

Man Is More than a Statistic

Mass media must be operated for higher motives than profit alone, or both Man and the media may be hopelessly debased.

By JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH

ROBERT SOUTHEY once said (if my blurred recollections are correct) that the two greatest mysteries in this world or out of it were: 1) the Holy Trinity and 2) what makes a book sell. He then went on to express the opinion that God simply doesn't want men to know how the second question might be answered. I agree for an obvious reason. Many books that don't sell nevertheless deserve publication.

Many publishers on the other hand would like to be able to answer the question with that scientific accuracy now so much more in fashion than God's will. Some of them, no doubt, actually do have traffic with those practitioners of a dubious black art who predict, on the basis of their samplings, just what the public acceptance of a new product will be. But it is just as well that, even now, they do not depend entirely upon any rating system analogous to that to which the television tycoons submit so abjectly. Had they done so in the past, *Moby Dick*, for example, would never have been published. Fortunately, however, some publishers still rely upon a thing as unscientific as a hunch, and a few may be even reckless enough to accept a book just because they believe it to be a good one.

Not long ago there was criticism of that most awesome of horses' mouths, the A. C. Nielsen Company, on the ground that its estimates were not sufficiently accurate because they were based upon too small a sample. My own chief objection is not that the rating systems are not good enough, but that, even if not perfect, they are too good.

That opinion surveys are not perfect is obvious. For one thing, they do not, in many instances, measure the attitudes

and behavior of the whole community but only those members who are willing to respond. And I am sure that the tastes and temperaments of the kind of persons who toss questionnaires into the wastebasket are very different from those of the kind who take the time to answer them.

In the second place, responses certainly are not always honest. Not long ago the magazine *Printer's Ink* innocently asked a group of human guinea pigs to name the magazines they read regularly and an astonishing 8 per cent of the responses named *Collier's*—which had suspended publication several years before the question was asked. With malice aforethought, another researcher put a number of fictitious titles in a list of books, and asked a group of high school history teachers to check the names of those they had recently read. Some of the non-existent books turned out to be prime favorites. And that proved not only that surveys are not completely reliable, but also that cheating is now popular among teachers as well as among pupils.

However accurate or inaccurate public opinion polls may be, moreover, they all too often encourage those who employ them (advertisers, in particular) to base their appeals on that low estimate of human nature and public taste which the polls seem usually to encourage. Considering many of the published findings of the surveys, one is tempted to say that if what they seem to demonstrate is true, then it would be better if the truth were not known.

Consider, for example, the United Press International account of a report proudly issued by NBC for the purpose of encouraging a certain type of very profitable advertiser to sponsor broadcasts in color. Here are some of the char-

acteristics which the report alleges, distinguishing the average owner of a color set from people still making do with black and white: They tend to use "aerosol products over bottle version of the same product; movie film rather than still picture film; electric toothbrushes, and so forth . . ." They are "especially heavy users of shoe polish in spray cans . . . below average in the use of paste shoe polish." They are said to buy more new automobiles than the average citizen and they "have a tendency to buy products with a 'status symbol' aura . . . Have a high degree of interest in buying wall-to-wall carpeting . . . Are much more likely to use Scotch and Bourbon rather than Rye"—which last is described as a "non-status" whiskey.

LEARNING these facts or alleged facts can have only one result. It will encourage advertisers to intensify still further the practice of addressing almost exclusively just the sort of persons described, and to use every effort to cultivate the same characteristics in those who have not yet developed them.

No other even quasi-intellectual or artistic enterprise (not even the movies) has ever been directed with so nearly exclusive a reliance on the "survey," and no other has ever occupied so large a proportion of the general public's time as does television. According to *TV Guide*, American homes have a TV set in operation on an average of six hours a day. Whatever may be said about the supposed increase in reading in the United States, it is obvious that a household that spends six hours a day on television can hardly spare much time for any other leisure activity. At least sixty-five minutes of these six hours, *TV Guide* has further stated, are devoted to commercial "messages," which means ninety

separate pitches per day, 630 per week, or more than 32,000 per year.

The point of *TV Guide's* article is to raise the question, "Does Advertising Make You Buy?" It asks whether the advertisers who pay approximately \$2.5 billion for those 32,000 messages "get their money's worth," and it admits that "oddly enough, nobody knows." Some of us may hope that they don't and that their wiles are ineffectual. But the real point here is something different. Not only the sixty-five minutes a day but also nearly all the remaining five hours worth of material is chosen almost exclusively on the basis of reports—accurate or inaccurate—of the actual state of the mass audience.

MARXISM notwithstanding, the profit motive is both legitimate and useful as a motive so long as it is not the *only* motive. Or to put it somewhat differently, the writer, the publisher, and the television company may quite properly want their respective enterprises to pay. In fact, the publisher and television company always, and the writer very often, would simply have to turn to some other activity if their enterprises didn't pay. And, on the whole, I think this economic pressure less unfortunate in its effects than the kind of bureaucratic pressure that, sooner or later, almost inevitably accompanies government-sponsored artistic projects, though I see no reason why such government-sponsored projects should not exist alongside of those that do have to make money. But to say this is not to say that the writer, the publisher, or even the TV official need assume that the *only* question he will ever ask is not merely, "Will this be profitable?" but, "Will this be more profitable than anything else I could possibly write, publish, or produce?"

It is discouraging to observe that the newest medium of communication comes nearest to accepting the profit motive as the *only* motive, and the great difference between television networks and publishers is simply that many publishers do take some pride in being responsible for things which they themselves, as well as the public, admire. The networks, on the other hand, despite occasional boasts about this or that sacrifice in the public interest, come much closer in profession as well as practice to saying simply, "We consider it our business to ask nothing except whether this or that program will win the largest possible audience and therefore most please the most profitable advertiser." Here, for example, is a pronouncement from Julius Babbathian, vice president and general manager of ABC, as quoted in *Newsweek*, November 11, 1963:

What do you mean by "caliber programs"? I'll tell you what it means to

me. It means a guy sitting there in front of a TV, with a hero sandwich in his hand and a glass of beer, saying, "That's a program I'd like to watch."

There is no free competition in commercial television. The national government has granted a few monopolies, which it protects. No one would protest more than these corporations if the government did not protect those who express horror at government interference with free enterprise or free expression—except when such interference protects their own monopoly.

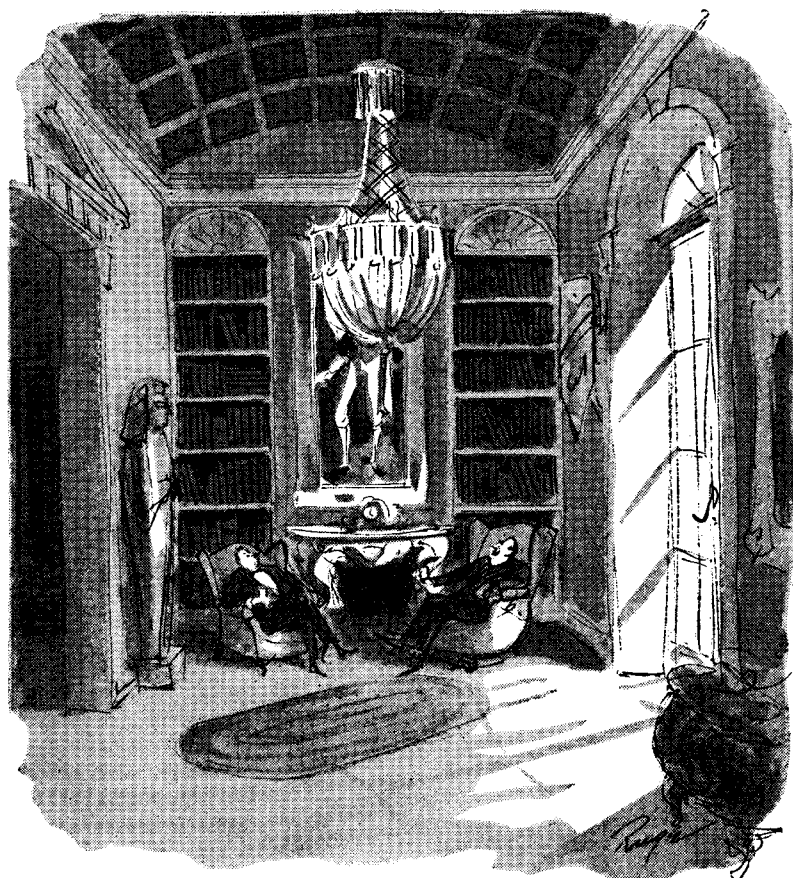
Since the government *does* guarantee these fabulously profitable monopolies, would it be an unwarranted interference with what is actually a monopoly—not a business engaged in free competition—if a price were placed on this protection: That the monopoly, on pain of revocation of its license, should not operate on the assumption that the only criterion in preparing programs will be, "Will it produce a larger profit than any other?" After all, there is a sizable body of citizens with at least minority rights in the air waves who are not completely typified by "a guy with a hero sandwich in his hand and a glass of beer."

There is, moreover, a regulation which

has often been proposed and which a government agency might impose without exercising any actual editorial control. It would certainly relieve the pressure of the advertisers and it opens no possible objections other than the fact that it might well make broadcasting somewhat less profitable—while leaving it quite profitable enough. That often proposed regulation is simply the requirement that the advertiser should sponsor the network program as a whole, not any one program of its choice.

UTOPIA? Perhaps it is, now that the sponsor has become so thoroughly accustomed to dictating and the broadcaster to so supinely accepting that dictation. But if this is true, it is simply another example of the way in which the newest commercial enterprises tend to be those which are the most crassly opportunist and the most abjectly determined to plan only in terms of what they believe to be the lowest common denominator—which, alas, the all-too-good rating systems enable them to do with what they regard as an adequate degree of accuracy.

Can you imagine a newspaper or a magazine run in this way, with each story, article, or editorial individually



"The early Byzantine shield is a stereophonic speaker. The amplifier and woofer are in the mummy case. The base speaker is behind the bound Emerson's Essays, and the turn-table is in the sarcophagus in the hall."

sponsored by the advertiser and not printed until such a sponsor could be found? Some magazines and some newspapers are accused (justly, no doubt) of being to some extent subservient to their advertisers. But no publication of any kind above the very lowest level has ever operated as the broadcasting industry does. Even news broadcasts and public service programs are likely to be sponsored if a sponsor can be found for them. But what newspaper would dare to interrupt both its news stories and editorials with the all too familiar "and now a word . . ."? Would any be willing either so to annoy its readers or so clearly advertise the fact that its advertisers are everywhere in control?

NO one ever went broke by underestimating the taste of the American public, said H. L. Mencken, and this has been often quoted. If this is true, then it would be better for all of us if

we didn't know just how low public taste actually is. If we didn't know, some chief of programing might overestimate that public taste just enough to raise the level of his network a bit and give his audience something a little better than what they would choose. Moreover, if there is anything in education, he might even raise the level of the public taste an equal amount.

Classical scholars have held different opinions concerning the question cynics sometimes ask: "Would the audience of fifth-century Athens really have liked less exalted dramas better than the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, *et al.*?" Audiences certainly did flock to them, but then they had no choice, except to the extent that the satyr plays which followed the tragedies were an alternate choice. And even they, though they certainly were less exalted in sentiment, are still considered to have been, in their own way, no less admirable as literature.

So far as I know, the question was never asked door-to-door in Athens.

And even if, as some scholars argue, the very exceptional audience of Periclean Athens would have turned up its nose at works offered by anyone who believes Mencken, the fact remains that a few centuries later the Roman emperors decided to try to keep the populace manageably docile by giving them precisely what they wanted, and then the drama gave way to musical vaudeville, and finally almost entirely to gladiatorial and wild beast combats.

John Stuart Mill (certainly not one to look with favor upon government interference with either business enterprise or free speech) once wrote in an essay an observation not sufficiently pondered by those who urge us to have unbounded faith in "the people," and who identify "the people" primarily with those who like to settle down in front of a TV set with a hero sandwich and a glass of beer:

Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most cases a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences but by mere want of sustenance . . . Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not the time or the opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones they are any longer capable of enjoying.

In any case, it is certain that if those who cater to the lowest possible public taste insist upon eagerly following its taste downward, then that taste will continue to descend as a sort of Gresham's law begins to operate.

PERHAPS Mencken's statement was true in the past tense which he employed. No one ever has gone broke by underestimating the taste of the American public. But that doesn't prove that it can't be done or that nobody ever will go broke for exactly that reason. Given the attitudes and the methods of the television tycoons, someone may succeed in descending below the level of all but an ultimately unprofitable minority.

There is at least one hopeful sign, a discovery that the Nielsen Company itself recently made public: this year 1,000,000 fewer people were watching television than were watching it a year ago. That certainly is not because the quality of programs has been raised above their level.

It might just possibly mean that Mencken's pronouncement will have to be updated. Even the man with the hero sandwich and the glass of beer is beginning to get bored.



"No, that's Balboa. Cortez is a much stouter man."

AUTUMN IN SIGULDA

Andrei Voznesensky, a protégé of the late Boris Pasternak, is one of Soviet Russia's foremost contemporary poets. The following poem, translated by W. H. Auden in collaboration with linguist Max Hayward, is from "Antiworlds," a new collection of Voznesensky poems, edited by Patricia Blake and Max Hayward, to be published May 27 by Basic Books, Inc.

Hanging out of the train, I
Bid you all goodbye.

Goodbye, Summer:
My time is up.
Axes knock at the *dacha*
As they board it up:
Goodbye.

The woods have shed their leaves,
Empty and sad today
As an accordion case that grieves
When its music is taken away.

People (meaning us)
Are also empty,
As we leave behind
(We have no choice)
Walls, mothers, womankind:
So it has always been and will be.

Goodbye, Mother,
Standing at the window
Transparent as a cocoon: soon
You will know how tired you are.
Let us sit here a bit.

Friends and foes, adieu,
Goodbye.
The whistle has blown: it is time
For you to run out of me and I
Out of you.

Motherland, goodbye now.
I shall not whimper nor make a scene,
But be a star, a willow:
Thank you, Life, for having been.

In the shooting gallery
Where the top score is ten,
I tried to reach a century:
Thank you for letting me make the mistake,
But a triple thank-you that into

My transparent shoulders
Genius drove
Like a red male fist that enters
A rubber glove.

Voznesensky may one day be graven
In cold stone but, meanwhile, may
I find haven
On your warm cheek as *Andrei*.

In the woods the leaves were already falling
When you ran into me, asked me something.
Your dog was with you: you tugged at his leash and called him,
He tugged the other way:
Thank you for that day.

I came alive: thank you for that September,
For explaining me to myself. The housekeeper, I remember,
Woke us at eight, and on weekends her phonograph sang
Some old underworld song
In a hoarse bass:
I give thanks for the time, the place.

But you are leaving, going
As the train is going, leaving,
Going in another direction: we are ceasing to belong
To each other or this house. What is wrong?

Near to me, I say:
Yet Siberias away!

I know we shall live again as
Friends or girl friends or blades of grass,
Instead of us this one or that one will come:
Nature abhors a vacuum.

The leaves are swept away without trace
But millions more will grow in their place:
Thank you, Nature, for the laws you gave me.

But a woman runs down the track
Like a red autumn leaf at the train's back.

Save me!

—ANDREI VOZNESENSKY.
(Translated by W. H. Auden.)

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