

Ideas

NEWSDAY'S JOURNAL OF OPINION/JULY 30, 1972

TV Belongs to Us

By Jeff Greenfield



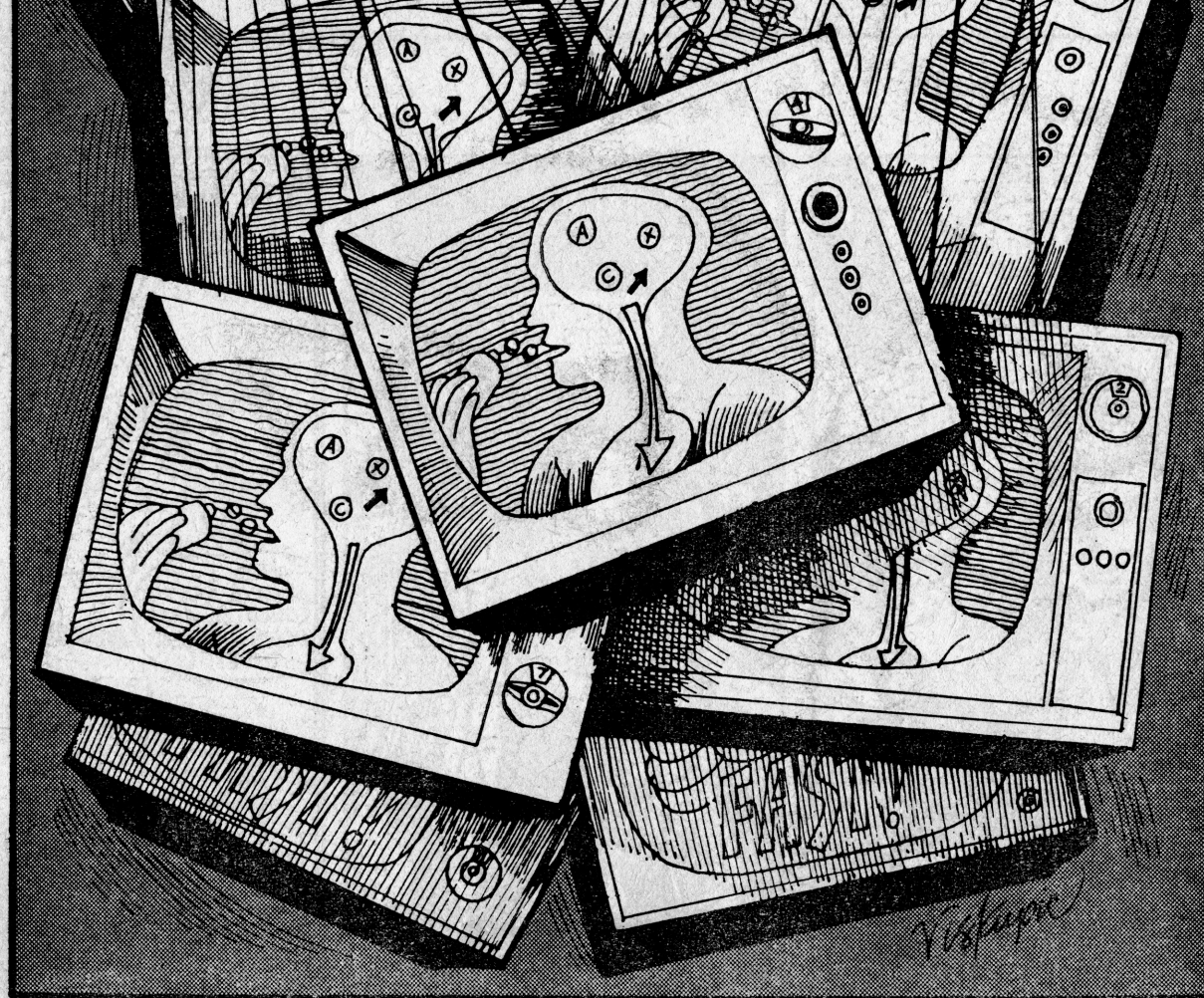
What does America do?

For perhaps the first time in our national history, it is possible to give a coherent answer to that question: We watch television.

Every day and night, as many as 100,000,000 Americans watch 90,000,000 sets in 60,000,000 homes for about five hours and 45 minutes. Except for sleeping, we do nothing else as much as a people. More than we work or play or eat or make love, we watch television. So pervasive is its presence that a child entering kindergarten has already spent more time watching TV than he will spend in his education through the end of high school.

For most Americans, then, what happens on television *is* what happens in our country. A famous philosopher used to ask, "If a tree falls in a forest and nobody sees or hears it, did it really fall?" Now we can amend that inquiry: "If a tree falls and it's not on the 'Six O'Clock News' did it fall?" "For all practical purposes, the answer is no. To be denied the use of television—whether you have an idea, a product, a candidate or a talent—is in some measure to be denied the right to speak to the American people.

Television's power is one reason so



Newsday Drawing by Gary Viskupic

Television's power is one reason so many different groups of Americans, from across the political and social spectrum, are complaining about who and what gets on television. In addition to Vice President Agnew's famous attack on the networks as a "small, unelected elite . . . a tiny fraternity of privileged men," many other people have in the last few years demanded a change in who has access to what:

- Nader-style lawyers are fighting to put "counter-commercials" on TV making the case against automobiles and high-octane gasoline on pollution and safety grounds.
 - Presidential speechwriter Pat Buchanan has raised the possibility of antitrust action against the "liberal monopoly" of news commentators on networks.
 - The Federal Trade Commission wants headache remedies like Excedrin and Anacin to admit—in their ads—that there's not all that much difference between brands.
 - Women and black activists are (separately) challenging New York station licenses on the ground of dis-
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Jimmy Breslin: A Grumman Man Looking Up at a Slow Clock, Page 7

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torted racial and sexual portraits.

● Federal Communications Commissioner Nicholas Johnson—long a gadfly to broadcasters—has accused television of smothering dissident political and cultural movements in America.

What makes these complaints special is that TV is necessarily limited. A citizen with something to say can't build himself an antenna and start broadcasting; he needs a license, and there are only so many channels to go around. The explosion of new, influential print voices in the last 20 years, *National Review*, *New York*, *Playboy*, *The Village Voice*, *Rolling Stone*, *Newsday*, *The New York Review of Books*, simply cannot occur in television. In effect, every license-holder in television has a government-issued, guaranteed monopoly, often worth incredible amounts. Stations with \$1,000,000 of equipment can sell their licenses for \$50,000,000 because they are protected by the limits of technology from competition for the advertising dollar.

Furthermore, television has become—in direct violation of the hopes of most Americans half a century ago—an enormous privately controlled enterprise. Most access to television is determined by money. Texaco can afford to spend \$80,000 for a minute of prime network time to imply that its oil refineries are built primarily as bird sanctuaries. Ford Motor Co. can place ads slyly ridiculing the idea that adults use bicycles for transportation. The Petroleum Institute of America can sponsor football games to praise itself—and, by implication, its billion-dollar tax breaks. Nytol, Compoz and other patent medicines all can afford to teach Americans—adults and children—that the cure to emotional anxiety is “a simple little pill.”

The point, of course, is that commercials don't simply sell products. They sell an attitude, a belief, a way of life, a need we never knew existed (say, for “feminine hygiene spray”). Many of these attitudes are highly controversial. But those who seek to rebut these advertisers—to prove, say, that we need more mass transit and less reliance on cars, or less tax breaks for big business, or a movement away from reliance on drugs—do not have the money to state their case

...ance on drugs do not have
the money to state their case
in prime-time television
again and again and again—
all the while deducting ad-
vertising expenses from their
tax bills.

We are becoming aware of
the influence of money on
politics, specifically the
ability to buy TV time to
present political commercials.
What some Americans
are recognizing is that com-
mercials *in themselves* may
contain political or social
views which television, by its

time-for-sale method of giving access, does not balance.

Commercials, however, are not the only sources of unfairness. Programming, too, is highly controlled and limited. The three major networks, which supply 90 per cent of what Americans see in prime time, are private corporations with ties to other parts of corporate life in America. Radio Corporation of America is a major defense contractor; it also owns the National Broadcasting Co. Until the pressure became too great, ABC sought to merge with ITT. Columbia Broadcasting System's president was a major supporter of Radio Free Europe and a personal friend of Lyndon Johnson. In 1965 he felt that strong questioning of Vietnam policy was a dangerous precedent.

The implications of the entanglement between television ownership and business and personal ties are infinite—and disturbing. Are the people of NBC willing to make an inquiry into excess defense costs—even if it shows that their corporate parent is guilty? If the ABC-ITT merger had gone through, how would ABC have covered the Dita Beard affair? Is the reluctance, and ultimately, the refusal of CBS to let the Smothers brothers stay on the air, despite high ratings, tied in with the political views of its owners?

None of these questions is meant to suggest that network programming—either in news or entertainment—is a monolith. From shows like "Sanford and Son" and "All in the Family" to entertainment of high quality like "Flip Wilson" and "Carol Burnett" to courageous news shows like "The Selling of the Pentagon," commercial television has shown its strong points. The question, instead, is whether so much power over so limited and influential a public utility as television airwaves should be reserved to a handful of decision-makers with no accountability except to make a profit for stockholders.

None of the present alternatives seems likely to have an immediate, important impact. The Justice Department wants network TV to give up ownership rights in the entertainment it puts on the air. But giving control back to advertising agencies or sponsors is not going to

such as advertising agencies or sponsors is not going to change what we see. The cowardice of ad agencies, from the days of the blacklist to the refusal to let questions about corporate practices be aired, offers little comfort (Back in the '50s, a drama sponsored by Ford was required to paint the Chrysler building out of the Manhattan skyline).

Public television has scored some successes, notably "Sesame Street," "The Electric Company," the "Forsythe Saga," and the "Great American Dream Machine." Its dependence on foundation and government money, with the

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controls and influences such funding implies, makes it a limited hope for major change.

(President Nixon's recent veto of government funds for public television is convincing evidence of just how tenuous public TV's funding can be.)

Technology may eventually solve the dilemma—with cable transmissions and domestic satellites offering viewers 100 channels, access to libraries, computer print-outs and such, but the expense of such a change makes it unlikely as an alternative for decades.

What, then, can be done to give more Americans access to television? There is one model, currently in use in Holland, which offers an intriguing alternative to television by corporate fiat. Here is how it might work in the United States:

First, every TV owner would pay a tax of about \$1 a month per TV set—far less than the hidden cost of advertising in the price of what we buy at the supermarket. That would provide a pool of about \$1 billion a year for production.

Second, every TV-taxpayer would "vote" by petition for a producer of his choice. It might be a political group, a sports promoter, an avant-garde theatrical troupe, a musical comedy production source, a news and public affairs programmer, a rock or classical music producer, or a company that promised to keep westerns or detective dramas on the air.

Any group that got a sufficient number of signatures (the number would depend on how much airtime was available) would have the right to television time—say, from two to 10 hours a month—and a share of the TV tax money sufficient to pay for production. It would mean, in other words, that Channel 2 wouldn't always be CBS—one hour it might be a group presenting a musical variety show, the next hour a documentary filmmaker. Then, a football game.

Short of libel and obscenity, these producers could do what they wanted, and the money would be controlled not by Congress or a foundation, but by the "voters" themselves.

Such a producer could do what was dramatically important or newsworthy

with a... was dramatically important, or newsworthy, without fear of having money cut off by an angry sponsor, congressman, foundation or benefactor. The only thing not permitted would be boring the audience—because unless enough people signed over their TV tax next year (or in two-or three-year intervals), that producing group would lose its right to airtime. Presumably, competing groups would fight for the production dollar—with television viewers as the final arbiters.

This would not mean

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forcing minority tastes into a dominant position. It *would* mean that minority tastes would have some airtime some of the time—even occasionally, through a kind of lottery, in prime time. It *would* mean that a TV drama could show men and women at work—even in a real plant—without sponsor complaints. It would mean the venality of public officials could be documented without fear of Congressional witch-hunts. It would mean the Superbowl and “All in the Family,” and the next generation’s Ed Murrow, *and* the Grateful Dead, *and* Bob Hope would all have a shot at getting on television. And it would break the stranglehold of private profit as a constant sword of Damocles hanging over television programming decisions.

I don’t believe for a minute such a redistribution of television access is going to happen next week. But I do believe that it is time we remembered that television is *not* owned by a handful of \$300,000-a-year executives or billion-dollar-a-year companies. It belongs to all of us. And one way or another, we have got to reclaim the right to a share of this precious national resource. □