

The Great TV Debate: It's About Far More than Violence
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For: Douglas Balz, Arts Editor, The Chicago Tribune

The flurry over gratuitous violence in commercial television continues. But it keeps missing the point. Why is the commercial system of television compulsively driven to believe that only schlock has value? That's the fundamental question that's never discussed in all the froo-hah about dumbed-down programming. We should be getting basic, trying to seek underlying causes, starting a profound national dialogue about what TV is for, and thus, what we as a society are for. The answer is an implicit mandate for a public examination of the TV system we Americans have been stuck with, and a challenge to change it if we dare. Grave anti-trust issues raised by gargantuan corporate wars in communications add to the urgent need for a hard look at the business of TV.

The central problem is that commercial television mediacrats are not in communications. They are in the commodities business. The electronic Mediocracy trades in commodities - corporate mergers and acquisitions, broadcasting stations, cable grids, distribution pathways, product licensing, and new patents. Men, women, and America's posterity, our children, are treated as commodities, too; their worth measured not in human terms, but hard numbers - demographics, purchasing power, ratings profits, and payoffs.

The mind-food the Mediocracy dishes out is a pathetically thin electronic commodity of fabricated outrage, voyeuristic humbuggery, and kitsch-by-committee that's shredding us of self-worth, good taste, and community.

With television, we're speaking, after all, of the most powerful social and cultural force in our daily lives. We're speaking about vast power, an industry that, in the late Paddy Chayefsky's phrase, "can break presidents' popes, prime ministers." We're speaking of the power to set agendas, influence consent, and shape the way we and our children view our world. Commercial television, for better and worse, has become the nerve center of the body politic, our window on the world, our single most pervasive educational institution.

The American system of television is the "ultimate authority," more than parents, more than schools, churches, and congresses. TV programs define right and wrong, move ideas, set and demolish manners and mores, and tell our children how things are. Then what does TV teach us in the great electronic lecture hall, when serial killers outnumber powerful teachers in the world that TV shows? When pro stars are in, and Nobel laureates are invisible?

The issue is how commercial TV has used its immense power. The answer lies in its economic role as the 25-billion-dollar engine of America's consumer economy. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith said: "The industrial system is profoundly dependent on commercial television, and could not exist in its present form without it."

In comparable nations, the spine of the television complex is not commercial, but public. In a balanced system - part public, part commercial - there is real choice. But such a system was denied us in the 1920s. Without public participation, American radio was largely reserved for selling, the construct of entrepreneurial radio amateurs-turned-broadcasters, and a radio "trust" of powerful interests - the Navy, General Electric, Westinghouse Electric, and AT&T. Together they created the powerful Radio Corporation of America. RCA was, in historian Erik Barnouw's phrase, "a private monopoly in convenient hands."

In Britain in the '20s, the founder of the BBC had a different vision. Said John Reith, "our responsibility is to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every department of human knowledge, endeavor or achievement." He who prides himself on giving what he thinks the public wants, Reith said, is "often creating a fictitious demand for lower standards which he himself will then satisfy."

That's what's happened in the United States. The mistakes of American radio became the frozen doctrine of American television. America's chances for the mixed public and private system that emerged in Britain were doomed here because American community builders failed to engage in debate or action over what radio was for. Philanthropists were busy lacing the American landscape with altruism and dollars, building libraries, concert halls, and schools, but not public-service broadcasting. It was easier for a rich man seeking legitimacy to chisel his name in a stone than the invisible empire of the air.

The 1928 convention of the National Education Association decisively voted down a proposal calling on its members to "provide leadership" for the needs of educational broadcasting. Habitually Luddite in their attitude toward technology, most educators found it hard to conceive that knowledge could be disseminated by means other than a book and a blackboard.

It wasn't until the late '60s that a community of the moment, galvanized by the galloping awfulness of what onetime F-C-C Chairman Newton N. Minow cattle-branded as "the Vast Wasteland," muscled public broadcasting into being as a mind-saving alternative. But it has been hamstrung ever since by a series of politically-driven controls that keep it hungry, and terrorized by dogmatic, power-driven purists of left and right.

So, by default, marketeering minds monopolize the power of commercial TV to manipulate and engineer consumer consent. An electronic universe of great ideas and quality programs has become, instead, an odd-lots basement. A business that ought to be a fundamental human process carries a "for sale" sign. There is no room on most of our commercial electronic pathways for communication as the conversation of the culture. In a world in which only commodities have value, creativity is just another product.

The commodities business has stripped the vision from television, giving us Beavis and Butthead by the carload and Letterman by the ton. It is solely dedicated to delivering units of audience to advertisers, rather than programs to people, moving units of goods back to those units of audience at the lowest possible cost.

In these commodities transactions, kids are loved only for the \$130-billion in annual purchasing power they are estimated to influence and control, directly or indirectly. "These little consumers [are] big business," declares the Turner Broadcasting System, in a brochure drumming up business for its new cartoon cable network. Commercial television has no problem in showing the young six to eight acts of violence an hour, 25,000 fictional maimings and murders by the time they're 18.

The Great TV Debate: It's About Far More than Violence
by Jerry M. Landay
10/9/93
Page 666666666

Literary values have no value in the commodities business. The program fare peddled by the Mediocracy discounts history, science and technology, art, business, labor, and good music as without programmatic value. We users of television live a narrow existence hemmed between the one-line gag and the bark of a Magnum. As commodities, the stories in which the Mediocracy trades are fabricated from boiler-plate formulas which are easy to write, quick to make, and cheaper by the baker's dozen in series of thirteen. These stories are easiest to make, market, and subtitle for the lucrative international television market. They also show us to the world at our worst.

This same ever-more-concentrated industry is now crafting a balkanized inventory of interactive, digitized delights and diversions - from military channels to electronic bargain basements - which threaten to dice the American community into a fragmented slaw of stay-at-home subcultures interested in little else but chewing their own cud. We are in process of squandering a mind force simply too important to our survival to be left solely to commodities merchants.

We need a national debate about the kind of television that best serves the public interest of the nation. We need a national communications policy that establishes a balance between the public interest and the private purse.

The Great TV Debate: It's About Far More than Violence
by Jerry M. Landay
10/9/93
Page 77777777

We need to challenge the idea that commercial enterprise, which is superb at making and marketing soap and soybeans, has the talent and wisdom to decide what's best for us and our kids on the tube. We need a declaration of independence and more money for public broadcasting. And, we need a code of programming standards that spells out criteria of good taste and ethical behavior for a set of TV commodities agents whose lexicon has no room in it for the word "enough."

The time for that debate is now.

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