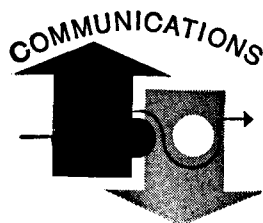


COMMUNICATIONS

Communications Editor: RICHARD L. TOBIN



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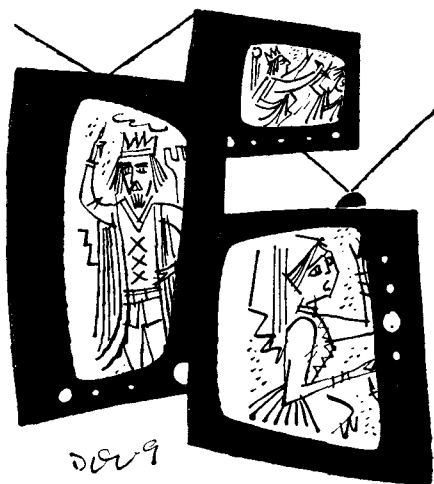
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1962: Can Educational TV Turn the Corner?

THE PHENOMENON called National Educational Television has, in less than ten years, become America's fastest-growing network and, in some ways its most important. Some sixty noncommercial stations now link videotape from Oregon to Maine, Arizona to Puerto Rico. As many as 75,000,000 Americans can tune into TV programs on the noncommercial NET. By 1965, the figure may be 100,000,000, though by no means all of this potential will take advantage of the opportunity and many of the programs they might see are substandard in production, quality, and showmanship.

Much of the programming on educational television stations is fulfilled through videotape created and distributed especially for network broadcast. The fabulously successful film series "An Age of Kings," Shakespeare's re-creation of a century of medieval English history, was so popular around New York and Washington that Esso renewed sponsorship and produced some of the most tasteful and original commercials ever seen on TV. They could not have failed to produce a warm feeling of good will in their millions of viewers, which is after all the essence of institutional advertising. This special sort of programming is broadcast nationally during prime evening time each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, often on regular TV channels any set can tune in. And the ratings are beginning to prove something partisans of educational television have long suspected: that if programs are well enough done they'll attract a mass audience. The news that New York will soon have an educational TV station all its own, available to any normal set on channel 13, may yield further rapid proof of the mass potential.

What is an educational TV station, anyway? Well, under rules of the Federal Communications Commission, noncommercial educational broadcasting stations are usually licensed to nonprofit educational organizations upon proof that the proposed station will be used primarily to serve educational needs in a community, for the advancement of educational programs, and to furnish nonprofit television broadcast service. Who owns ETV stations? Roughly one-third are owned by colleges and universities; another third are operated by city or county school systems, by state departments of education, or by state educational television commissions; and the remaining third are of the community type—supported by local civic, cultural, educational, and corporate interests and organizations. Where does the money come from? Funds for ETV stations' construction and operation come chiefly from state legislative appropriations, public contributions, foundation grants, and the budgets of educational agencies and institutions. Commercial broadcasters have been extremely helpful in almost every area where educational TV has tried to make a start—they have donated equipment, technical advice, funds, personnel, taped programs, even publicity to new (and competing) ETV ventures.

The sixty stations now on the air represent capital investments approaching \$30,000,000. Operating budgets for ETV are \$15,000,000 annually. Known in broadcasting as "the fourth network," NET provides American business with a new outlet for true public service. By under-

writing a NET series a company actively promotes a deeper knowledge, a keener understanding, a quickened appreciation, a cultural growth that is essential to the very life of a free society.

The communities served by educational TV come to appreciate them. Most startling example of this occurred after a recent fire destroyed WGBH, Boston's famed educational broadcasting station. By noon the following day, appeals to rebuild WGBH were being made at practically every level of communication in the Boston area. A flood of response began and has never ceased—from school children's pennies to \$10,000 checks sent by anonymous donors. As of last week, more than \$600,000 had come in and WGBH had gone from ashes to a future. Like most of the leading ETV stations, WGBH is available to any listener in the Boston area possessing an ordinary TV set with the ordinary low-number channels. No special tuning equipment is required, an early hazard in ETV at the ultra-high frequency levels.

But, having reached the end of a long and tenuous approach, can educational TV turn the corner in 1962? When Newton N. Minow, chairman of the FCC, was speaking to America's broadcasters about their "vast wasteland" he put very well indeed the fundamental problem of ETV:

"Commercial television has no monopoly on wastelands. We all know there is room for improvement in program quality in educational as well as commercial broadcasting. . . . Television requires many skills and many talents of a high order. It also demands a large slice of showmanship. I'm afraid that many educators consider 'showmanship' a dirty word. Many educators brush off showmanship as arty and gimmicky and they are leery of it. But tawdry theatrics are a world away from *true* showmanship—the art of attracting and holding an audience, of making an idea or a subject fascinating, the art of emotional involvement. Great teachers always have been exciting and challenging. Great teachers use showmanship every day. And they never bore. True showmanship demands greatness of spirit, the pioneering instinct, creative initiative, and courage. It demands imagination and daring in the treatment of ideas and techniques."

Educational TV *can* turn the corner in 1962, but only if it listens to sound advice like Minow's and puts it into operation. ETV will slide back only if it forgets Minow's admonition that to educate you must first attract, entertain (in its best sense), and excite through projection and showmanship.

—R.L.T.

Letters to the Communications Editor



GREAT DEBATE: PRIME TIME ON TV

I WAS CONSIDERABLY interested in two letters to the editor in your December 9 issue, one by Harold Mehling and the other by Beverly C. Fisher.

Mr. Mehling is especially adept in his handling of a certain type of humor; a type that appeals to me very much. The question of the quality of television programs is one that lends itself to a certain amount of levity, but the levity does nothing to solve the problem. However, since nothing else has done anything toward a solution either, it is good that we can have the levity.

Especially timely, I think, is Mr. Mehling's tongue-in-cheek assumption that any attempt to improve the programming or the quality of any program is an attack on the American Way of Life, and therefore subversive. The question of quality, and this answer to it, are nothing new, though this is the first time I have seen them set forth in a humorous vein. Some years ago I read an essay by someone deploring the lack of quality in TV. He was answered by an executive of some broadcasting concern, strenuously deploring the deploring. The executive had the grace to admit that some of the programs were not, perhaps, all that they might be. He seemed not to understand, however, why we could not be more patient about this lack since TV was always, in his words, "seeking new horizons." Television is still doing that—seeking new horizons; always on horseback and cracking blank cartidges all over the landscape.

Now for Miss Fisher. She says, "This is an excellent time of day for some thoughtful, mature family listening." I wish to ask, what is thoughtful, mature family listening? Ever since television came over that horizon, far too much family listening has been done, and none of it has been either thoughtful or mature. Nothing that children do is mature, though some of it may be very thoughtful indeed. Why should we expect anything that interests children to be mature? The children aren't.

With a very few exceptions (one example might be Walt Disney's nature shows) no program could hold the interest of the whole family if the parents are reasonably intelligent people. To qualify for "family listening" the parents must confine the scope of their interests to that of an eight-year-old, and keep it so confined. Far too many parents have already been too disastrously successful in doing just that.

I think we don't need any more family listening, but since this is so obviously the American Way of Life, perhaps I am one of subversive characters.

To Mr. Mehling, Miss Fisher, and to

all others who do not care for most of what they see on TV, I wish to recommend a solution that has solved that problem for me. I know in advance that my recommendation will be ignored. So be it. The solution is very simple. Just unplug the set and shove it back in the corner to gather dust. Or if, as I am, you are one of the fortunate few who have not yet been stuck with one of the things, just refuse to buy one. It seems fairly certain that if enough people did this we would get some prompt action in the programming department. I am not so blindly optimistic as to believe that this action would automatically guarantee an overall improvement in quality, but it is certain that some changes would be made, and quickly. It seems likely that a few more decent items (I do not deny that we already have a few) would slip in, if only through someone's carelessness. However, anyone who chooses this form of action, or inaction, should be prepared to take some punishment for a while. For choosing to settle some of my personal problems in this determined and unorthodox manner, I have been called everything from anti-social to anti-Christ. This has been going on for so long now that I am beginning to like it.

FRED L. DAVIS.

Belleville, Mich.

"IRRATIONAL PROPOSALS"

I WOULD LIKE to voice my disagreement with the suggestions in Mr. Tobin's "Immodest Proposals." If such fare were to be offered during current TV "prime time," the result would be such a boom in movie attendance as to bring back fond memories of pre-TV days. When your editorial was read in a broadcasting class composed of non-broadcast majors, the consensus was that the prime time would shift from 6:30 to 10 to become 8 (or 9) to 11. You would not educate the nation but simply deprive them of the entertainment they want. The answer does not lie in forcing the commercial nets to bow to the god of Education but in the establishing of more stations devoted to the small audience that desires such fare.

In the editorial you praise the American press for refraining from following the example of some of the European press while encouraging American TV to follow an equally bad European TV example. Please, let's be reasonable and consistent. The "newspaper traditionally opens its entire front page to public service" because such treatment catches the eye of the reader who shops at the newsstand. Hence, they are not motivated by the high sense of personal service you imply, but by the

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