Perhaps the one thing that it added to my viewing pleasure," one student said, "was the knowledge that PBS would be a commercial-free evening. It's amazing what a difference that makes!" Another commented similarly: "I did not have to put up a shield in order to protect myself against the advertisers."

One student expressed surprise that American public television "is a completely different system than the networks or cable television. . . . The PBS shows were less professional and less stylized than network programming, but their material and the manner in which it was presented was much more gratifying for the viewer." ("Less professional," we later determined in discussion, meant fewer glitzy visual effects.)

One wrote that in his first perusal of a public TV program guide, he was amazed at the diversity: "I discovered that the station . . . aired rock concerts, magic shows, documentaries," in addition to children's shows. "It is hard to find such diversity on any other station . . . It is similar to a full slate of cable stations

**"I think that PBS could provide a standard for entertainment as well as education and information," one honors student concluded. "This is not only possible but imperative." If the task for overhauling traditional broadcast arrangements is tough now, this student wondered, "will it be any easier when a handful of profit-driven companies owns a 500-channel cable universe?"**

combined into one."

The students gave specific praise to the depth of content they found on PBS programs:

■ the informed talk and the issue focus of *MacNeil/Lehrer*, *The McLaughlin Group*, *Wall Street Week*, *Washington Week in Review* and *WTTW's Chicago Tonight*. In a typical comment, a student said: "This style of journalism allowed viewers to formulate their own opinions. . . . The networks should take a close look at these shows and think about changing their news formats. . . . It would raise the level of journalism in newscasts and transform [them] from being amusement to . . . informational and thought-provoking."

■ *Nova's* "Ice Man" and the *American Masters* profile of George Lucas "went beyond the average behind-the-scenes program."

■ The honest, unpretentious formats were popular because they presented "music more-in-depth than any other station would do. The Peter, Paul & Mary special for children, for instance, "allowed the [musicians] freedom to be creative and to try new things. . . . The concert had not been engineered to produce a visually stunning moment each and every possible moment. Rather, it was allowed to stand alone as a concert, and the entertain the way a concert should—through the strength of the music alone."

However, performers James Taylor, Elton John and Peter, Paul & Mary were seen as "somewhat past their prime" and chosen for their appeal to the moneyed baby-boomer generation. Couldn't PBS do the same for some of the musical favorites of their generation?

"College students are left out," one complained. "PBS should promote more programming for a larger target audience that includes college students."

Yet this alienated bunch—bright, aware, interested and plugged into the world—is precisely the audience that PBS ought to be grooming for the good of their future and its own.

These honors students are among the most talented and highly motivated undergrads on the Illinois campus. Along with outstanding academic records, they brought from high school a penchant for clear thinking and writing.

They are typically unpretentious in the midwestern manner—activist and achievement-oriented. The class ranged in age from 18 to 21, their academic specializations spanning the sciences and humanities. They spend as many hours a week, on average—between 9 and 11 hours—reading and listening to the radio as watching TV.

They conform quite closely to the demographers' profile of Generation X: they view their economic prospects dimly and are therefore not as conservative as the boomers who immediately precede them. They are

**The students' critiques "project a sense of confusion about PBS's identity. Is it about serving the public interest or about finding ways to raise cash? If it truly serves American cultural needs and tastes, as it claims, then why is so much of it British?"**

suspicious of authority, and they question the myths and assumptions of their elders. Several challenged the doctrine that the so-called "free market" knows best what Americans should watch. Rather than providing diversity, one wrote, "it's really the same product."

They are increasingly interested in news and current affairs. Educated though they were about the difficulties involved, several students urged public broadcasters to wage an aggressive campaign to create a news and public affairs unit at PBS, using the NPR news team as a cadre.

They virtually unanimously condemned the system's dependence on pledge drives. They labelled as "sad" and "pitiful" the irony that the "quality broadcasting . . . increasingly must rely on private charity." One enthusiastic convert to PBS complained that "it is pitiful that the system has to stoop to this level in order to stay in business." Others likened the enticements of merchandise to the Home Shopping Network.

But most saw the funding issue less as an albatross than a call to action and innovation. "This country needs public broadcasting," wrote one student, who concluded that "a better solution for financing quality programming must be found."

Proposing solutions was part of the course project—team-produced papers proposing a national electronic mass communications policy for the United States. In addition to the expected suggestions of a dedicated national user's tax on TV sets, and spectrum and cable-channel fees, there were two fresh ideas.

One was a call for a generous income-tax credit as an inducement to underwriters. Another proposed the establishment of a Federal Project for Creative Television, funded by a consortium of CPB, the Department of Education and the national arts and humanities endowments. Modelled on the federal writers and theater projects of the New Deal's WPA, the television project would provide funding for high-quality, original programming for PBS, the best of which would be honored by National Program Awards.

A student concluded: "I think that PBS could provide a standard for entertainment as well as education and information. This is not only possible but imperative." If the task for overhauling traditional broadcast arrangements is tough now, this honors student wondered, "will it be any easier when a handful of profit-driven companies owns a 500-channel cable universe?" That sense of urgency was reflected in many of the students' reports.

To me, their signals were clear. If PBS wants to win the loyalty of Generation X, it must:

■ give them programming that suits their tastes. The relationship should not end abruptly at *Sesame Street*. Air their musical favorites in concert. From time to time, talk about the issues that matter to them on *MacNeil/Lehrer*, and invite some of their peers to discuss them. Why leave it to MTV?

■ promote PBS programs more effectively on the local level—in campus and high school newspapers, for instance—and on the radio stations they listen to. That need not be costly. Promote memberships and program guides at a price they can afford.

■ find a way to recruit them to the cause of a stronger, more financially and creatively independent television service, which most said they want.

Were these students telling me what I wanted to hear? I doubt it. Their minds are open, but their thoughts and conclusions are their own. There was no doubt of that from the very first day of class. What is also clear is that public broadcasting very much needs to recruit Generation X.

One student policy paper concluded: "It is our hope that the 'new' PBS will be able to draw enough audience away from the commercial networks that they will be forced to improve the quality of their own programming, or perish [through the competitive] forces they regard as gospel."

*Prof. Jerry M. Landay teaches "Issues in Television" and electronic journalism courses at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, and writes on media issues. He previously served as a news correspondent for ABC and CBS and as a news executive and correspondent for Group W.*