

# TV Quality and High Employment Are Compatible

Audiences are complaining and government agencies are threatening network television over the reruns, while network television is urging the prime time access rule be dropped as a failure. David Levy makes his observations as a writer-producer for Paramount Television. Next week, Times television critic Cecil Smith will discuss the controversy.

BY DAVID LEVY

● By year end the director of the White House Office of Telecommunication Policy, acting under instructions from President Nixon, is expected to propose a solution to one of the most troublesome aspects of network programming, the steady growth of series reruns. According to Broadcasting magazine, last season "the average number of episodes of new, original series programming—for 45 series that completed the fall season—was 22.8. The average number of reruns for those series was 227."

Reportedly, the OTP will request the networks voluntarily to accede to its recommendations or to face possible FCC regulatory action. In either case, an unnecessary culmination to events will have occurred, for the network TV industry requires not more but less federal intervention.

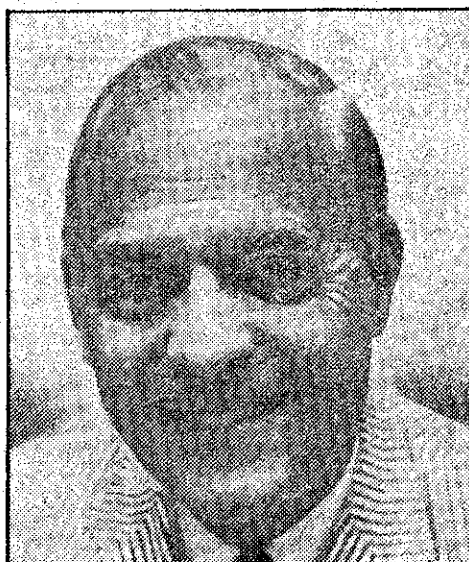
## Appeal to Government

This current intrusion by the federal government resulted from an escalation of moves which found important segments of the industry—the guilds representing actors, writers, and various crafts—forming an organization called STOP—(Save Television for Original Programming). Almost at once this group appealed to the government to seek aid in reducing the number of series repeat episodes. The end purpose of the industry group is commendable since its objective is to increase employment. Some question the means chosen to solve the rerun dilemma since the avenues of internal industry discussion should have been exhausted before anyone sought political assistance.

The TV industry has already witnessed what can happen when a government agency interferes with established program patterns that have won public approval and that have supported large creative and technical working forces on both coasts. That last intrusion was the FCC action which forced the networks to surrender a half hour of network programming each night to their affiliated stations. The purpose of the prime time access rule was to encourage local stations and TV production companies to create distinctive new programs.

What has resulted from this FCC intrusion has been a dismal failure. The programs displaced by the rule were of a higher quality than those now scheduled. Many of these new prime time access shows, which eliminated quality network programs utilizing large numbers of employes, require no actors and no writers. Some of these programs are produced in Europe and few employes either before or behind the cameras are Americans.

The rerun issue, as well as the prob-



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lems created by the prime time access rule, should be faced realistically rather than emotionally or politically. Those who insist that network TV return to the practice of committing series programs to 39 originals and 13 repeats per year forget that that practice was one inherited by television from radio. And they forget that as production costs rose it became necessary to trim original programming; no guild has offered to reduce its minimum scales to prevent this erosion.

On the other hand, if a healthy American TV industry is to survive—its workers must be able to make a living. The network position that reruns are required because of high original costs and that they are first runs for a vast majority of viewers are the chief arguments to support their current policies. But it can be argued that a good many TV series programs are ephemeral stuff hardly worthy of an encore; besides, no viewer can ever see all the programs offered by the networks anyway.

If the "stop rerun" forces are to achieve their real end—more employment—then they must first recognize that all programming on all stations must be in the public interest, convenience, and necessity—in accordance with the law. Therefore, the first obligation of all who are concerned about the public's interest is to improve program quality.

## End Prime Time Rule

With that in mind, the first goal for improving program quality should be to persuade the FCC to rescind the prime time access rule. Such a move would confirm what viewers already know, namely that inexpensive game shows, low-budget dramatic shows and low-priced imports have displaced network shows of greater quality. Such an effort, made in concert by the unions, the networks and local stations, would have a beneficial by-product: more employment.

The second goal would be to initiate an industry conference in which all elements would deal with the rerun problem pragmatically. It is not in the viewer interest to return to a pattern of 39 originals and 13 repeats for series programs. Times have changed. Specials are an integral part—often the most exciting part—of a network's

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schedule. New patterns of form and substance have appeared—longer programs of mini-series, time periods filled by two or three rotating series. At the same time it can be argued that it is not in the public interest to reduce original programming to the extent that it occupies less time in a given time period than repeats.

The networks have an obligation—if they seek (as they do) help from all quarters to convince the FCC to rescind the prime time access rule—to acknowledge that the quality of their service is greater when they program original material. This is not to say that some series programs and many specials do not merit a repeat performance; it is simply to predict that some realistic mix of new and repeat programs, a mix that balances network/advertiser economics as well as the desirability of maintaining a healthful opportunity for employment, can be achieved by quiet discussions within the TV industry without government meddling.

One network official recently estimated that if each current TV series were expanded to 39 original episodes

the extra costs to the three networks would amount to some \$120 million, a figure that would wipe out the \$54 million profit earned by the three networks last year. Such a plan is obviously confiscatory. Even if all current network series ran for only 30 weeks (as against the prevailing 23 to 24 weeks of many series), the added costs would amount to about \$30 million.

The important decisions that should be made in this area are (1) the decision to find a solution without the help of the White House, (2) to settle on a modest voluntary beginning before the OTP acts. If a figure of 30 original programs scheduled during a broadcast year within each time period was found to be a practical level at which to start the program mix within any prime time period to consist of a series plus specials, news, mini-series, and even original summer programs—it would automatically trigger more quality programming and result in immediate greater employment.

Eventually, industry elements could tackle the problem of off-network reruns and repeat feature films that occupy so much of so many local station

time periods. The prime time access rule was supposed to encourage local stations to originate programs but, in the main, they simply purchase low-budget programs to fill the time the networks were compelled to vacate.

There is one final area that merits study and that is the network use of feature films produced originally for theatrical exhibition. There are six such network time periods and ABC will likely add a seventh when it replaces football. There aren't enough new quality films to fill seven time periods a week so some features are exhibited on one network two or three times and then later turn up on another.

A voluntary rollback to one time period per network per year for the presentation of theatrical features would automatically raise the quality of the pictures being televised and would result in at least eight hours of network time requiring original programming. Such a move could be made by 1974 or 1975 so that the networks could reduce current feature inventories. It would eliminate the concern some feel that poor quality films produced for theaters—including borderline PG rated pictures—would get on the air. Even in edited form such films endanger the retention of the current TV code standards which are designed to protect television as a wholesome family medium.

The television networks have no responsibility to protect the motion picture theatrical industry. If the use of feature films was voluntarily curtailed in the public interest, the companies producing such films would feel little lasting pain for they are also the same companies chiefly responsible for producing the majority of TV film series.

Plainly the opportunities for employment in the TV industry are present and can materialize if each of the various interests starts out by aiming to do what the law requires—to foster programming in the public interest. The repeal of the prime time access rule, the establishment of a season's minimum number of original programs (of any type) for each prime time period—for example, 30, the rollback in the network use of feature films originally produced for theatrical exhibition, the encouragement of some minimum original programming standards on local stations, will all contribute to raising the quality of TV programs offered to the public and creating greater employment in the television industry.