

SUSTAINED MEDIOCRITY

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It wasn't unlikely in eighteenth century England for a member of the London gentry to spend a Sunday afternoon being entertained at the local bedlam. He would gleefully observe the inmates, as Charles Dicken's said, "roll and twine among the straw, transported with such brave music--'Hurrah for the Madhouse!' Oh it's a rare place!" While eating a picnic lunch.

Man today needn't go to such lengths to find leisure time activity. For example: a Southern California viewer stares intently at the solid state glow transmitted from station KHJ-TV in Los Angeles. It is the high point of his favorite show. Dr. Walter Kemplar is bringing to a climax his "attack method" of treatment. He reveals, while camera number one catches a portrait close-up of a distraught weeping girl, that her problems were all caused by a father who owned a thrill circus and destroyed her faith in Santa Claus. The viewer comments to his wife, upon arrival of the commercial, that he liked last week's family therapy session better. For the show ended with the camera moving slowly back, showing a boy weeping uncontrollably as he embraced the psychiatrist as his father image.

Unfortunately, psychiatry's advances have not been matched by a reduction of man's search for varying forms of entertainment. These unrehearsed and authentic group psychotherapy sessions fulfill the ultimate implications of what Newton N. Minow, past chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, labeled in early 1961, as a "vast wasteland."

Today, twenty years after the beginnings of commercial television, and six years after Minow's speech, bringing to focus the immaturity of the media in meeting its responsibilities for higher levels of programming, television is still alluded to in such phrases as "the literature of the illiterate" or "the culture of the low brow..."

Combine these comments with television's potential reception. The average American, according to Paul Lazarsfeld, Director of the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University, spends an average of two and one-half hours a day watching TV. As of 1965, there were 668 television stations and TV sets in 52,600,000 homes. At night there may be as many as fifty to sixty million viewing simultaneously.

When you compare quality of network programming with quantity of reception it appears that there is merit to the sarcastic comment of one broadcaster that television is the "massiest of all media." It takes no more than a sampling of a week's programming guide to reveal that the medium has reached a level of sustained mediocrity. Rat Patrol, Occasional Wife, Petticoat Junction, The Green Hornet, and of course Batman. Or if you prefer spy stories: The Man From UNCLE, The Girl From UNCLE, and who knows maybe next year, The Uncle From UNCLE. It is little wonder that Senator Robert F. Kennedy indicted the networks recently as failing to exhibit any responsibility at all for helping the development of minds.

One recent notable effort at excellence in providing valuable information for the American public through the medium of television, was NBC's documentary on crime in the United States. It seemed that for one evening broadcasting had constructively recognized the implications of Billy Graham's message at the 1964 National Association of Broadcaster's Convention in Chicago, indicating that broadcasting's influence on the American mind was greater than that of the church. For three hours the American public had the opportunity to become acquainted with a catastrophic disease of the American social structure.

But the results of this programming were: not many people watched; not many sponsors participated, which was obvious by the abundance of public service announcements; and finally, NBC had fulfilled its obligation to public relations and the FCC. This type of programming effort on the part of the networks is infrequent. And some criticize these attempts more diligence in pursuing public relations than high standards of broadcasting. And these results of network attitude toward programming mirror the deep-rooted if not hopeless, position of the medium. But what are the causes of the sustained mediocrity? The simple fact is that television must make money, and because of this economic motivation programming must produce what Dr. Wallace Fotheringham has termed "consummatory behavior"--behavioral situations where the audience must get an audience and keep it at all cultural costs. "Like Roman Emperors, the network executives wait for the boos and cheers of the crowd. If the TV ratings show that the crowd is unenthusiastic, it is consigned to oblivion."

Also when we combine the network programming emphasis with the present methods for reform we have a formula for frustration. A frustration that is all too apparent in the words of Robert J. Allen, TV producer for the National Council of Catholic Men, when he states that present methods of regulation as a means of improving the cultural level of American broadcasting is dead.

Last month in Atlantic City the eulogy was read when a speaker addressed the New Jersey Broadcaster's Convention. It should not seem strange that he might deal with the typical and trite superlatives of broadcasting's bright future if it would only come to creatively realize its phenomenal potential. But as he looked out upon his audience, he did not accuse as Newton Minow had done in early 1961, rather Lee Loevinger, one of the seven commissioners of the FCC, seemed content to concede "Television is a golden goose that lays scrambled eggs; and it is futile and probably fatal to beat it for not laying caviar." Anyway, more people like scrambled eggs than caviar.

So where shall we go for the answer to the problem of sustained mediocrity? It would seem that the networks are unwilling, the FCC unable, and the public unconcerned. Nevertheless, and as difficult as it may seem, these three areas possess the tools that can break the bonds of mediocrity.

I believe we must first eliminate the necessity of the network's getting an audience and holding it no matter how low the level of programming needed to fulfill the goals of consummatory behavior. This could be accomplished by legislation, similar to that suggested by E. William Henry, chairman of the FCC, that requires the networks to provide two hours of programs per evening from independent non-network sources. This of course would not be a panacea to erase all the evils I have spoken of, but it would provide for more favorable conditions for the diversification and upgrading of television programming.

Secondly, I would suggest that because the over one-hundred educational television stations are in constant financial difficulty, that they be allowed to carry limited sponsorship of their evening programming and experiment with audience subscription financing.

Finally, Congressional awareness must be created so that you and I as part of the mass are not satisfied with sustained medium mediocrity.

In 1961, one of the great men in broadcasting passed from the American scene. Yet his words, which are the manifestations of his hopes linger on unfulfilled. Said Edward R. Morrow: "We are an imitating society. In the mass media we are too much concerned with the body and not enough with the mind...too largely indifferent to what our words and pictures are doing to the minds of Americans.