A New Approach to Television

Michael Cady
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Right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues than through any authoritative selection. To many this is, and always will be, folly; but we have staked upon it our all.

- Judge Learned Hand

Station managers and network officials who fail to act to correct imbalance or consistent bias in the networks—or who acquiesce by silence—can only be considered willing participants, to be held fully accountable . . . at license renewal time. Who else but management can or should correct so-called professionals who confuse sensationalism with sense and who dispense elitist gossip in the guise of news analysis?

- Clay T. Whitehead, President Nixon's communications theorist
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Introduction

The question of First Amendment guarantees in this country, especially with respect to mass communications, has recently been receiving considerable attention. As the power and ability of the mass media to sway masses of people has become apparent during the past two decades, a considerable protest has arisen to the effect that it is simply not fair that a tiny percentage of our society--the owners of radio and television stations--should be able to control what the rest of the public hears and sees. Many people are beginning to wonder, who decides what is broadcast? and, how does one gain access to fellow citizens on television and radio? What good is a "free" press (press taken here to mean both print and electronic media) if only a handful of us are able to make use of it? Shall only the rich and powerful be given voice? Might not some sort of guaranteed access be in order? It may have been enough to stand on a soapbox to be heard by your fellow townspeople two-hundred years ago, but what of today's cities with their millions of inhabitants? How does one reach them?
What compounds the problem is that the broadcast stations, almost literally without exception, are more committed to turning the largest possible profit than to facilitating the transmission of information—the communication of messages—from people to people. The resulting distortion of the nation's "information content" leads soon enough to a serious warping of values. Somehow we must free the electronic media from the exclusive grip of self-aggrandizement in which they have been held for so long. One of the few chances of giving television greater relevance, as discussed in this paper, involves offering people and groups the opportunity to directly sponsor programs of their own choosing. The need for such an arrangement seems obvious.

As a nation we are in the grasp of television, addicted to it as though to heroin; Corporate America has in some ways become to manufactured products what the pusher is to narcotics. It is clear that something has got to be done; the average American now watches television five to six hours a day, about one-third of his and her waking hours. Television has become the modern American equivalent of the great Roman diversions given by the Caesars in the Colosseum. It is time to broaden television's base of operation to include all of the people. The very future of free speech may depend on whether we can open the media doors—doors which are now closed to all but the few.
No government has ever seen fit to relax controls on the electronic media. In the United States this has meant that, for whatever reasons, a succession of Presidents has been able to fabricate outrageous versions of the truth on radio and television about U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia without fear of editorial reprisal; because of the completeness of Establishment control of the media, no way exists for citizen to alert fellow citizen on television about the hidden reasons behind decisions made by our corporation-controlled government.

No government ought to be without censors; and where the press is free, no one ever will. If virtuous, it need not fear the fair operation of attack and defense. Nature has given to man no other means of sifting out the truth, either in religion, law, or politics.

- Thomas Jefferson
to President George Washington
The members of any democratic group, whether they form a tribe or a nation, must be able to communicate freely among themselves if they are to maintain cohesiveness. Effective communicators ordinarily use the most efficient medium of communication available, whether voice or printing, radio or television; businessmen are no exception. The business communities of industrialized nations have found television to be the most effective means of selling their products and services. In fact, television is such an effective communication tool that the demand for its use has driven up the cost of using the medium to a point beyond the reach of all but the wealthy businessman; the medium is thus controlled by people who are more committed to the principal of profit than to the practice of free speech, with the result that television today habitually ignores ideas antithetical to the pursuit of the dollar.

Where communication is thus restricted, chances of developing solutions to problems facing society are also restricted. The contention here is that all public communication channels must remain open and easily acces-
sible to all of the people. There can be no restrictions. If there are restrictions, society becomes warped to the advantage of the few who decide what will and what will not be communicated. Our problem, then, is to free the mass communication channels of America—or at least some of the channels—from the grip of self-aggrandizement in which they are now held, a grip which, since the development of the electronic media, has hindered the give and take necessary for a healthy democratic society. At the same time, we must consider ways of ensuring that the public will always have ready access to the media—particularly television.

Television is our eye on the world, a tool designed by the human intellect to transmit visions to all who care to watch. The people who control those visions decide what America will see, so that the average American's view of the world is constrained and molded to the liking and advantage of the corporations which control the media. This all-pervasive corporate influence narrows the range of "acceptable" program material; there are not many things one is free to say on television if the first rule is to avoid offending Corporate America. To arbitrarily exempt television from presenting the widest possible spectrum of viewpoints has the effect of making impossible the search for solutions to problems.

Somehow, a means of ready access to the electronic media must be made available to responsible people desiring it. In order for self-government to function properly, everyone in the society must be able to speak out as well as to hear. This is one of the ideas at the heart of democracy; feedback isn't necessary in an oligarchy but it
is the essential ingredient in a democracy. As our laws controlling television now stand, the United States is tending to resemble an oligarchy rather than a democracy. The term "the people" does not mean faceless corporations; it means the general public. The distortion of this fundamental concept is at the heart of our problem in America today: only a few of us are being heard.

Following the Industrial Revolution there evolved a heavy reliance on the products and services spawned by technology. Today our technology enables us to group together in order to live comfortably in large cities; it lights our homes at night, enables us to travel about rapidly, and keeps us aware, via the printed and electronic media, of events in far-off places. We maintain knowledge of the activities of our fellow citizens and the actions of our elected leaders largely by means of our technological achievements. Modern civilization remains viable to the extent that the various technologies continue to function.

Chaos results from the breakdown of any one of the major technological systems; a city without electricity is unable to function as transportation and communication become all but impossible. And if for some reason sources of information and news should fail—if the supply of information needed to make intelligent decisions is cut off—people soon begin making decisions which they would not have made if they had had full access to all information pertinent to their well-being.

In the same way, any attempt at even so much as partially filtering out or withholding selected kinds of information results in people making illogical decisions which, again,
they might not have made if given free access to the full spectrum of pertinent ideas.

I am persuaded myself that the good sense of the people will always be found to be the best army. They may be led astray for a moment, but will soon correct themselves. The people are the only censors of their governors. . . . Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.

- Thomas Jefferson

If it is true that democracy can function only where the channels of communication remain completely open, it follows that some sort of guarantee of public accessibility to the channels should be developed if the health of the society is to be maintained. Obviously, the technology which made the electronic media possible has altered our environment and the way we relate to it. It seems clear that technological developments require complementary legal developments for the protection of the public interest.
CONCENTRATION OF POWER

It should be understood that, despite outward appearances, the present mode of television operation in the United States is not the result of conscious design. Lester Brown, in his book *Television*, writes:

No one created the American television system. It evolved in a series of patchwork progressions, affected variously by government regulations, corporate aims, technological advances, advertising and marketing requirements, and to some degree by public reaction. It probably did not start out to put commerce before communication, but if that was the inevitable result of the medium's great penetration into American life, its sweeping embrace of rural and urban households everywhere, the industry calmly accepted it. Product salesmen, who would be turned away at the door, were admitted into every household through the small electronic screen; and the world of business came to know that nothing could sell as well as television. There was so much money to be made in television that a network or a station was remiss if it did not make the most of it. The industry's present system of values is descended from that pattern of easy affluence.

The United States is by law committed to the concept of open and uninhibited exchange of ideas (though at present one cannot say how firmly); the First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees it. But practically speaking this is not the case with television, where high costs and station and network programming policies hinder widespread public use. What is worse, many stations tend to
acquiesce to pressure from the Federal government out of fear of losing their government-controlled broadcast licences. In doing so most broadcasters fail to live up to the most fundamental of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) edicts—largely ignored—that programming must be "in the public interest." Too many stations operate under the assumption that the public interest is best served by programming for the profit of big corporations rather than for the ill-defined "interest" of the public.

This kowtowing to corporate interests is one of the reasons why things have become so distorted in America; some people have become "more equal" than others through their use of the media. Because so many people place their primary trust in television as the main carrier of news and information, we must be especially careful not to let anything interfere with the natural right of people to communicate easily via television. Ideally we should all have the opportunity to be heard as clearly as the most powerful and wealthy people—just as the villager has as much access to the ears of his fellow villagers as has the village mayor. (To expand the analogy, if somewhat loosely, television, particularly live television, is the industrialized nation's equivalent of a tribal meeting: political conventions, football games, and so on. But it makes for a strange meeting because the tribal members are unable to participate in any sort of dialectical give-and-take except in the most indirect, hence ineffectual, manner.)

Economist Milton Friedman has said that a governmental system (in this case the FCC) cannot be devised "which
will not be taken over by vested interests and exploited for the preservation and enhancement of their own wealth."² There is more to the vested interests in media than meets the eye, as has become increasingly the case in recent years; television stations are more often than not owned by huge conglomerates which strongly influence FCC decisions. Morton Mintz and Jerry Cohen, in their book America, Inc., write that "the eleven largest cities do not have even one VHF station [ Channels 2 to 13] that is not in the hands of a network, a newspaper, a newspaper chain, an owner of a group of stations or an industrial or financial conglomerate."³ This trend toward concentration of power is almost equally apparent in smaller cities across the nation. Media ownership by a conglomerate, as maverick (so-called) FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson has said,

imposes an added burden, and an unnecessary risk, upon the integrity of the information presented to the American people. It creates a situation in which the incentives are almost irresistible for the holding company to view the mass media subsidiary as but a part of its advertising, public relations, and public information program for its more predominant and profitable industrial subsidiaries.⁴

The effect of such control of the media can be readily illustrated. Mintz and Cohen describe how financial conglomerates protect their own interests:

A bank has a director and stock interlock with a newspaper and with an airline. A story in the paper on airline safety might have an adverse result on the airline and a lifesaving result for the public. Another bank has a similar interlock with a news maga-
zine and a manufacturer of oral contraceptives. A story pointing out that the safety of the pill was not demonstrated before marketing or, for that matter, long afterward, could lower the value of the drug company's stock while protecting women from avoidable blood clotting diseases. A third bank has a director interlock with a television network and with a large insurance company. A documentary on abuses in the field of auto insurance, again, could be adverse to the carrier but beneficial to motorists. One can produce long lists of examples of stories to show that a newspaper's or a magazine's or a network's connections with banks could not possibly have had any effect. Yet the situation is not one to produce tranquility. Such lists do not deal with the less tangible matter of stories that have not been done.\(^5\)

Another example of conglomerate control of the airwaves can be found in the way politically-involved disc jockeys on underground radio stations are told they must either keep their comments "in line" or be fired. Often restrictions are gradually imposed on station personnel until they can no longer put up with the harassment, and so quit. Thus is control effected over a powerless listenership.

The question of corporate culpability has lately been receiving some attention. Mintz and Cohen write that Unlike a human being, a corporation, which at law is also a "person," cannot be jailed. It has no soul which may face Divine Justice in the hereafter. It must be dealt with in the here and now or not at all. Yet the same media that meticulously record the
misdeeds of human wretches . . . go on and on letting giant corporations elude the therapeutic benefits of public shame that fair reporting might bring. The situation is disgraceful. What holds greater potential to make it worse than to allow control of news media by these same corporations?

It may be that the conglomerates should be forced to divest themselves of at least some of their media holdings. Making money and serving the public interest usually do not mix in the case of broadcasting. Possibly there is justification for some conglomerate ownership of media, as in the combining of staffs (but not editorial staffs) for purposes of cost economizing; but the maximum allowable limit on such ownership should be clearly defined.

ONE-EYED BANDIT

Most of us have had the experience of seeing the occasional good program series dropped from a network schedule and wondered how in the world they could have dropped that show since it was the only thing worth watching. It may be that we weren't coughing up enough money to satisfy the sponsor—to make it worth his while to continue sponsoring the series; or perhaps there weren't enough of us tuning in (maybe only five million instead of ten million). But sheer quantity of people tuning in is not the only criterion used in deciding which shows stay and which ones must go: the audience must have
"purchasing power." Lester Brown writes that one of the myths about American television is that it operates as a cultural democracy, wholly responsible to the will of the viewing majority in terms of programs that survive or fade. More aptly, in the area of entertainment mainly, it is a cultural oligarchy, ruled by a consensus of the advertising community. As it happens, television's largest advertisers—the manufacturers of foodstuffs, drugs, beverages, household products, automobiles, cosmetics and, until 1971, cigarettes, among others—have from the first desired great circulation among the middle classes, so that the density of viewers has become the most important criterion in the evaluation of programs. This emphasis on the popularity of shows has made television appear to be democratic in its principles of program selection. In truth, programs of great popularity go off the air, without regard for the viewers' bereavement, if the kinds of people it reaches are not attractive to advertisers.

And so The Lawrence Welk Show, a program loved by millions of older Americans, was booted off the air for awhile in 1971 (until public outcry finally prompted its return as a syndicated show) because its generally elderly audience did not possess sufficient purchasing power to attract the necessary sponsors. Occasionally, programs attracting marginal numbers of viewers are tinkered with in an attempt to boost audience ratings. The idea is to maximize ratings so that maximum rates can be charged to sponsors. The usual result is that the integrity of shows is compromised in an effort to locate the lowest common denominator of viewer interest.
"Modern" television production values lead to the kind of situation in which a recent program on Africa contained a specially staged scene featuring a D-grade commercial American rock band complete with amplifiers playing to a small group of tribesmen in the middle of a plain in Tanzania. The Africans obviously weren't enjoying it; it was beneath their understanding if not their contempt. Can it be that the American television viewer did enjoy it? The scene was included in the show because some anxious producer in New York thought it would boost the all-important audience rating a couple of points. And thus, whatever integrity the show may originally have had was effectively sabotaged.

Integrity is for the most part a stranger to television, as is seen in the following by Nicholas Johnson:

Television tells us, hour after gruesome hour, that the primary measure of an individual's worth is his consumption of products, his sexuality, his measuring up to ideals found in packages mass-produced and distributed by corporate America. Commercials for many products (and even some programs), but especially the drug commercials, sell the gospel that there are instant solutions to life's most pressing problems. You need not think about your own emotional maturity and development of individuality; your discipline, training, and education; your perception of the world; your willingness to cooperate and compromise and work with other people; or about your developing deep and meaningful relationships and trying to keep them in repair. You pop a pill. "Better living through chemistry" is not just Du Pont's slogan. It is one of the commandments of consumerism.
Television—which Professor John Kenneth Galbraith has characterized as one of the "prime instruments for the manipulation of consumer demand"—educates us away from life and away from our individuality. It drives us to line up at the counters of drugstores and supermarkets, and to shape our needs and wants and, ultimately, ourselves into the molds that are the products. Not only do the programs and commercials explicitly preach materialism, conspicuous consumption, status consciousness, exploitation, and fantasy worlds of quick, shallow solutions, but even the settings and subliminal messages are commercials for the consumption style of life. 8

Johnson's points are well illustrated by the "Clearasil" skin ointment commercials, which are typical of the way medications are advertised. Rather than dealing with the causes of skin problems (which are usually of dietary or psychological origin), the pharmaceutical firm convinces millions of teenagers that a "cure" can be had simply by rubbing on a medicated potion. The commercials foster anxieties in the young and then slyly appeal directly to the fears which grow out of those anxieties; they attempt to scare the public into buying a product. Anything for a buck.

Dr. George Briggs, a University of California professor, recently told the U.S. Senate's Nutrition Committee that the American diet is so bad that it costs the nation $30 billion a year in health care. He blamed the food and advertising industries for promoting nutritionally worthless foods. "Dr Pepper" used to be regarded as a healthful soft drink, but today the ingredient label
reads, "carbonated water, sugar, caramel color, artificial and natural flavoring [totally unspecified], phosphoric acid, sodium benzoate (preservative), caffeine, monosodium phosphate, lactic acid." The effect on the body must be ruinous. The point is that television, which urges us to buy such products, is one of the main pipelines to bad health in this country.

Lester Brown writes that

The American broadcaster is one part conscience and nine parts profit motive. The better ones may be three parts conscience. Even so, it is a sorry ratio for media with such power and penetration in a society.

In his defense is the fact that the broadcaster did not begin with the intention of plundering the air waves. He was simply allowed to indulge in bad habits by an inattentive government; a historically apathetic, sometimes even sympathetic, regulatory agency, the Federal Communications Commission; and an abstruse Communications Law dating to 1934, written before anyone could foresee television as the dominant medium of, much less foretell its implications on, American life.

Admittedly, it took some courage to invest large sums of money in the new medium during the forties and early fifties, and mindful of that the FCC exempted the television operator not only from a high level of performance but also from many of his basic responsibilities as a licensee in order to help him build television into a sturdy business. It became a good business soon enough, but the early permissiveness
established precedents for the practices which put profits before service and for the FCC's passivity. Moreover, after two decades, the Commission continued to accept the broadcaster's argument that he was entitled to make princely profits because he had risked so much to pioneer the new medium. 9

It's time to ask a few questions. Are we satisfied with the status quo on television? Do we have access, via the electronic media, to opinions and ideas which have relevance to our real needs? Does the version of reality projected by the controllers of television help me to live my life more happily, more lovingly, more productively? Are my ideas and those of my peers receiving adequate, empathetic exposure on television?

CONTROL OF INFORMATION

Regarding the government's active role in coralling the press, CBS newsman Morley Safer spoke early in 1972 at a dinner of the Overseas Press Club in New York:

This Nixon administration has carefully planted doubt about what we print or show or say. It has not been a casual, accidental thing, but a carefully planned program of misinformation. . . . People who practice the big lie cannot stand the smallest truth. Their occasional discomfiture over what we report invites a broadside of sleazy rejoinders. . . . To continue to mouth the kind of humbug that so-called soldiers and statesmen in this country have been mouthing about
Indochina, for example, deserves precisely the kind of reporting it's been getting for the past decade.\textsuperscript{10}

But the war didn't get nearly enough bad press; the people were too easily convinced that the government knew what it was doing. In point of fact, the government rejoinders have had sufficient power to see several reporters jailed. Nicholas Johnson writes that

The press must forever be beyond the power of government so that government will never be beyond the power of the press. Government can at no time dictate to the press because the press must, sometimes, lead the people. Our system will not work if the press lets its precious freedom languish. It will not work unless the press uses its freedom—to inform, to expose, and to persuade.\textsuperscript{11}

The press has definitely not been beyond the power of the government during the past few years, the war in Vietnam being the prime case in point—a war fought not because the people were aroused and wanted to fight, but because certain sectors of the Establishment successfully conspired against the people's right to know in order to create the illusion that it must be fought. Vietnam probably never would have grown to be the great problem it eventually became if the press had recognized its historic duty and drawn the line at the "domino theory" explanation for the war when the fighting began to escalate in 1964.

No experiment can be more interesting than that we are now trying, and which we trust will end
in establishing the fact that man may be governed by reason and truth. Our first object should therefore be to leave open to him all the avenues to truth. The most effectual hitherto found is the freedom of the press. It is, therefore, the first shut up by those who fear the investigation of their actions.

- President Thomas Jefferson

Of course, managers of the electronic media must live with the realization that the Federal government has the power to silence their operations by withholding approval of applications for broadcast license renewal. Libertarian Jerome Tuccille goes so far as to question the very right of government to control broadcast frequencies.

Federal licensing of radio and television stations is nothing more than a form of indirect and sometimes direct censorship over the communications media. The airwaves are to be considered property existing in nature, and radio frequencies and television channels belong rightfully to those who first pioneer them, much the same as land was claimed initially by the original homesteaders. The function of government in this case should have been nothing more than to acknowledge titles of ownership as each new frequency was claimed and to protect the property rights of each new pioneer and his heirs. . . . The stuff that is piped into our living rooms night after night is a mockery of free speech. The ideas and the standards of entertainment to which the American people are subjected are as much a product of the government as
they would be under a dictatorship.\textsuperscript{12}

To most commercial broadcasters the public's "right to know" is of secondary importance; almost without exception the license holder is more concerned about his relationship with the FCC and other Federal offices than with his responsibilities as a disseminator of information—as a voice speaking in the public interest. This, coupled with the broadcaster's practical need to avoid material offensive to sponsoring corporations—to avoid biting the hand that feeds him—in effect cripples the public's right of access to information.
THE PROBLEM

We have recognized a couple of interesting things about mass communications. First, freedom is threatened when control of the major media is in the hands of a small number of powerful people. The profit-seeking networks and individual stations prepare the news and develop the programs, and to support these activities they sell advertising time to profit-seeking corporations and businesses. The corporations often decline to sponsor programs whose subject treatment is even slightly antagonistic to the prime goal of making money, with the result that the television industry has become molded to the advantage of the few who finance it. Second, mass communication is apparently essential to maintaining cohesiveness in large democratic nations, to prevent a breakdown of democracy's intricate structure. Just as word-of-mouth communication is essential to the functioning of a small village, so too mass communication is necessary for the cohesive functioning of large nations.

A dilemma exists in these two points: without mass communication a large nation cannot easily maintain cohesiveness; but under the present arrangement in the United
States the mass media are controlled by self-serving corporations; slowly, almost imperceptibly—and to the increasing discomfort of growing numbers of people—our national purpose has tended to become subverted to the advantage of a few mega-corporations. Most of us, seemingly, can do little but sit back, unwitting pawns in the game of one-upmanship being played out by the all-powerful corporations.

To this we can add the following: because the corporations use the electronic media to further private aims, and because the media, which use the public airwaves, ought to serve the interests of the public, the media—especially television—should be equally available to nonprofit groups in order to provide an effective balance to the self-serving aims of the corporations, aims which in recent years have subtly but radically and negatively affected the basic value system of the nation.

But there exists no commercial television network in the United States that would willingly broadcast independently produced programs over which it had no control—programs which might embarrass the giant business community; the hold of the corporations on the nation is simply too strong. An approach from a completely new perspective is needed.

It may be that the present system of tight network control over all programs originating with the networks is not entirely legal. It is certainly not entirely democratic in spirit. The situation is reminiscent of the early relationship between movie studios and theaters; it was common practice until the 1930s, when it was declared unconstitutional, for studios to own the thea-
ters in which their pictures were shown. The present case of television, in which the networks own many of the production rights and facilities and also exercise complete control over program content, is analogous.

In addition, the one-way nature of the medium (television talks to—or at—the viewer, never the reverse) encourages representatives of special interests to stretch the truth. They know that their statements cannot easily be challenged by the viewing public; accountability is necessarily deferred to the future when the politician or industrialist is safely off-camera. The public has become wary of statements by public spokesmen. One wonders why people should be expected to turn on the six o'clock news to watch politicians and corporation presidents tell lies. The situation has gotten so far out of hand that viewers fully expect to be lied to. (Author Elie Wiessel recently said, "I believe that never has society been so dehumanized as it is now. Words mean nothing. What is even worse, words of lies come out as words of truth.")

This formidable censor of the public functionaries, by arranging them at the tribunal of public opinion, produces reform peaceably, which must otherwise be done by revolution.

- Thomas Jefferson

The mass media are not forces to be controlled by a few people in the interest of profit. They are the means by which people and groups of people communicate to groups
and masses of other people. It is time we considered ways of making available at least one channel in every area of the country to allow for the open expression of ideas free from those influences which tend to filter and distort the various communications among people; at least a few media channels should be under the guiding hand of broad-based citizen groups whose decisions are not primarily motivated by considerations of profit—people who see the media as tools of education and communication rather than as the means to wealth and power. We should go right to the heart of the problem; namely, freedom of expression. Thomas Emerson recently put it concisely:

An abstract legal right to expression is of little practical use in the absence of the means for exercising that right. At the present time the monopoly or near-monopoly of the major media of communication by a small group representing similar economic, political and social interests has created a serious distortion in the system of free expression. This lack of access to the mass media is perhaps the major weakness in the existing system.  

In a geographically large nation the only way cohesiveness can be maintained is through the use of mass communications; it is one thing to have freedom of speech in one's immediate neighborhood and quite another to be able to make oneself heard by citizens of the larger national community. The question is: how can we best create a place in television for the airing of material and viewpoints which are beyond the control of the Establishment?
For many years in the United States most of us have assumed that there were but two ways of supporting television programming: by government sponsorship, as in many countries, or by commercial sponsorship, as in the United States. A few nonprofit radio and television stations receive support directly from the public, but most are able to subsist only at a bare minimum level. Nonprofit television stations have had to rely heavily on government subsidies. However, late in 1972 President Nixon decided to terminate government support.

The public has not been willing to support the nonprofit stations at a level that would allow them freedom from financial problems. Possibly this is because most viewers and listeners are interested in no more than one or two programs offered by the stations and can't afford to pay the annual $15 to $25 that full "membership" support of the stations requires. If such is the case, we have tripped over a bureaucratic error in thinking which can be set straight. A logical alternative approach would be to ask people to support a specific program series of their own choosing rather than the total operation of a station. The programs of nonprofit stations are plainly not all of interest to everybody; why should people be expected to support an entire program schedule which, for the most part, they have no interest in watching? We will return to the question of sponsorship in Part Three.
SELF-INTEREST VERSUS COLLECTIVE NEED

We have seen that television in America is used to sell people on a particular way of life—through the choice of material presented, the products advertised, and by carefully excluding certain kinds of information from the public view; this, rather than offering people the full spectrum of information and news to which, in the spirit of our Constitution, they are entitled. What might viewers expect from television programming which they themselves control? In what way would viewer-controlled television improve program integrity and quality?

Just as television now hustles people into buying quantities of stuff they don't need, so too can it urge people to live their lives simply and with dignity, in positive response to their own real needs and the needs of their fellow humans. For the first time since the development of the mass media the potential exists for common people to speak with a common voice and be heard. Television has the potential to bring down the walls, to allow us to see and hear ourselves and each other as we really are. And it can help ensure an open marketplace of ideas.

The commercial networks have successfully sold the idea that most people will watch only shallow noncontroversial entertainment—the kind which softens the viewers for the commercials to come, so they can be led like sheep to the doors of the drug stores and auto showrooms. The choice seems clear enough: either we open up the airwaves to a free exchange of ideas or sink into a maze of cheap, simplistic dramas foisted on the public by corporation PR men.
Newsweek magazine recently printed a public opinion poll by The Gallup Organization which showed that of all programs offered on television, viewers rate news and documentary programs as highest in quality. But far greater numbers of people, according to the A.C. Nielsen Company (which monitors television receivers in 1200 homes across the nation), prefer to spend their viewing hours watching crime and adventure programs. What can this mean? Why don't people watch the programs they consider to be highest in quality? Notwithstanding the possible existence of an undisclosed lemming-like instinct in the American character, one possible answer is that while documentaries may sometimes cover material which many people would like to know something about, the treatment is often too pedantic or scholarly for the average viewer, or just plain poor treatment of a potentially interesting and exciting subject. There seems to be an all-or-nothing approach to presenting most out-of-the-ordinary programs on television. It is as though the television writers, knowing that only one chance will be available in a given year for the airing of a "special" on, say, new automobile propulsion methods, feel they must make the most of the alloted single hour and so delve into minutiae uninteresting to the average viewer.

An alternative would be to present such material more often, in shorter doses: if it is important that people learn about the world around them, then it is important that somebody in television begin thinking about techniques of presentation. If shorter doses of esoteric but necessary information will help people to understand, then shorter segments should be offered. Of course, there must continue to be room for occasional
longer treatments of limited-interest subjects, but to bypass the more frequent popular approach is to misuse the great mass-educating potential of the medium. Our mass communication tools should be available for the edification of the masses.

The controllers of television for the most part present material which is either supportive of the status quo or of neutral significance to it, and tend to avoid material upsetting to government and business. The result is the omnipresent tendency to warp national goals to the advantage of the few in power, Thomas Emerson writes of making choices in modern society:

A rational judgement is possible only by considering all facts and ideas, from whatever source, and testing one's conclusion against the onslaught of opposing opinions. This process demands that all points of view be heard, no matter how dangerous or "fraught with death" they may seem. All ideas are either true, in which case they ought to be accepted; partly true and partly false, in which case they add some element to the truth; or wholly false, in which case they serve the function of making us rethink and retest the accepted opinion and thereby understand it more fully. . . .

A system of freedom of expression is essential to popular decision-making in a democratic society. Under our theory of government the people are sovereign: the Government is the servant, not the master. If the people are to perform their role and instruct their government, they must be able to hear all voices. 15
If we are going to rely heavily on television for news and analysis, the information given must be full and complete, unrestricted by special-interest groups. Somehow, space must be provided on television for alternative voices.

Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.

- Thomas Jefferson

The kind of television we are concerned with—a television in which viewers have a say—can offer a range of views and concepts not usually available to the public, and so help to overcome the stiflingly limited perspective of most commercial programming. The concept is harmonious with constitutional views on free speech, as reaffirmed by the Supreme Court in the 1969 Red Lion decision: "It is the purpose of the First Amendment to preserve an uninhibited marketplace of ideas in which the truth will ultimately prevail, rather than to countenance monopolization of the market, whether it be by the government itself or a private licensee."  

TELEVISION—THE EDUCATIONAL TOOL

A picture can be much more widely interpreted than words. The viewer interprets what he sees on his own level and not, as with words, on the level of a narrator; the mes-
sage is more surely received than if words alone are used to convey meaning. Television, in this sense, is the great democratic teaching medium because nothing more than eyes and ears are required to receive any message offered; no skills such as reading or a sophisticated vocabulary are needed. (Some 10 percent of the American people are "functionally illiterate.") Pictures are accessible to the illiterate and the intellectual alike.

Buckminster Fuller has some things to say about the medium which can be seen as an answer to those who question television's value as an educational tool:

I think it's very important for us to recognize right away that if a great teacher is of the essence, then it is also very much in evidence that great personalities can come over television and moving-picture documentaries. . . . I think it obvious that we can bring great personalities—who could not possibly meet face-to-face with millions of students seated in stiff chairs in crowded classrooms—to hundreds of millions of young people listening and viewing undistractedly in their homes, by use of well-developed TV documentaries. . . . TV antennae bristle from the rooftops of every one of the world's worst slums. The pipelines for great teachers to reach the eager brains of the otherwise underprivileged billions already exist.17

One difficulty in marshaling public interest to urge the solving of problems is that often the public cannot grasp or even see that a problem exists, so slowly do the effects become noticeable. In contrast to its usual
role, television could be used to help people understand the reality and mechanics of change—the ever-shifting relationships of things and ideas. Many phenomena that take place over months or years, such as environmental deterioration, are more easily understood if described with the aid of visual and graphic techniques. Time-lapse photography, for example, can be used as a stimulant to "wide-angle" thinking. Buckminster Fuller notes that

We can't see atoms in motion, we can't see that the stars that move through their motions are thousands-fold faster than our fastest rockets, we can't see trees grow. And there are a myriad of economic trends and other vital evolutionary events taking place today which are invisible to humanity only because they are too fast or too slow for man to apprehend and to comprehend them.18

Commercial television portrays a world of snap decisions and instant solutions. The error in such an approach to problem-solving is that our problems today are many-faceted; their solving requires help from many different fields—from across the full breadth of human knowledge. But much of what has been learned by scientists and technologists has been maintained in storehouses insulated from the general public (and often from other scientists) by specialized language. How firmly we are able to maintain control over our lives is contingent on our understanding at least some of the reality unfolding around us. A lot of what could be fascinating learning experiences on television is presented in a manner guaranteed to put the average viewer to sleep; it's as though there were an unspoken agreement among many educators and tele-
vision producers that the public is incapable of understanding much of the new knowledge. But if use is made of audience-involving visual and aural techniques, much now-esoteric knowledge could become accessible to many more people. We will learn to control our technology when more of us come to understand it.

WHAT'S ON TV?

Just as the general interest magazines have faded in popularity and the specialty magazines have become more numerous, so too will eclectic television programs eventually fade in deference to more specialized offerings. Some may think this is a sign of the age of specialization. But not many people read only one magazine, and not many watch only one television program or channel; information that people don't get from one source they can get from another. Just as a good newsstand carries a wide selection of magazines, so too should television offer a wide variety of programs. Better that each program should be a distinctive offering than just another in a tedious line of soap operas, creaking cartoons, and shoot-em-ups. The viewer should be as free to choose what he wants as is the reader.

Everybody can benefit from greater diversity in television programming; our task consists in breaking away from the strictures placed on American society by commercial programming policies which make television something for the few rather than an instrument of the people.
Following are brief descriptions of specific programs of the sort which people might want to support—programs which, presumably, many would benefit from and enjoy watching.

— A viewer-sponsored news program, free from the requirement that it avoid offending corporate sponsors.

— A program of "letters to America" consisting of short film or video tape "essays" made by people all across the country; exploring possible solutions to problems of society, self-help projects, alternative life styles, and so on. Also material from foreign countries.

— A prime-time "classroom of the air" series, each program consisting of three or four sections which would examine a particular topic for several weeks and then move on to explore new subjects.

— Continuing drama or comedy series set in the future, done warmly, sensitively, positively. (Television can do much to help people feel good about the possibilities of the future, to lessen fears about change; alternatives are needed to counter the negative, crisis-ridden picture usually presented on commercial television.)

— Science for the layman, including physics, astronomy, geology, ecology, medicine, biology, psychology, parapsychology, archaeology, etc. Also cybernetics, teleology, and game theory, as well as explications of the great scientific controversies of the day.
— A repertory playhouse, biweekly or monthly.

— A series of biographies of present-day Americans—people both in and out of the public eye.

— A series on the work done by the many humanitarian, professional, and charitable organizations: storefront lawyers, League of Women Voters, American Friends Service Committee, Common Cause, the hospital ship "Hope," environmental protection groups, and so on, with an eye to encouraging public participation and support of such efforts.

— History of civilization (in contrast to the 1971 BBC-produced series "Civilisation" which was generally limited to western civilization); a continuing series on the history of mankind, taken from earliest records and myths right on up to the present.

— Programs for deaf people.

— A speed-reading course.

— Series of film-music-sound programs—an occasional hour of visual and aural free form. Live action, animation, computer-generated graphics, etc. Stereophonic sound.

— A series on astrology; why continue to leave to charlatans a subject once studied by great thinkers?

— Several series sponsored by magazines, more or less along the lines of the National Geographic specials.
— Dramatizations of stories from the Bible.

— A series on ecology. Popular, rather than academic, treatment. (How can we save the earth if most of us don't understand what we're trying to save?)

— Meetings of city councils, county commissions, State legislatures, school boards, etc.

— A series on occult and unexplained phenomena, including segments on psychism, mediums, ESP, magic, monsters, miracles, etc.

— A series on tales and myths, some programs animated, others live action; the Flood legends of the world, American Indian stories, African tales, Nordic legends, Aesop's fables, and so on.

— A mock town-meeting, each week taking up a different problem typical of problems facing society.
ON SHORT-CIRCUITING GOMORRAH

It is true that fifty history buffs in Poughkeepsie do not constitute adequate support for a program series. But several thousand people in towns all across the country do represent potential support for a series if somehow they can all learn of their common interest. Producing quality television programs for broadcast on a single station is prohibitively expensive; it is only by airing a given program over several stations to a large audience that the benefits of wide exposure can outweigh high production costs. CBS, for example, could not afford to produce "All In The Family" just for a St. Louis audience, but the program's huge national following makes the cost-per-viewer reasonable. Accordingly, it appears that any effort to improve television should be joined on a national level if there is to be any hope of producing quality programs; noncommercial television is no less affected by economic realities than is commercial television.

How might viewer-controlled television be initiated? One possible approach would be to place advertisements in several publications around the country to solicit
subscriptions for a new kind of television program series—a series which would receive its sole support directly from the viewing public; the public would in essence subscribe to a "magazine of the air," and would receive programs at home on a standard television receiver.

How might the concept of subscriber-sponsored television be publicized? One possible approach could be: "You're willing to spend five dollars per couple several nights a year to see a movie of your choice. You would probably also be willing, then, to spend the same amount for (let's say) 36 television shows a year—shows over which you, along with other subscribers, have complete control." One million subscriber-sponsors at $5.00 per annual subscription would yield five million dollars for a program series. At the arbitrary number of 36 weekly shows in a year, each program could be budgeted at well over $100,000.

Imagine that a group of subscribers has been formed for a program series and is exploring means of getting its series on the air. The group might go to individual stations and ask for broadcast time, but most stations would undoubtedly balk at such an idea, for under present U.S. communications law stations are legally responsible for all programs they broadcast regardless of the source of the material; stations would be liable for material produced by subscriber groups even though they were not involved in producing the programs. In addition, presumably our group of subscribers believes strongly that it should have the same ease of access to the public enjoyed by the for-profit corporations—such as would
be provided by a network hookup. The subscriber group could go directly to a commercial network, but a network, aware of the legal vulnerability of its broadcast outlets, would probably also insist on the right to cut material it considered objectionable. The need for an alternative is evident. Thomas Emerson writes that In 1969, in the Red Lion Broadcasting case, the Supreme Court opened the constitutional door to more radical methods for achieving greater equality of access to radio and television facilities. Upholding the equal time and the fairness doctrines against the claim that they infringed the broadcaster's freedom of expression, the court laid down the basic principle: "It is the right of the viewers and listeners, not the right of the broadcasters, which is paramount." Under this doctrine our entire approach to the use of the broadcasting medium could be revolutionized. Instead of granting a monopoly to a single broadcaster for each open channel, the law could provide that the broadcaster must act as an agent of the public and grant access to all comers on equal terms. The ensuing problems of allocating time and paying the cost would be enormous, but there is no reason to suppose they could not be overcome. It may be that stations and networks could set aside several hours each day as a "common carrier" period, during which they would broadcast any program for which sponsors purchase time. During such periods the stations could forgo liability for material broadcast—just as the telephone company, a common carrier, is not responsible for material passing through its facilities. Officially designating a regular common carrier period would have
the effect of creating a "legal umbrella" for the stations; all responsibility for programs broadcast during these periods would shift from the stations to the producing subscriber groups. Only if the subscriber groups themselves were to take on legal responsibility for program content would stations accept subscriber-sponsored programs.

Under such an arrangement there are, of course, many people who would watch the subscription shows without sending in their supporting subscription fee. A means of attracting these people to help sponsor a series would be to send to subscribers a small, high-quality, eight or twelve page biweekly program guide or magazine containing material pertinent to the show they support. Each magazine might regularly carry a questionnaire on the program series calling for suggestions for subjects to be covered in future programs; the magazines could also contain information relating to upcoming shows to allow subscribers to actively participate in each week's program while watching at home. But certainly no one would be expected to subscribe to each program he watches; the system would probably function adequately if viewers were to support only one or two favorite programs. Subscription fees for programs of great popularity could be appropriately reduced.

Program guides notwithstanding, the ultimate success of the subscriber concept would rest on people's willingness to abide by the "honor system" which the concept implies. In turn, such willingness would depend largely on the success of an information campaign aimed at raising the public consciousness about the state of information in
the United States; most people, of course, are presently unaware of the degree to which television molds their impressions of the world around them.

Perhaps the biggest difficulty in contracting with commercial stations to broadcast subscriber-sponsored programs is that the broadcaster invariably considers himself to be first a profit-making businessman and only secondly the manager of a communications center. He naturally constructs his program schedule for greatest profit potential. Any subscriber group shows he might agree to carry would consequently be aired at his discretion, which means at times other than during the profitable evening hours when most people do their viewing; prime-time audiences are so large that the commercial broadcaster can set far higher rates than any non-profit sponsor could afford. Not many subscribers would agree to having their speed-reading programs broadcast at one o'clock in the morning. The logical answer seems to be stations which operate primarily as common carriers.

It is apparently necessary, therefore, to expand our concept to include the formation of common carrier stations. With this in mind, the following is offered as root material for a working plan. It is based on ideas discussed in the foregoing pages. There are three main elements.

First, as already discussed, the public should be offered the opportunity to directly sponsor television programs over which subscriber groups would exercise complete control.
Second, I propose that a conference of interested parties be called to explore the possibility of forming, in cities all across the country, locally controlled cooperatives whose purpose would be to buy and maintain television stations wherever there is sufficient interest. The purpose of each station would be limited to providing a broadcast outlet to subscriber groups—that is, to acting essentially as a common carrier. Unlike commercial stations, the prime goal of the broadcast co-ops would be to make available to all responsible parties the opportunity to be heard; stations would not be concerned with turning a large profit. Broadcast time ideally would be split between national and local subscriber groups.

And third, I propose that a group be formed to function as the board of directors of a new informally constituted nonprofit network. The group would determine the scheduling of subscriber-sponsored programs, as well as aid the co-op stations which comprise the network in various technical and administrative matters. The board's members would eventually be drawn from the stations and from the various subscriber groups. The board, for obvious reasons, should be honestly representative of the full spectrum of American life. The network would, of course, exercise no control over program content.
PILOT SERIES

It is important to get a subscriber-sponsored pilot series on the air soon—a series whose integrity can set the tone we may expect of all not-for-profit television programming. Such a series, whatever it is to be, is more than just another new television show; it is a pilot for a whole new kind of television. It must in some way stand out from other shows as a clear alternative.

The two essential ingredients should be borne in mind: the series should be sponsored directly by viewers, and the general content of the programs should be determined as much as possible by viewers. The programs should attempt to subjectively involve the audience so that viewers may come to understand that they themselves can be responsible for what they see on television. The series might be one of those suggested at the end of Part Two, or it could be something in a free form. I suggest a semi-free form to allow the show to move where necessity takes it and with the tide of viewer interest.

The programs might initially have a four segment, one-hour format, each segment running 10 to 30 minutes. A vote of viewer preferences for subjects to be covered could be taken each month by means of a punch-card questionnaire included with the program guides sent to subscribers, and by postcard. The segments might each center on a general subject area, perhaps as follows: history, people, science, and occult & spiritual. To offer constant variety of subject treatment the pro-
ducers could rotate the lead segment each week, so that one week "people" would lead off, the next "science," next "occult," then "history," and so on; each program's lead segment could suggest the tone of the evening's show. Schematically, the week-by-week schedule would appear as on the following page.

Some possible titles are:

Changes
See Hear
Dear Earth
Realities
Mirages
Macroscope
Quest
Through the Maze
Pictogram
Protos
Metagram
Cycles
I Wonder
Grassroots
SCHEMATIC OF WEEKLY PROGRAM SCHEDULE

Key: h, History; p, People; s, Science; o, Occult

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HISTORY:

- Dramatic sketches of great events of the past; biographies of great historical personages.

- Animated patterns of world historical movements showing spread of various races, cultures, languages, ideas, technology, and so on.

- Segments on literacy: the effect of literacy on a culture; the printing press, the telegraph, electronic media, and so on.

- Effect of various drugs and stimulants on the course of history: tobacco, alcohol, peyote, marijuana, opiates, etc.

- Segments on the great American documents—Declaration of Independence, Constitution, Bill of Rights; dramatic segments exploring ideas that contributed to the making of the United States.

- Segments on American Indians.

- Segments on significant cases and issues before the Supreme Court and Congress.

- Segments explaining, in allegorical terms, why the U.S. gets involved in situations all over the world.

- Occasional segments on the future, showing it in positive terms—what it can be, as opposed to dwelling on the horrors predicted by doomsayers.
PEOPLE:

- Simple segments, filmed anywhere, showing people living their daily lives; communication by picture and sound, always letting the people tell their own stories directly with minimum narration.

- Segments explaining current social theories: various approaches to education; theories on aggression, violence, and criminal rehabilitation; self-government and citizen responsibility, and so on.

- Segments on great thinkers of the day.

- Segments on optimum, ideal towns and cities.

- Segments on the arts in various societies.

- Series of segments on fear—as seen through different groups of society; the causes, meaning, and consequences of fear.

- Segments on mental health disturbances: coping and dealing with problems; rehabilitation; new approaches to problems of mental health.

- How things work: no-fault insurance, democratic and totalitarian states, monetary systems, economic systems, metric system, new math, etc.

- Segments showing familiar sports, particularly team sports; how to watch and play football, basketball, soccer, gymnastics, golf, etc.
- SCIENCE:

  - Segments on the development of major technologies; computers, space, medicine, transportation, etc.

  - Health, with emphasis on preventative measures, such as care of teeth, eating right foods, exercise; psychosomatic problems, etc.

  - Segments on food chains, including effects of pesticides and chemical fertilizers; consequences of upsetting natural balances; animal population control.

  - Segments on the human body: functioning of the various organs and systems. What is brain? What is mind? What is consciousness? Who are we?

  - Physics and astronomy: what and how is the universe? Segments on electricity, magnetism, gravity, radiation, cosmic rays, stars, planets, quasars, black holes, relativity, and so on.

  - Occasional "news of the earth" segments, from a geologist's point of view, covering both long- and short-term phenomena.

  - Segments on the great scientific controversies: uniformitarianism vs. catastrophism; models of the universe; language and thought; acupuncture, etc.

  - Segments on peculiarities and capabilities of various animal species.
— How things work: electron microscope, steel mill, Apollo rocket, television cameras and television receivers, slide rule, computer, color film, rotary and reciprocating engines, smog-control devices, various potential power sources, etc.

— Time-lapse sequences shot from planes and cars, showing transitions from high arid to coastal terrain; various natural events in time-lapse: tides, storms, seasons, phases of the moon and eclipses, and so on.

— Ideas of Immanuel Velikovsky.

OCCULT & SPIRITUAL

— Segments on psychism: Edgar Cayce, Jane Roberts/Seth, Peter Hurkos, Taylor Caldwell, others.

— Segments on questions usually avoided by science: UFOs, telepathy, mediums, precognition, telekinesis, fakirs who walk barefoot on hot coals, and so on.

— Fountainheads of knowledge: evidence for great achievements in the past.

— Segments on astrology: theories on how it "works."

— I Ching, tarot, actualism, various other approaches to understanding.
A subscriber group is really nothing more than a bunch of people who have gotten together to put on a particular kind of show they all want to see. Thirty percent of all television stations in the U.S. are losing money; fourteen stations went broke in 1971. Surely a way can be found to gain control of some of these failing stations so that people can decide for themselves what they will see.

For years American education failed to do what it claimed to do; it didn't really educate most people, it merely trained them to fill job positions. But now something has happened and many people are beginning to take seriously the "land of the free" talk they have been hearing through the years; they are questioning many of the basic economic and political assumptions accepted for so long. The problem is that when they have occasionally tried to express their new-found convictions to other Americans they have discovered that the more effective mediums of communication are, in effect, closed to those who don't subscribe to a point of view supportive of the Establishment.

Why continue to give the commercial broadcasters and
their self-supportive laws and codes the sanctity of the law of gravity? We can't walk in the sky, but surely we can devise a way to bring First Amendment guarantees to include television. If we are to learn, we must be free to learn all that catches our eye and not just what an established order would have us learn; if we are to speak freely, the mediums through which we communicate must not filter out information which may be at odds with the current power structure. Most people will continue to remain largely ignorant of possible means for untangling the darker workings of society if the very medium in which they can most readily discuss the alternatives remains closed to all but a privileged few. The success of America's experiment in democracy will be assured only by removing the various hindrances to free communication.
NOTES*


4. Ibid., p. 145.

5. Ibid., pp. 153-54.


*combines footnotes and bibliography


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**Frontpiece quotations:**


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**Thomas Jefferson quotations:**