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DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

July 1, 1969

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Professor Joshua Lederberg
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Dear Josh,

Thanks for the copies of your articles on television. I had the opportunity to read them when they appeared in the Chronicle and wanted to comment on them before, but your kindness in sending the copies finally spurred me to action.

Frankly, I think that the solution to the very real problems that you pose are not technological, at least in the sense that any wildly innovative new technological break-throughs are needed. For that matter, I am pessimistic about the utilization of such technology as may arise. From my point of view the basic problem is that of economics and the institutionalization of broadcasting as, in the words of Lord Thomson of Fleet when he was given the Independent Television Authority franchise for Scottish Television, "a permit to print one's own money."

The novel notion of requiring programming in "the public interest, convenience, and necessity" as a quid pro quo for a frequency allocation, and the refusal to define the public service obligations of broadcasters in terms as specific as, say, the bandwidths of allocated frequencies lie at the heart of this dilemma. It seems to me that the philosophical basis of the refusal to define broadcaster's responsibilities, on the part of Congress and the FCC is the assumption of similarity between the private good and the common weal. What has happened as a result is a broadcasting system based on the rule that a continually increasing dividend for shareholders is the prime responsibility of broadcast managers, that this dividend is increased by the sale of advertising, and that there is a direct relationship between what advertisers will pay for air time and the circulation figures. In advertising parlance, it is the "Cost Per Thousand viewers" that matters.

Relatively few sponsors are wealthy enough, or product-specific enough for that matter, to sponsor whole programs. They rely largely on so-called "scatter plan" buying, in which a number of commercials are spread throughout a broadcast schedule. Since charges are a function of circulation, the possibilities of significant amounts of programming of quality being presented by single sponsors out of some noblesse oblige motivations diminish, and the pressure on the broadcast manager is to engage in a continual rating battle at every hour of the day, for the greater benefit of the shareholder.

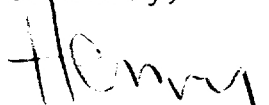
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Rather than the present technology bringing this situation forth, I suggest that it is in the economic interests of the industry as a whole to pre-severate the technology as it currently exists. The introduction of color television, largely through the work of NBC when its system was adopted rather than the system proposed by CBS, seems to have a great deal more to do with the parent company, RCA, and the needs of its television manufacturing units to continue operating after saturation of black and white sets and transmission equipment had been achieved, than it did with the technological breakthrough of color. Certainly the necessary condition was the technology, but the necessary and sufficient conditions were technology in the service of economic gain.

To me the choices seem fairly clear. We can either assume, hope, or work toward a situation in which multiple channel and perhaps even interactive communication systems can be made more economically attractive than the current system of broadcasting or we can set about re-structuring the communication system in such a way that entertainment and information are treated as public cultural utilities in much the same way as libraries or museums. I see no reason to believe that in the long run the case for equating private profit and public good will be any more possible than it is now. At the least, if the institution of exploiting the public air for private gain is too entrenched to be totally re-structured, we should be prepared to rent spectrum space to the highest bidders in return for minimal commitments and for cash with which to support a public service communication utility.

When trying to understand how broadcasting works I am often reminded of James Agee's comments about the film industry and how talented men turn out trash. "If you have any problem figuring this out" he wrote, "then I suggest that you consult both God and Mammon and see who has less difficulty coping with the servant problem."

Cordially,



Henry Breitrose
Associate Professor of Communication

P.S. I think that you take the case for the effects of television violence too lightly. A memo that Wilbur Schramm prepared is enclosed which is as good a summary of the data as I know.
hsb.