

COMMENTS ON MEDIA CONCENTRATION AND A MODEST PROPOSAL

by

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There are certain implications of what I call the age of television that require a fresh diagnosis. The cures that have been advanced so far are either unbelievable or worse than the disease that they try to cure.

I would like to spend three minutes on a capsule history of civilization, three minutes on a few findings of research that illuminate certain aspects of the world of television, and two minutes on a modest proposal.

The organization of culture in a preindustrial age can be characterized as what later times called religion; ritualistic weaving together all the stories and all the celebrations and all the image-making, that socialize children of a community into the structure of social relation into which they have to be induced. That system is ritualistic, it's highly institutionalized, and it's total in that it involves the total community, and all parts essentially stem from the same formula, same way of life, same way of looking at life. It is the basic socializing process of the community. Children are born into it, grow up with it, learn from it their needs as well as how to satisfy those needs.

The Industrial Revolution changes that. The first machine is the printing press. The mass-produced product is the book. It paves the way for all the rest to follow.

Print de-ritualized cultural production, deinstitutionalized it, created what we call modern publics. All our notions about self-government are predicated on the assumptions of the print era.

Now comes television. For most viewers it is a non-selective ritual. It is highly institutionalized: you need a license. It is total in that it brings together the total community and almost all of its programming is predicated on a single formula: cost per thousand. It again becomes the basic socializing process of our communities. Its true historical pre-

decessor is pre-industrial religion, not other media. It brings into the cultural network a very large population of 40 or 50 million people who have not been the readers, who have not been cultural consumers, who are essentially the non-selective ritualistic viewers.

Television has become the functional equivalent of pre-industrial religion. It takes its place in the nexus of power that the church and state used to be. Its programming is increasingly unified if not in styles then in the world it presents to viewers.

I would now like to describe some trends that indicate directions in program supply and content configuration. The shift in the 1950's to which Bruce Owen referred from advertisers to networks also reduced the number of buyers for the bulk of network programs from approximately 100 to 3.

According to Broadcasting magazine (September 23, 1974), several years ago there were 27 principal program suppliers; at the time of that writing there were 19.

The president of ABC, Leonard Goldenson speaking in Hollywood just a few weeks ago, in November 1978, complained that principal program producers are making less than one-half of the number of motion pictures they made five years ago. He said that the total motion picture product for television was down by one-third.

The Hollywood-based Caucus for Producers, Writers, and Directors recently instructed its officers to take their long-standing battle with the networks over sufficient time for creative work directly to the advertisers. The Caucus, representing the creators of 90 percent of dramatic fare on television, considers six weeks for an hour show minimum production time. Yet, many Caucus members are forced to complete production in half or even less time, indicating the increasing pressure toward formula-bound assembly-line

TV production.

A study by Dominick & Pearce ("Trends in Network Prime-Time Programs 1953-'74," Journal of Communication Winter 1976) developed a diversity index and a homogeneity index. The diversity index measured the number of program choices and showed a score of over 60 in 1953. By 1974 the score was under 20, indicating fewer network program choices.

The homogeneity index shows the similarity among the three network schedules. That index was in the 250-300 range in 1953. By 1974 the same index was in the 120-150 range, indicating increasingly similar schedules among the three networks.

In our own continuing studies, called Cultural Indicators, we have developed a series of indices indicating thematic stability and demographic stability and balance. The thematic stability index is based on a ranking of 21 key themes occurring in prime-time network television dramatic programs. For a period of ten years, the rank order correlation from one year to another ranged from .83 to .96, indicating high similarity in the ranking of themes from year to year, and no significant shifts or differences from one year to another. This suggests that the world presented on prime-time television programming is remarkably stable in terms of its thematic structure.

What kind of world is it?

It is a world in which males consistently represent between 70% and 74% of the total population, again with no significant differences from year to year. Children under ten, who represent about 20% of the real U.S. population, comprise one-tenth of that, less than 2% of the television population. All characters under 20 number half of their actual percentage. At the other end of the life cycle, characters over 65, who represent about 10% of the actual U.S. population, amount to only 2.2% of the television

dramatic population. These are gross and stable under-representations.

According to a study we are just completing, the profile of television's dramatic population comes closest to representing not the actual population but the consumer profile, which is the population in each age group weighted by income. This is representation according to pocketbook, a reflection of plutocracy rather than democracy, monolithic and stable from year to year.

An important feature of our Violence Index is the victimization ratio which is obtained by dividing the number of victims in each dramatic character group with the number of violent. We find that for every male violent there are 1.2 male victims. But for every female violent there are 1.3 female victims, for every young woman violent there are 1.7 young woman victims, for every non-white woman violent there are 1.8 non-white woman victims and for every old woman who is violent there are 3 old women who are victimized, thus setting up a hierarchy of powers which is extremely stable across different kinds of programming, networks, and from year to year.p

It is difficult to say what kind of diversity might be most meaningful in the presentation of life on television, but one thing is certain. Without some measure of movement toward equity, fairness, and dignity of representation, to which every broadcasting code pays lip service, there is no meaningful concept of creativity and diversity.

It is clear that we are dealing with robust institutions that have grown up as cultural arms of industrial society and are not easily altered. Most of the solutions that have been advanced for the problem of media concentration are either cosmetic or marginal or illusory. Such is the proposition of cable and cassette or disc which will simply enrich the culturally already rich selective minority and leave the non-selective

ritual of the majority essentially uneffected, or worse.

But whatever is proposed or tried, it will need a research operation to follow up any innovation with the information necessary to determine whether it made any difference as it touched the life of people. Such an operation would take the existing indices, such as I have reported, refine and elaborate them, and develop them into a visible, effective, and influential advisory service or agency. The information would consist of a set of indicators, periodically reported, giving not esthetic judgment, but information about the symbolic world of broadcast television which provides the common cultural environment into which our children are born and in which all of us live. The service will not rate individual programs but report aggregate data cutting across all programs, focus upon the basic social composition of the symbolic world, and relate that to network policy.

The ultimate goal and justification of a concern with media concentration is diversity of content. Progress toward that goal requires a basis for judgment in solid, reliable, and periodic information such as the census, labor statistics, or the economic indicators that guide much other policy and activity. This informational operation may be housed in the FTC or perhaps in the National Institute of Education, or in an independent institution. The purpose of these indicators would not be to censor but on the contrary to provide a measure of diversity, of progress toward breaking up the existing censorship, of success in creating a free marketplace of creative products as new policies take effect. These indicators would show what in fact happens to content, and how that affects TV viewers' conceptions of themselves and of the reality of their lives. No structural innovation or attempts to enlarge the number of information sources can be shown to have any relevance to the ultimate goal of these attempts, namely progress toward freedom and creativity on the air, without some such indicators.