

New Video Technology: Pluralism or Banality

TODD GITLIN

To have great poets there must be great audiences, too," Walt Whitman wrote. This combination expresses the democratic goal, a standard against which our actual culture and its institutions can be measured. But in the absence of full democracy, popular culture remains a political arena for battles worth fighting. In a commercial age, most controversy about popular culture revolves around the axis of pluralism. If full democracy is first and foremost concerned with the content of a whole culture, pluralism is most concerned with the process by which pieces of it are produced. In contemporary discussions, the question that recurs is: Does the political economy of popular culture lead to a more plural culture, one in which more people and more groups are permitted, even encouraged, to produce a greater diversity of cultural goods? In debates between "populists" and "elitists" over arts policy, the issue is, likewise, whether pluralism matters.

Let us not be quick to dismiss the value of pluralism on the grounds that it is pseudodemocracy. At the very least, it has strategic value as a condition of future change. Pluralism is now our necessary defense against not only the tyranny of the state, but the tyranny of the marketplace; not only against stagnant conventions, but the trivia to which the commercial rush toward novelty often leads. True, there is a danger that the demand for pluralism may be a clamor for Babel, a debasement of culture into the laissez-faire of whatever commodities the market may bear. But then again, pluralist demands may be the wedge that keeps open the possibility of a culture that would serve democratic ends. Each issue in contemporary cultural policy must be examined to see just what sort of pluralism is at issue, and where it tends. Since popular culture as a whole tends to work in favor of the hegemony of business values and the dominance of ethnocentric and class privilege, the demand for pluralism in the production of culture is at times a necessary holding action against the utter closure of thought and imagination that the culture industry incessantly prepares. This is one such time.

With the democratic end in mind, let us scrutinize two current developments: the rise of the new telecommunications technologies and the politicization of present-day media. They bear heavily on the prospects for American popular culture and its democratic potential. The conventions of mass culture repress that potential and compress it into popular molds, but the necessity of repression pays peculiar tribute to the lingering possibility of a culture that would help people live more beautifully and truthfully in the world.

Enter the new technologies, *deus ex machina*, to end the scarcity of airwaves that was mass culture's greatest argument for catering to the least common denominator. The hype that surrounds the new telecommunications technologies revolves around a single claim: that the new "delivery systems"—cable, satellites, videocassettes, videodiscs, and all the attendant variations—will bring, through greater choice, a greater diversity of content and a closer fit between what particular publics desire and what they can find. For many years we have been promised "the wired nation" and an accompanying culture hospitable to a wide range of styles and substances. But in fact, the new technologies only carve out a new terrain for political and cultural contest—this is their major significance.

Since the Industrial Revolution, communication has often undergirded utopian visions of an informed polity. One of the grade-school pieties on which Americans are raised links increased communication with increased understanding, and this shibboleth, in turn, with peace. In a utopia of multiple channels for communication all conflicts can be traced to noise in the system. The utopian vision persists in the press releases, if not the hearts, of the toniest and sleaziest editors, journalists, and producers alike: ye, ye, and ye shall know the truth, and the unobstructed truth shall make ye free. And voices on the Left also know the appeal of this utopia. The *Communist Manifesto* sang paeans to the opening of new channels of communication for the working class. Ten years ago, the Marxist Hans Magnus Enzensberger¹ and the philosopher Robert Paul Wolff² anticipated the new media technocrats and their video-freak infrastructure to argue that the multiplication of points of entry could make for a direct political democracy on a scale Rousseau could not have imagined.

¹ "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," *New Left Review* 64 (November–December 1970).

² *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), in which Wolff proposes a two-way television "instant direct democracy" that anticipates some of the hopes Warner Amex has invested in its two-way "interactive" cable TV system Qube, presently operating in Columbus and Cincinnati.

There is also, of course, a considerable tradition of skepticism about the convertability of new technology into political progress. Those with historical vision might well be skeptical. For they have learned that the expectation that technical change will generate better living has become a banality that diverts attention from problems of power and meaning. For more than a century, an odd ensemble of Marxists, far-seeing entrepreneurs, futurists, scientists, and other modernizers and modernists have insisted that technological breakthroughs can bypass deadlocked arguments. The birth-control pill changed the terms of moral disputation by breaking the link between sexual intercourse and pregnancy. Similarly, new weapons were to change the rules of international politics; the machine gun was to make war unthinkable; then the H bomb changed the terms of Great Power maneuver, making World War III an all-or-nothing proposition (at least until the present administration discovered "limited nuclear war"), and it will keep those new terms in force until the last moment in history, when, at a stroke, the terms will expire along with everything else. The twentieth century has taught us much about the unintended consequences of technological development. Evidently it is a tricky business, this argument from technology to political and moral results. In a market economy (and perhaps many planned economies as well), unintended consequences are the name of the game. So the argument from technical change to political potentials begins with a lineage and a surface plausibility, yet there is good reason for suspicion.

On the face of it, the multiplication of channels would seem to make for diversified content. No longer would publics have to depend on the fare cooked up to satisfy twenty or twenty-five million households. Increasingly, so the pluralist argument goes, it becomes possible for cable suppliers—and eventually direct broadcast satellite operators—to make money by distributing programs that might satisfy five million, or one million. Even the networks are hedging their bets and getting in on the act. Beginning in October 1981, CBS Cable expects to be serving at least three million cable subscribers with an array of big-star drama, ballet, opera, and the like, gorgeously produced, designed for a high-spending, lengthily educated, mostly high-taste audience. ABC has gone into partnership with Warner Amex (itself a joint venture of Warner Communications and American Express) to reach a similar audience through a satellite-relayed network called Alpha. Both plan to sell advertising—tucked between shows in the European mode, not interrupting them. And after long hesitation, RCA, NBC's parent company, has gone into partnership with Rockefeller Center Television, a cable packager headed by former CBS President Arthur Taylor, to compete for the high-culture dollar; RCTV has already bought the American rights for the distribution of BBC shows, leaving public television in the lurch. In short, major concentrations of culture-industry capital—and many displaced

network executives, like Taylor—have read the writing on the wall and decided to go for the audiences who are willing to pay extra. Truly a class act.

But it isn't only high culture that will "knock the corners off the market," as one network executive put it. Several dozen other nationally syndicated cable networks already distribute via satellite to locally franchised cable system operators and thence, via coaxial cables, into a growing minority of American households.³ There are pay cable services, of which Home Box Office (owned by Time, Inc.) and Showtime (owned jointly by Viacom and Teleprompter, two of the top owners of cable systems, the second of which is being bought by Westinghouse) are by far the largest; they distribute mostly Hollywood films of recent vintage, with a sprinkling of independently produced variety shows and theater. There is Ted Turner's Cable News Network; the sports-heavy Entertainment and Sports Programming Network; SIN, a Spanish-language network; Warner Amex's Nickelodeon, a network for children; C-SPAN, which covers live the proceedings of the House of Representatives; a black network; a Jewish network; and the Christian Broadcasting Network, with pious soap operas. Local independent channels in Atlanta (also Ted Turner's), Chicago, and Oakland have bought satellite time and converted themselves perforce into national "superstations," beaming old movies, local news, and syndicated entertainment series around the country to subscribing cable operators. Each of these operations gets piped into a few million living rooms, and the number grows every month. As new cable franchises are let, the older systems of twelve or fifteen channels (which must include all over-the-air broadcast channels, by FCC regulation) will be replaced by Wurlitzer-style arrays: Warner Amex, for example, won the Dallas franchise in 1980 by promising to build an eighty-channel system. The more channels, the more suppliers spring up to beam programs to them. The world of cable looks like a gold rush. Over 15,500 people—suppliers, cable operators, hardware specialists, advisers to city governments, lobbyists—registered at the 1981 convention of the National Cable Television Association.

Of course, political decisions stand behind cable's takeoff. The cable boom got a healthy boost from Nixon's and Carter's FCCs. Deregulation of cable freed the operators from the few restraints that broadcasters face: licenses and therefore license challenges, the Fairness Doctrine (often interpreted as requiring a right of response), obscenity laws, equal time for political candidates, and the

³ Industry estimates of the number of households reached by cable in mid-1981 range between 22 and 27 percent. No one knows exactly how many, since the ratings services have not caught up to the new technologies. Not all cable systems carry satellite-distributed programs, but as the old, smaller (twelve-channel) systems expand and new, more capacious systems are built, the total proportion of cabled homes will grow, along with the percentage of homes reached by the new networks.

general requirement that programming serve “the public interest, convenience, and necessity”—an obligation generally met by broadcasting a certain number of hours of news and public affairs programs. In the eyes of the FCC, the necessity for these controls was predicated on the scarcity of broadcast channels. If there were only two or three channels in a given market, each one would have to be held to a severely minimal definition of public responsibility. But the proliferation of cable channels undercuts the factual premise for such regulation. If there are twenty-six, or eighty, or 100 cable channels piped into the living room—so deregulators have successfully argued—then consumer choice can be left to its own devices; “the public interest, convenience, and necessity” is presumably guaranteed by the workings of the marketplace. On a similar argument, the FCC has recently deregulated radio. And the Supreme Court has sustained a key provision in the deregulation process. A group of listeners in New York City sued to prevent a jazz station from shifting to another format. The Court upheld the dominance of the market by letting stand the argument that where there are so many channels, the free market will automatically end up serving minority tastes. If there are enough listeners who yearn for jazz, an entrepreneur will arise to serve them. By the same logic, however, if no entrepreneur programs jazz, no market exists for it. Demand is only acknowledged after the fact.

Competition does not necessarily generate substantive diversity when the competition is oligopolistic. Competition among the big three auto companies did not give us small, gas-efficient cars in time to forestall imports. Now consider network broadcasting. In the fifties and sixties, ABC was not really in the running for big ratings. It was the third network of date of origin; it had by far the fewest affiliates and a reputation for the shoddiest, least scrupulous products. In the seventies, though, ABC began to move, and under Fred Silverman in the late seventies it actually overtook the longtime leader, CBS. (In 1980–81, thanks to “Dallas” and “Sixty Minutes,” CBS won back the lead.) So in one sense there is more competition among the networks today than ten or twenty years ago. But it would be hard to argue that competition from ABC has brought us any substantive aesthetic or political diversity in television, let alone much information and debate that would serve democracy. Instead, it has given us the whiz-bang style of ABC News and the perfervid gestures of the late-night “America Held Hostage” and its successful “Nightline” continuation. Pierre Salinger’s three-hour January analysis of Carter administration policy toward Iran was exceptional, but it came months too late to contribute to intelligent politics. It could even be argued persuasively that growing competition for a mass audience is most likely to lead to imitation, to a similar look, similar styles, similar formats and genres, similar points of view (not to mention the identical commercials). The more profit that rides on a marginal difference in ratings, the less willing any

executive will be to take a chance on anything substantially different, in either aesthetics or politics.⁴

What are the possibilities for variation in cable programming? There are two institutional filters in the distribution system. Local cable system operators, franchised by local governments, constitute the filter closer to the viewer. (At the moment, localities are granting only a single franchise, as if cable were a utility; some industry hands expect a second-generation boom after the initial cable is laid, with more than one operator competing over the same cables.) Under political pressure, many cable operators will open up public-access channels; let us hope artists and commentators learn to make good use of them. Then there are the program suppliers—Warner Amex, Cable News Network, Home Box Office, and the rest—from which the local operators buy their ever-replenished streams of material. For some time now, the cable systems winning the franchises in major markets have been subsidiaries of major national companies like Cox Broadcasting, Warner Amex, Times Mirror, and Viacom. In the jargon of the industry, these are known as Multiple Systems Operators (MSOs). And in recent months the MSOs themselves are rapidly plunging into still larger conglomerates. According to a trade journal, “Eleven of the top 25 multiple systems operators have over the past several years either sold out all or part of their operations to larger companies or have such deals pending.”⁵ Cable is a booming industry, and the scarcity of franchises makes it ripe for corporate takeovers. Scarcity, having been diminished in the stratosphere, reemerges elsewhere in the system. As for suppliers, they are also hooked into multinational conglomerates: the cases of HBO, Showtime, and Warner Amex have already been cited.

In short, the big operators are on the move. Some suppliers will discover they have overexpanded, and either go under or get bought out. Having carved out the local franchises, the system operators now face two big problems: they have to generate capital to install their wires under the streets and carry them into subscribers' living rooms (half of America's homes are already passed by cables); and they have to fill the channels they have pledged to fill. The cable industry faces further uncertainty because of new technology stimulated by conglomerate wars. Depending on political decisions soon to be made by an FCC, whose

⁴ This is a law of aluminum, shall we say, and not iron. There are network executives who are willing, once in a while, to go out on short limbs to develop or protect a program of distinct quality or political dissidence. The most conspicuous current example is NBC's decision to renew the extraordinarily intelligent and stylistically adventuresome series “Hill Street Blues,” for at least half of a second season, despite low ratings. Top NBC executives stuck with the show partly because they like it, partly because it was acclaimed critically, and partly because they had no storehouse of likely superhits waiting in the wings to replace it.

⁵ Robert Cels, “Acquisition Fever Abounds in Cable: Day of Indies Numbered,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 24, 1981, p. 1.

newly appointed chairman ran "communications" in Ronald Reagan's gubernatorial and presidential campaigns, direct satellite-to-home broadcasting (known in the trade as DBS) will emerge to compete with the new satellite-to-cable networks. If the Comsat corporation gets its way, by 1985 it will be bouncing signals off a satellite directly to homes equipped with small receiving dishes. The dishes will cost less than \$500 apiece, perhaps much less with mass production. Who will then need cable, with its monthly costs for basic services running around \$10 (excluding pay channels like HBO)? Public-interest lobbyists say that Comsat is promoting a service it has little stake in delivering; they suspect Comsat is pressing for DBS in order to take charge of lucrative business services like instantaneous copying and teleconference call making (known in the business as teleconferencing), and is proposing a program service mainly to plug in for the real dollars. Whatever Comsat's motive, they have the clout—one major spokesman is Washington corporate lawyer Richard Wiley, formerly FCC chairman under Richard Nixon—and the capital to elbow into the competitive chase. To stop them, two networks have filed with the FCC to use the same frequency Comsat wants, for the purpose of doubling the number of electronic lines on which TV is broadcast—a change that would permit a degree of fidelity even surpassing the superior European standard and open the way to high-definition wall-sized screens, as in *Fahrenheit 451*.

Another possible entry into the new technology boom might be Sears, Roebuck & Co., whose wholly owned subsidiary, Allstate Insurance, owns 44.5% of the stock of an entity entitled the Neighborhood TV Co. The rest belongs to the owner of a television station in Prescott, Arizona, and his associates. Neighborhood TV has filed with the FCC for the right to operate 124 low-power television stations scattered across the land, planning to broadcast in a small-town vein, with the Prescott station beaming to a satellite and thence to "translator" stations elsewhere. Low-power stations are a technical innovation opened up under the Carter administration for the purpose of granting programming access to minority interests, nonprofit associations, community coalitions, and like groups hitherto unrepresented in broadcasting. Depending on their precise locations, such stations would be able to reach major portions of urban areas without interfering with existing broadcasters. But the Carter administration is no more, and nothing has prevented corporate operators like ABC, NBC, Neighborhood TV, and Ted Turner to file for networks of major low-power licenses yet ungranted. The American Christian Television System, Inc. is also in the running for strings of low-power stations, as are equipment manufacturers and other business coalitions—as well as the minority and community groups that the FCC originally envisioned as the proper licensees of the new frequencies. Besieged by upward of 5,000 applications for low-power stations, many of them competing for the same frequencies, the new FCC has not yet established criteria to allocate

this newly scarce resource. It remains to be seen whether Reagan's FCC will carry deregulation so far as to permit new broadcast networks to emerge in competition with the established giants. Deregulation might indeed cut the other way too, permitting the networks to obtain low-power licenses and cable systems, thus undercutting small competitors.

But whether through cable, DBS, or low-power, surely the new networks are on their way. They will coexist with the old Big Three; along with local independents that can attract large audiences with syndicated series, game shows, talk shows, and old movies, they are slowly eating away at the networks' shares of the market. While the giants maneuver, the public should be asking what effect the proliferation of commercial networks will have on the prospects for democracy. The answer is likely to be: a few more brand names in the same supermarket. To the extent the new networks set out to maximize audience shares, they will also feel pressed to perpetuate current standards. At the 1981 cable convention, Robert Wussler, a former CBS executive who is now Ted Turner's right-hand man at Cable News Network, told his industry audience that there was "no reality" to any expectation that there would be new types of programming "in the very near future," and "not in the lifetime of most of the people in this room." Aesthetically, of the array of new satellite services I have sampled, only CBS Cable and Warner Amex's Music Channel offer anything out of the ordinary, and they too will have to struggle against the formulas of their own successes.

To make matters more predictable, most cable schedules will come studded with advertising, since monthly subscribers' fees evidently will not make the new networks hugely profitable, or even profitable at all. The most that can be hoped is that, as in European commercial TV, at least on upscale cable, commercials will be grouped at the beginnings and ends of shows and thus not disrupt their continuity. But as cable gets more popular and advertisers find it a better buy for their bucks, that policy might change too. There is ample precedent for commercialization formerly unimaginable; in 1922, no less a guardian of the public weal than Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover opined about radio, "It is inconceivable that we should allow so great a possibility for service to be drowned in advertising chatter."⁶

What does all this mean for diversity and political democracy? Cable promoters insist that the new technologies will contribute to an era of "video publishing" comparable to what we now have in magazines. When one takes into account videocassettes and videodiscs, there is a clear proliferation of cultural ob-

6 Herbert Hoover, *Memoirs: The Cabinet and the Presidency, 1920-1933* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1952), p. 140, cited in Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 96.

jects. There are, then, two major trends: on the one hand, the multiplication of mainstream networks; on the other, fragmented specialty services. But the analogy to the world of magazines, appealing at first, instantly disturbs. Inspect the standard drugstore, tobacco store, supermarket, airport, or bus station magazine rack, or even the kiosk in many college towns, and one is not inspired by the relation between multiplicity and the prospect for enlivened political talk and action. It is enough to resurrect Mencken's notion of "a carnival of buncombe." From coast to coast one is confronted with the predictable array of flesh magazines, tennis and golf magazines, skiing and surfing magazines, model railroad magazines, needlecraft magazines, camera magazines, stereo magazines, fitness magazines, car magazines, field and stream magazines, hairdo magazines, romance magazines, horoscope magazines, gun magazines, stamp and coin magazines, music magazines, upscale city magazines, and celebrity magazines. All appeal to the buyer as hobbyist, a consumer who seeks satisfaction in the cultivation of personal competence and in a sense of linkage to anonymous others. Over in the corner, in the bigger racks, one finds the science, futurist, and opinion magazines. Whatever one may think of their points of view, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, *Mother Jones*, *The New Yorker*, *National Review*, *The American Spectator*, et al. address their readers much of the time as citizens. They articulate worldviews; they speak to, and for, a political counterculture. Arrayed against this political remnant is the dominant culture: depoliticized, indeed anti-political, valuing private goods over public needs. In this culture, the common good is always being parceled out into separate pursuits of private happiness.

So the magazine rack reproduces the Tocquevillean structure of American culture: culture as an array of fragmented interest groups. As shoppers, people find satisfaction in the knowledge that they are not alone in their tastes, and enthusiasms. What they experience in going through the magazines is a kind of involvement, a feeling of participation in activities larger than themselves, built on standards that stand outside their lone egos. It would be false and snobbish to say that these magazines display no taste. Rather, among other things, they establish and reproduce hierarchies of value in their fields. They tell their readers who is a good skier, what is good stereo equipment, what constitutes a good garden, and in the process help confirm their part-time identities as skiers, listeners, gardeners. They link knowing and having in a way distinctive to a materialist civilization. Veblen to the contrary, the many millions who care about such things are not simply conspicuous consumers. They are also connoisseurs, aspirants to high orders of knowledge and refinement. In this respect, the rich set a tone for everyone else: they declare that meaning is to be found through membership in a leisure group. Their activities say who they are in a world of strangers.⁷

⁷ For an anthropological argument to this effect, see Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

Meanwhile, what has disappeared is the general-interest magazine whose readership cut across class, regional, and interest-group lines: *Life*, *Look*, *Collier's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*. The old standbys could not compete with television's lower advertising rates. And however one evaluates the contribution of the golden magazine oldies to the maintenance of a robust political life in this century, the economic forces that undermined them are about to be reproduced. The coming of "video publishing," of "narrow casting" to fragmented markets, contributes nothing in particular to the possibility of public enlightenment and democratic political dialogue. In fact, in the short run at least, audience fragmentation provides Congress with one more excuse to cut funds for public broadcasting. Government budget cutters and cable program distributors now argue in chorus that private capital can provide the upscale culture—theater, music, dance—that until now required public financing. But the new pay-cable enterprises charge their customers a pretty monthly penny, thus cutting off the poor. Moreover, the new networks have little interest in generating political talk. They have no plans to put documentaries or political debate on the air. Those that plan talk shows will focus them on health and consumer tips. Ted Turner's Cable News Network has not notably opened up the realm of political discourse, especially if we compare it to the much less expensive achievement of National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." If, as rumor has it, Westinghouse goes into the cable news business, nothing in its corporate history suggests a concern with serious investigation or subsurface insight. You can be sure if it's Westinghouse. ²⁰

And the networks? They whistle in the twilight. Today, almost all their executives protest against any analogy likening their fate to that of the old mass magazines. It is true that the networks occupy a seller's market for advertising, and that the total population will go on increasing, advertising rates along with it. But at the same time the networks are facing considerable cost pressures. The cost of producing programs has multiplied several times in the past two decades, even allowing for inflation. A two-hour television movie now costs between \$1.8 and \$2.2 million; an hour-long series episode, upwards of \$600,000. Networks are paying up to \$6 million for commercial TV rights to feature films that have already been shown on pay cable. As network market shares go on declining and program costs go on increasing, something will have to give. Most likely it will be costs. One highly placed network executive has expressed to me the fear that, as market shares go on declining, the network attitude will have to be "let 'em eat game shows." Especially because they will be losing their better-educated, upscale audiences to cable.

This economic logic points toward a more rigid class structure for television. Video publishing's payoff comes with the upper demographics. Indeed, because of intense competition among MSOs for the remaining big-city cable franchises—competition so stiff it has led to the scurrilous practice in which an MSO "rents

a citizen" (a pillar of the community) or "rents an institution" (a university, a non-profit foundation) to impress the city council—the city councils are able to bid up the MSOs' offerings. MSOs now promise not only the moon, but many moons. Warner Amex's promise to Dallas of a three-tier system of eighty channels has already been mentioned. The lower tier of twenty-six channels can be bought for \$12 a month, but all eighty, including several pay movie and "interactive" channels, will cost over \$42 a month. The upshot may be a growing cultural class division between the culturally rich, who will get richer, and the poor, who will remain relatively dependent on the networks. The unregulated market only serves those who can afford access.

To sum up, then: the new cornucopia creates minor, but only minor, possibilities for a diversity that would support democracy. Conglomeration proceeds apace. As in other economic domains, oligopolistic competition by no means guarantees the opening of new space for genuine aesthetic and political diversity; on the contrary, it usually leads to a predictable combination: homogeneity on the one hand and a fragmentation of consumer goods and markets on the other. As for diversity of ideas and the opportunity to search for truth—leading values in the liberal theory of the cultural marketplace—the corporate order systematically undermines it. Technology opens doors and oligopoly marches just behind, closing them.

If there is to be any alternative to aesthetic suffocation and political closure, it must be fought for by public groups that insist on it, by cultural producers who think freshly, and by the occasional network executive with strong character and good taste.⁸ In Berkeley, California, and other centers of political dissidence, community coalitions are organizing toward getting low-power TV licenses; the challenge, if the license comes, is to make programs that would be worth watching. The same goes for independent video groups who are beginning to sell programs to cable networks that are hungry, after all, for material to fill their channels for hours each day. More power and ingenuity to them. But the marketplace does not by itself generate political or aesthetic diversity; its interest is only in the single standard of marketability.

⁸ At this writing, incoming RCA chairman Thornton Bradshaw has let go of NBC chairman Fred Silverman and replaced him with Grant Tinker, deservedly the most honored and prestigious program packager in Hollywood. Tinker's MTM Enterprises is responsible for the most intelligent and rambunctious series on network television ("Lou Grant," "WKRP in Cincinnati," "Hill Street Blues"). Analysts of the networks' artistic possibilities will be fascinated to watch him try to turn the NBC dreadnought around.

The possibility that broader standards might emerge, and that more space might open up in popular culture for political lucidity, will also be affected by the struggles now raging within and against the established media. For the mainstream institutions of popular culture are becoming contested areas.⁹ Their content is the object of heated, cross-cutting political conflicts. No longer do publics take newspapers or television for granted as if they were natural phenomena. Suspicion and critique are widespread. Business, the President, the fundamentalist Right, labor, minorities, feminists, all have been busily trying to shape the national array of symbols. The question for democrats is whether these political conflicts can be deepened in such a way as to open up the debates.

Signs of public doubt and visible conflict lie everywhere in popular culture. Annual Harris polls show that although television news remains the single institution in which Americans place the most confidence, its credibility is waning. Consumer boycotts by offended groups, such as those organized against *Cruising* and *Fort Apache*, have become commonplace. Now comes big business's assault on the dominant media, which oddly enough reveals that there is still a significant political latitude in the mainstream.

Top corporate groups have been going public with claims that the news media are "antibusiness." For polemical purposes, they pretend not to understand that the media are also corporations of a curious sort, whose business is the aggregation of large audiences whose attention can be sold to advertisers. Since attention is the point of the marketplace game, it stands to reason that the news—and entertainment—media will resort to conventions, stereotypes, which are less than flattering to business.¹⁰ In 1979, for example, Kaiser ran full-page newspaper advertisements blasting the networks for refusing to let them air commercials on public policy. Mobil Oil has followed suit.¹¹ An Illinois utility has widely distrib-

9 The less mass sectors of popular culture, in particular popular music, were of course essentially contested from the start. For a provocative celebration of the subversive potential of rock music, see Simon Frith, *Sound Effects* (New York: Pantheon Books, forthcoming).

10 For a fuller version of this argument, see my *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 279-82.

11 The networks argued that the Fairness Doctrine restricts anyone but their news divisions from making general statements about the world (as opposed to claims about products). But subsequently ABC has decided to permit a limited amount of general, "philosophical" advertising during late-night hours: the broadcast equivalent of Mobil's *New York Times* op-ed page pensées. Meanwhile, Mobil, Exxon, and other giants, not satisfied to be labeled in plain type as "bringing" PBS programs to public television, have been demanding the right to use corporate logos, and will probably get it soon. Even commercials are possible on "public" television. With federal support of documentaries waning, we are fast approaching a time when the public network becomes the Petroleum Broadcasting System.

uted a videotape comparing a "Sixty Minutes" piece criticizing its nuclear plant cost overruns with its own tapes of the full interviews conducted by "Sixty Minutes." Some corporations are beginning to be bolder and less directly self-serving: they are taking the press to task for its all-around bad attitudes. One striking case is a full-page ad that the Bechtel Corporation ran in the May 26, 1981, *San Francisco Chronicle*, criticizing local television for having ignored a local tribute to eight Medal of Honor winners. "While we understand the nature and limits of TV news," said the copy beneath photographs of the neglected eight, "when a nation bumps eight great Americans for Orphan Annie's dog [referring to an interview aired on another channel that night], we think local TV needs to take a second look at its priorities."

Everywhere the news media are being criticized for skewed coverage. On the Right, the Nixon-Agnew legacy is alive: a group called Accuracy in Media in spending some \$1 million a year publicizing its claim that the media are dominated by left-liberal points of view.¹² And now television entertainment is also transformed into an arena of political claim and counterclaim. Mobil and other giant corporations have funded the Media Institute, which last spring published a study of the image of businessmen in network entertainment. Their conclusion shimmers within their title: "Crooks, Conmen and Clowns." In their sample, as reported in *Daily Variety* of April 12, 1981: "Two out of three businessmen are portrayed as foolish, greedy or criminal. Over half of all corporate chiefs on television commit illegal acts. Only 3 percent of television businessmen are shown engaging in socially or economically productive behavior. Hard work is normally labeled 'workaholism' and leads to strained personal relations." The source of such images has little to do with the politics of TV writers and producers, let alone the more conservative network executives; it follows directly from the convention that characters oversimplify traits. Villains are men (less often, women) of power. To be convincingly villainous in an individualist culture, the bad guys should be the big guys who, by getting and staying big, threaten to keep the little guys little. Of course corporations are not prone to acknowledge that, in the main, television entertainment sustains the values of personal ambition, consumption, and the legitimacy of corporate structure, values more important to the support of a business civilization than the images of particular businessmen. They also overlook the saturation of television by commercials that embody business values. Nor have they shown much interest, to my knowledge, in

¹² The Left has mounted its own critical attack, as in Gaye Tuchman, *Making News* (New York: Free Press, 1979), Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), and my own *The Whole World Is Watching*.

discovering whether the percentage of working people shown on television "engaging in socially or economically productive behavior" (not that there are very many of them) is comparable to 3 percent as well. Unsystematic monitoring by groups in the Machinists Union confirms, to no one's surprise, that the televised worker is characteristically a dummy. Indeed, with few exceptions, network entertainment is not in the business of representing *anyone* "engaging in socially or economically productive behavior."

Rear-guard research by groups like the Media Institute and the Machinists Union will have little effect, if any, since in network planning the desire to "satisfy" vast audiences far outweighs the ideological preferences of its executives. But there are political forces that have had considerable effect on TV content, and may be expected to have more in months to come. As is so often the case in present-day politics, what is very loosely speaking the Left moved first, with uneven results, only to be imitated, and now surpassed, by the Right. Since the networks have no standards outside the evidence of the market, such as it is, they are liable to tilt with the most manifest wind. During the late seventies, high-minded public interest coalitions, including Action for Children's Television and the National Parent Teachers Association, succeeded in getting the networks to reduce the number and intensity of violent acts depicted in entertainment. At the same time, dominated groups mobilized to alter the denigrating images they were assigned on the air. Yielding to much agitation, the networks have also accorded the well-organized National Gay Task Force a certain veto power over the representation of gays. In the television business, the power to say no is far better distributed than the power to say yes, and so the actual number of gays prominently depicted has declined since the mid-seventies at the same time the limp-wristed specimens have been eliminated. Likewise, in informal ways, the treatment of female characters seems to have changed as more women have moved into middle management positions at the networks; many more professional women are in evidence on prime-time shows. But black influence has been rolled back since the triumph of "Roots" and "Roots: The Next Generations" in 1977 and 1978. Two dramatic series with black male leads failed in the late seventies, leading the self-imitative networks to conclude, using their normal logic of oversimplification and overextrapolation, that the market did not look kindly on black leads. Hispanics have been buffaloed, for the most part; at the time of writing, René Enriquez of "Hill Street Blues" is the only distinctly Hispanic character on series television.

But the major challenge to network power now comes from the fundamentalist Right, with its direct access to national TV audiences, its knack for playing the press, and the collusion of panicky advertisers. The Reverend Jerry Falwell is only the best known of the nationally visible evangelists who have seized upon televised sin as a popular issue with their constituencies—and a winnable issue to

boot, a way to mobilize partisans who will, once mobilized, be available for other neofundamentalist moral crusades. This is not the place to explore the ins and outs of this movement as a whole. Suffice it to say that in February 1981 Falwell's Moral Majority Inc. joined the Reverend Donald Wildmon, founder of a National Federation for Decency headquartered in Tupelo, Mississippi, along with other right-wing groups, to form a Coalition for Better Television, headed by Wildmon and complete with a Falwell deputy next in line. Wildmon's original approach to television was direct: organizing mail campaigns against "anti-family" and other "offensive" shows, at least some of which (like ABC's September 1980 three-hour movie version of Marilyn French's novel *The Women's Room*) they had not yet seen. ABC got several thousand letters of protest before the broadcast, but very few afterward. Such ad hoc campaigns have been going on for years, with little effect. The new Wildmon-Falwell approach is considerably more sophisticated. It goes after TV's economic pipeline: advertisers. This past spring the coalition organized what it claimed were 4,000 monitoring groups (none of them identified), scrutinizing television entertainment for excessive sex ("implied sexual intercourse," "sexual innuendo," and "skin scenes"), violence, and profanity, using a methodology they refused to make public. Wildmon got reams of publicity with the declaration that, by the end of June, the Coalition would single out a sponsor whose commercials appeared in programs the monitors found most offensive, and organize a boycott against that company.

Came the end of June and Wildmon claimed victory. He said so many big advertisers had cooperated with him, declaring they were cutting back on buying into offensive shows, that the Coalition decided to forego boycott. This way they would not have to test their strength in the supermarkets. But although network executives and Madison Avenue liberals claimed victory, big advertisers are indeed running scared. The two biggest, Procter & Gamble and General Foods, had assessed what they took to be public opinion even before the Coalition organized, and had begun to cancel their participation in offensive shows. In June, the chairman of Procter & Gamble shocked a Hollywood audience by declaring publicly that television had become too lascivious and that P&G had pulled off fifty episodes (not fifty different series, as some press reports implied) last year. For some time now, the major advertising agencies and companies have been using screening agencies to check problematic shows before they buy in; what was new was to go public about it.

In public, network spokesmen have consistently denounced the Coalition and the Moral Majority. NBC and ABC commissioned polls which seem to show that only small percentages of the population would support consumer boycotts; indeed, this news may have impelled Wildmon to claim victory without putting it to the public test. But whatever the polls say, many network planners now assume that the organized opposition speaks for a wider public disgruntlement with

television. Advertisers, always skittish, are even more edgy than usual. And pressures will continue to grow not only against smarmy sex jokes and conspicuous T&A jiggles but against any program content that smacks of controversy. Ideological adjustments are couched as assessments of the mood of the market. ABC bought several gangbuster-style series for its 1981 schedule, including "Today's FBI," on the assumption that American audiences, in the post-Carter, post-hostages mood, want upstanding heroes in the John Wayne manner.

The economic and cultural stakes of these skirmishes are real, but in a way the networks are the terrain of a shadow war. It was partly a keen eye for publicity that dictated Jerry Falwell's choice of network television as target, rather than, say, the R-rated soft porn that gets piped via cable and satellite into hotel rooms and living rooms everywhere. Network television's banal smarminess probably turns up more recruits than the small-fry porn peddlers down home. The New Right's working premise is that the American heartland, the proverbial Middle America, the denizens of the territory that network executives routinely fly over, can be set against the cultural sophisticates of the two coasts—well educated, well paid, and, not so incidentally in many fundamentalist eyes, disproportionately Jewish. Network television is of course nationally visible and gives the fundamentalist Right a symbolic Armageddon on its way to the glories of the genuine article. But the New Right has made headway partly because the liberal side has forfeited. Pluralists led by Hollywood producer Norman Lear are fighting them with TV commercials sanctioned by a top-level coalition of mainstream religious leaders called People for the American Way, but they have not mobilized large numbers as effectively as have Falwell and Wildmon. The liberal vision is largely defensive. In the necessary struggle against any new blacklist, the liberal Left is careful not to identify itself with the cultural wonders of "Three's Company" and "Dallas," but is loath to campaign too heatedly against them. After all, they need to remain on good social and business terms with the packagers of such shows. Polemically, then, they are stuck with pluralist defenses of the First Amendment right to broadcast popular tripe: not the most compelling rallying point for defying the new puritans.

If pluralists should win the current contests, potentials remain. If they lose, a darker night descends upon not only "Three's Company" but also the prospects of cultural counterforce, including more critical news, during the Reagan years. Where giant corporations have not yet established sway over popular culture, they need to be opposed. Community groups can work toward public controls over the allocation of cable channels, as is happening in Santa Barbara.¹³ But

13 As I write, the Senate Commerce Committee has adopted amendments, pushed by the National Cable Television Association, that "apparently would prohibit local governments from requiring cable companies to provide a public access channel or other special service" (*New York Times*, July 16, 1981). So much for decentralization. In this atmosphere, localities and citizen groups will have their hands full simply trying to hold open the door to let in a crack of light.

where giant corporations are already entrenched, as in the networks, the forces of enlightenment must keep pressing up against the conventional unwisdom.

Television programs of originality, depth, brilliance, or truth do not follow of themselves from the economic, technological, and political processes discussed here. Nor, obviously, do programs that work against the dominant ideology. From a democratic point of view, the workaday premises and control structure in the industry are tilted against worth. Yet the vast reach of the medium cannot be gainsaid, and the industry's structural biases are by no means absolute closure. The occasionally penetrating news piece, interview, or drama, remains feasible, and has its part to play on contested terrain. The Right does not cease trying to use the media that exist; neither should the Left. Again: all that is opened up by the culture industry's current flux is a few opportunities. But the decline of the existing oligopoly will be only the prologue to a higher-tech oligopoly unless people who care about the quality of culture look for points of entry. Declaiming about structural bias from the margins will not avail. Neither will abandoning the networks to the onslaughts of the new fundamentalists, or to outright commercial exploiters, or the slender hope that large numbers of people will learn to watch less television. It might well be better for public life if television had never been invented, but the point is moot. In the world as it is, there are live political fights in progress, and a Left never has the luxury of inventing the terrain on which it works.