

The TV Problem

By WALTER LIPPMANN



Lippmann

TELEVISION has been caught perpetrating a fraud which is so gigantic that it calls into question the foundations of the industry.

The fraud was not the work of a few cheats who had wormed their way into the company of honest men. The fraud was too big, too extensive, too well organized to be cured or atoned for by throwing a few conspicuous individuals to the wolves, and by putting on a pious show of scrupulosity about the details of the productions.

There has been, in fact, an enormous conspiracy to deceive the public in order to sell profitable advertising to the sponsors. It involves not merely this individual or that, but the industry as a whole. This is the judgment of the leading professional critics of television on both the New York Herald Tribune and "The New York Times." Mr. John Crosby has said that the "moral squalor of the quiz mess reaches clear through the whole industry." Mr. Jack Gould has said that the fraud could not have been carried out without "the constant involvement of representatives of networks, advertising agencies and sponsors."

The size of the fraud is a bitter reflection on the moral condition of our society. But it is also sure proof that there is something radically wrong with the fundamental national policy under which television operates. The principle of that policy is that for all practical purposes television shall be operated wholly for private profit. There is no competition in television except among competitors trying to sell the attention of their audiences for profit. As a result, while television is supposed to be "free," it has in fact become the creature, the servant, and indeed the pros- titute, of merchandising.

ture the largest mass audience the companies have resorted to fraud as in the case of the quiz shows. But, reprehensible as it is to play the gullible public for suckers, that is not the worst of their offending. The worst things they do are first to poison the innocent by the exhibition of violence, degeneracy and crime, and second, to debase the public taste.

According to "Newsweek," the television networks decided about a year ago that in the coming season, during the prime evening hours which draw the biggest audiences, they would devote to violence a total of twenty-four hours a week. "Heroes and villains crumple under the impact of black-jacks, whisky bottles, wrenches, and even gold-headed canes. A goggle-eyed public sits by while its fellow humans are pistol-whipped, stabbed, garroted, mugged and mused up."

What to do about it? The great offense of the television industry is that it is misusing a superb scientific achievement, that it is monopolizing the air at the expense of effective news reporting, good art, and civilized entertainment. The crux of the evil is that in seeking great mass audiences, the industry has decided from its experience that the taste of great masses is a low one, and that to succeed in the competition it must pander to this low taste.

Quite evidently, this is an evil which cannot be remedied by a regulating commission or by some form of government or self-constituted censorship. The alternative, which is practiced in one form or another in almost every other civilized country, is competition—competition not for private profit but for public service. The best line for us to take is, I am convinced, to devise a way by which one network can be run as a public service with its criterion not what will be most popular but what is good.

Television is expensive and the available channels are few. These channels are possessed by a few companies who are in fierce competition among themselves. But what are they competing about? About how to capture the largest mass audience which can be made to look at and listen to the most profitable advertising.

In this competition, as in Gresham's famous law of money, the bad money drives out the good. In order to cap-

No doubt, this network would not attract the largest mass audience. But if it enlisted the great talents which are available in the industry, but are now throttled and frustrated, it might well attract an audience which made up in influence what it lacked in numbers. The force of a good example is a great force, and should not be underrated.

We should not, I believe, shrink from the idea that such a network would have to be subsidized and endowed. Why not? Is there any doubt that television is a mighty instrument of education—education for good or education for evil? Why should it not be subsidized and endowed as are the universities and the public schools and the exploration of space and modern medical research, and indeed the churches—and so many other institutions which are essential to a good society, yet cannot be operated for profit?

They are unwise friends of our system of private capitalism who do not recognize the fact that the higher life of our society depends on respect for and support of non-commercial institutions. It is true that the best way for this country to produce wealth is by private enterprise for private profit. But there are a lot of other things that need to be done besides producing wealth and selling goods. One of them is to inform, instruct and entertain the people through the media of mass communications. And among these media there must be some which aim not at popularity and profit but at excellence and the good life.

That it is possible to operate non-commercial institutions is attested by the fact that we do operate successfully schools, universities, hospitals, laboratories of research. Harvard and Yale and Princeton and Columbia and Dartmouth and so on are not operated for profit. Their trustees do not play politics. They are concerned with excellence and not with making money. Why should not people of this sort be able to find ways to operate a television network?

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