

REVIEW AND COMMENT

Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power

By Christine Acham

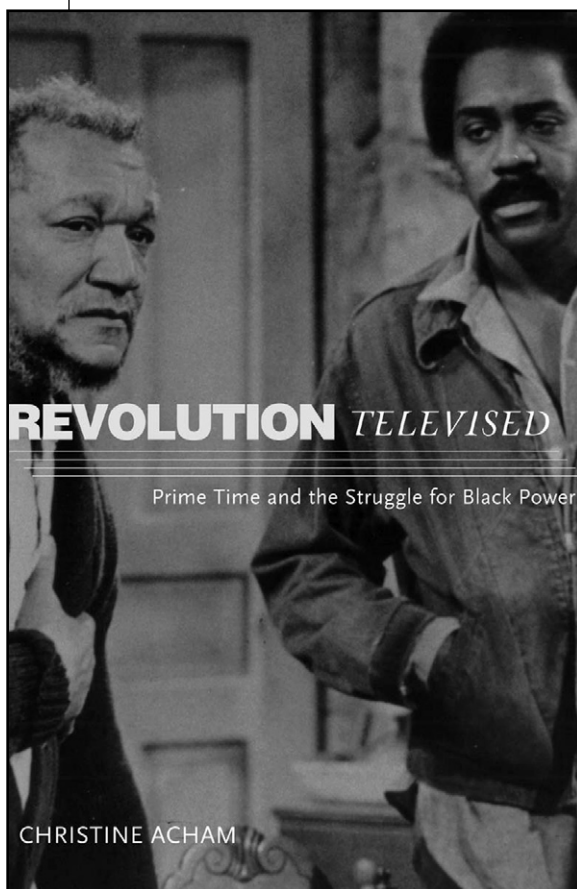
*University of Minnesota Press,
Minneapolis, MN*
(248 pages, \$24.95)

By Howard A. Myrick

Revolution Televised: *Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* is a “must read” for all television programming executives and producers who are now (or ever expect to be) involved with African-American television talent or African-American subject matter—with equal relevance and treatment for both entertainment programming and serious news reporting. It is also essential reading for media critics and scholars who are wedded to the traditional negative v. positive images paradigm of analyzing programs with ethnic characters and racially oriented themes—in search of evidence that a given story or portrayal advances or retards the search for objectivity and progress in the representations of different ethnic groups in, notably, television programs and films.

Issuing an advisory to the reader of a new book may seem to be a strange opening. In this instance, though, it seems warranted. The advisory: do not be misled by the title—

especially, the subtitle, *Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power*. Why? It is really quite simple: This book is not only about the Black Power Movement of the 1960s. Although this historic period in the civil rights movement in America is accorded ample coverage, this book (and its greater value to media practitioners and analysts) is its contribution to a deeper understanding of the fact that (as Peter J. Boyer, a media critic for *The New York Times* during the period, stated) the civil rights struggle “...was a story that finally proved the value of TV news gathering as opposed to mere news dissemination.” Seemingly, not wishing



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to confuse coincidence with causality, the author, Christine Acham—assistant professor in the African American studies program at the University of California, Davis—cites and appears to reject (with less vigor than this reviewer) the notion that “The whole process of changing television into a serious news medium happened to coincide with the civil rights movement” (as posited by CBS News reporter Robert Schake) – suggesting, instead, symbiosis (perhaps) but not coincidence.

One of the most engaging aspects of this book is its analysis of the dynamic impact of entertainment programming and the black actors who put a whole new face (no pun intended) on mainstream television programs. The author serves the reader exceedingly well in her identification and analysis of the various stratagems employed by such talented black actors and comedians as Redd Foxx, Flip Wilson, their supporting casts members and script writers, having their say, variously, in what the author refers to as “hidden transcripts” – getting past the mostly all-white gatekeepers at the networks. “Hidden transcripts,” a term borrowed from the political anthropologists James C. Scott and Robin D.G. Kelley, who referred to the phenomenon of “oppressed groups challenging those in power by constructing ‘hidden transcripts’, a dissident political culture ...emerging ‘on stage’ in spaces controlled by the powerful ...always in disguised forms”.

The failure of white programming executives and producers to understand the dynamics of race and the interrelationship of the mass media

(especially television) accounts for not only the loss of missed opportunities to serve the public’s best interest, but also the loss of revenue – notably from a segment of the population (African-Americans) possessing aggregated wealth exceeding that of the national economies of many countries in the world (a phenomenon not unlike the continuation of slavery, long after the expiration of its economic viability). It is also the reason that to this day the television industry has relegated black-oriented programs to such networks as Fox, UPN, WB and BET – suggesting that no lessons were learned from the cross-over power (and earned revenue record) of such programs as *Sanford and Son* (featuring the brilliant actor-comedian Redd Foxx), *The Flip Wilson Show*, the short-lived *Richard Pryor Show*, all artists to whom today’s Chris Rock, Eddie Murphy and many black and white artists pay homage. What would today’s television industry be like (and how much wealthier its executives) if these programs and their black artists had been allowed to achieve their full potential?

Lest the reader conclude that this book is only about the economics of the subject, it should be noted that the author concedes that was not the starting point for this scholarly effort; rather, it begins with “a review of the historical trajectory of African-American participation within mainstream American society ...” and how “the mass media, especially television, have become significant tools in this transformation and have promoted different aspects of a black political agenda”. This trajectory and transformation, of course, did not

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follow a straight and uninterrupted path. It ebbed and flowed with the vagaries of the times, the sentiments and sensibilities of the mostly white gate-keepers in the media.

There was a period in the 1960s and 1970s when it appeared that the television industry had made a commitment to the integration of its program schedules.

There was, for example, a period in the 1960s and 1970s when it appeared that the television industry had made a commitment to the integration of its program schedules. Such black-cast programs as the previously mentioned *Sanford and Son* and *The Flip Wilson Show* were prominent program offerings for both black and mainstream audiences. Then in the 1980s – except for the *Cosby Show* and *Different World* – black-cast programs became scarce again. In the late 1980s and early 1990s black-cast programs reemerged – but in a mainly black-targeted “network ghetto” populated by fictionalized black people. The author of this book poses (and answers) the question: “What social, political and industrial factors brought about this shift from invisibility to hyperblackness in the late 1960s and 1970s?” A follow-on question: What accounts for today’s programming decisions and what *should* today’s decision-makers be doing?

The focus of this book is not limited to an investigation of entertainment programming: it also includes a very comprehensive and incisive probing into the realms of television news

programming and documentaries – areas in which some strange differences are revealed. The acclaimed communications theorist George Gerbner has noted, for example, that in contemporary television a curious dichotomy in the representation of African-Americans is reflected: in fictionalized dramas and sitcoms African-Americans are depicted as more affluent and more socially integrated than they actually are in real-life America. In television news they are over-represented as criminals, drug dealers and engaged in various anti-social situations than is the case in reality. Are these chance phenomena?

Revolution Televised provides some unique insights into the role of television in those still not widely understood periods of American history referred to as the Civil Rights Era and the Black Power Movement (two very distinct facets of a larger sociopolitical phenomena – clearly delineated by, both, the adherents and the news media that reported on them). The Civil Rights and the Black Power phenomena did occur at just about the ten-year mark in network television news’ maturation, at a time when the medium was still in the process of defining itself. Accordingly, if the news media did not cover these dramatic events, their powerful orators, charismatic leaders and large vociferous protest events, it would have been like insisting that the emperor was regally dressed when, in fact, he was naked. The Civil Rights and Black Power leaders knew it and so did the television news executives.

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Did the news media cover these events fairly and professionally? Sometimes they did and other times they committed egregious errors. As a graduate cinema student at the University of Southern California during the time of the 1965 Watts riot, I recall all too vividly a TV newsman reporting from a hovering helicopter (as the TV camera zoomed in for a close-up) "there goes a rioter now looting a clothing store!" – the "looter" actually was an off-duty black police officer who was the owner of the haberdashery from which he was trying to save his inventory from the approaching fires threatening to engulf Watts. Almost as if to corroborate my personal story, which might be regarded as merely anecdotal, *Revolution Televised*, recounts NBC's executive William Corrigan's comments about the problems encountered in covering the riots. Corrigan, who was dispatched to cover the riots, stated that news helicopters "sent out some frightful reports that were totally unverified." To this the author added: what was reported revealed much about the predilections of TV journalists and the cultural prisms through which they viewed and interpreted events.

Journalistic errors and exaggerations aside, the fact remains that television coverage of the "revolution" did keep the issue of race relations in America in the forefront of the national (and international) consciousness. The television networks covered the 1965 Martin Luther King-led march to Selma, Alabama, the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the historic "I Have a Dream" speech by Dr. King at the Lincoln Memorial. It was

television, too, that caused the nation's politicians and the American people to recognize the options posed by Malcolm X's "By Any Means Necessary" and Dr. Martin Luther King's "Non-violence" credos. The symbiotic relationship of the two different leaders and their approaches for achieving racial justice were amplified and made visible, in large measure, by television.

Apparently (and justifiably) not wishing the television to become too proud of itself, Christine Acham's *Revolution Televised* cites many examples of television's penchant for engaging in "recuperative" work, the creation of "nostalgic" (but incorrect) reconstructions of black Americans' and, concomitantly, the nation's racial past. We are reminded, too, that "The United States is constantly involved in a process of mediation with its history, and television has played a significant role in this negotiation and recuperation of our national memory."

Returning to the subject of the dual approaches the networks took to the *Civil Rights v. Black Power* facets of the larger race issue in America, the author reminds the reader that television news programs and especially TV documentaries were produced at a time when America was attempting to "contain rising black social and political movements." The networks were conflicted – probably as much by the dictates of networks' business and political concerns as by the reality that they and their reporters and producers were products of their whiteness. Briefly stated: "Black Power" was scarier than "Passive Resistance". In this connection, the reader is invited to review such

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notable televisions as the 1965 *CBS Reports*: “Watts: Riots or Revolt?” and Mike Wallace’s five-part series *The Hate That Hate Produced*.

Public broadcasting did not escape the scrutiny of *Revolution Televised*. Indeed, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), my former employer, received more analysis than the allotted space here will permit recounting. Suffice it to state that, because public broadcasting is supported by tax dollars – to which African-Americans, too, contribute – there was ample criticism of the disparate treatment accorded programs dealing with civil rights issues. Complaints centered mainly around a conspicuous lack of financial support for such programs. Illustrative of this problem was the 1972 conflict, described as follows: “The Corporation for Public Broadcasting released the list of programs it intended to fund for the 1973-74 season. Conspicuously absent were the only two nationally televised black programs: *Soul*, a music-, poetry- and entertainment-driven program, and *Black Journal*,” the latter concerned more with political and social issues affecting African-Americans. This instance, not having been the first such action taken by the public broadcasting system, elicited an outcry of protest which repeated a criticism stated in *Jet Magazine* by William Greaves, then the only black producer in American television, who stated that “*Black Journal*, the ‘one oasis in a very large desert’ [will be dried up this fall for lack of funding].” The reason, of course, was clearly not due to a lack of funding.

The readers of this book will, no

doubt, find much that is disturbing, unsettling, and painful – some things we would all rather forget. Acham’s *Revolution Televised*, however, deserves praise for being both elucidating and innovative. Moreover, who can find fault with an author who, for good reasons, dares challenge the continued perception of former FCC Chairman Newton Minow’s characterization of television as a “vast wasteland”? The book is worth a reading, if only to discover the justification of the challenge to Newton Minow’s law.

Howard A. Myrick, Ph.D., Professor of Broadcasting and Telecommunications at Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, former Director of Communications Research at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Director of the American Forces Radio and Television Service, currently serves, also, on the Pennsylvania Public Television Commission.

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Bad News: The Decline of Reporting, the Business of News, And the Danger to Us All

By Tom Fenton

Regan Books, New York
(262 pages, 425.95)

Changing Channels: The Civil Rights Case That Transformed Television

By Kay Mills

University Press of Mississippi, Jackson
(313 Pages, \$30)

By Bernard S. Redmont

Veteran foreign correspondent Tom Fenton vainly tried to sell his network, CBS News, on an interview in late 1996 and 1997 with a then little known Islamic activist named Osama bin Laden. “Our bosses saw him as an obscure Arab of no interest to our viewers,” he related.

A few months later, when he wrote another story about bin Laden, the masterminds complained, “too many foreign names,” and killed it also.

Fenton had another staggering experience with the home office: In 1978, CBS refused to air his story that the Shah of Iran was in trouble. The New York producers killed it. Less than three months later, the Shah fled in

disgrace.

When Fenton reported Saddam Hussein’s 1988 poison gas attacks on northern Iraq, the *Evening News* producers made him delete all mention of the Kurds, despite his insistence that this was what it was all about. The producers said, “too confusing . . . no one knows who the Kurds are.”

These sad but true stories provide an anecdotal counterpoint to a hard-hitting recitation of what’s wrong with broadcast news—and how to fix it.

Fenton labored with distinction in the CBS News vineyard for 34 years. He was one of the ablest and most experienced flagbearers of what used to be called the Tiffany of broadcasting. (Disclosure: Tom is a former colleague of mine at CBS News. He moved from Paris to London as European correspondent when I moved from Moscow to Paris.)

In *Bad News* (what a great title!), he has written not merely a reporter’s memoir such as many of us compose near the end of the trail. Tom has produced a devastating indictment of network news, and he explains how and why it has fallen so low.

His former colleague Andy Rooney summed it up to him: “Money has taken over news. It was always a factor but never what it is now.”

To bolster his case, Fenton also gives us trenchant interviews with Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather, Peter Jennings, Don Hewitt and Walter Cronkite—who incidentally admits he doesn’t watch the *CBS Evening News* any more. Cronkite commented to Fenton: “There’s nothing there but crime and sob sister material. It’s scandal sheet

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stuff for the most part.”

For Fenton, who retired in December 2004, the industry leadership was incompetent, ignorant, lazy, biased and uninterested in the public good. In his account, serious journalists feel the news has been trivialized, dumbed down and severely cut back. This applies not just to CBS but its competitors as well.

“Corporate greed and indifference have all but killed the kind of newsgathering ethos that produces results... We need more and better news. Our lives depend on it.”

In wielding the economy hatchet, the networks closed most of their bureaus abroad. Americans need more than ever intelligent understanding of international news and its impact on them. Fenton—and many of his colleagues—believe their trust, and the public’s trust, has been betrayed. In the process, they charge, our democracy has been endangered. It’s no surprise that network ratings have declined.

Fenton declares that “mega-corporations that have taken over the major American television news companies squeezed the life out of foreign news reporting.”

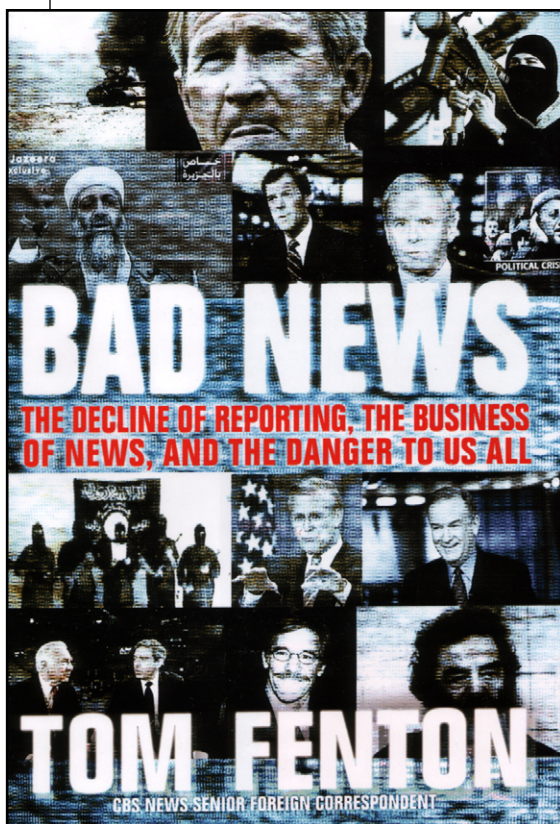
Fenton’s chapter-and-verse assault on the “corporate bean counters,” the “bottom-lining bottom-feeders” and the “pandering to ratings” will not endear him to his former chieftains, but by his reckoning they earned it.

Tom says he writes not to knock his profession, or to denigrate

CBS News, but because “we can—and we must—do a lot better.” In his view, “corporate greed and indifference have all but killed the kind of newsgathering ethos that produces results.”

For Fenton, politicians and government share the guilt, and the news media do a poor job of unscrambling their slanted “spin.” The Bush White House, he declares, has perfected the art of manipulation. He warns journalists, “Do not be intimidated by censorship disguised as patriotism” and “make sure government does not abuse its power at home.”

Even his London bureau doesn’t



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do much reporting any more. It's a "packaging" operation, wrapping up reports and pictures shot by others—the news media's version of outsourcing.

Fenton's charge that the world outside the U.S. is better informed than the American public may stagger some readers. But it's no surprise to journalists who spend any time abroad and get their international news from a wide variety of sources including the BBC or European and Asian newspapers and broadcasters.

Fenton offers a long list of important stories that could be covered by television news, but aren't. He asks "what do we even know about America's interests abroad?" He wonders what we know about how the U.S. government spends our money abroad. How many of us know that "the Pentagon currently owns or rents 702 bases in 130 countries around the world, plus a number of other bases that are part of NATO or other multilateral commitments?"

Fenton's credentials as a world news analyst are impeccable. He worked for the *Baltimore Sun* and was as naval officer before he moved to CBS to cover virtually every major story in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. He has won four Emmy awards and countless other honors.

In the quest for higher broadcast journalism standards, we may ask, what's to be done? This important book has some positive recommendations: Amplify the public's voice. Create a lobby or pressure group to monitor news quality and quantity. Prod the FCC to do its assigned task of preserving the public interest. Expand the evening news to an hour. Reopen foreign bureaus and

staff them with a respectable number of correspondents. "With handheld DVD and laptop editing technology available, the costs need not be what they were in the past," Tom suggests.

Fenton concludes, "This is not just a book. This is the beginning of a campaign to galvanize America. We need more and better news. Our lives depend on it."

The ruling struck like a thunderbolt. The decision jolted the broadcasting industry and ultimately transformed the face of television. But few today remember the case, or the long legal battle over WLBT-TV, the dominant, high-powered NBC affiliate in Jackson, Mississippi.

This is the theme of *Changing Channels*, a fascinating work by Kay Mills.

Complaints about violations of the Fairness Doctrine on racial issues first surfaced at the Federal Communications Commission in 1955. It seems longer ago, and as if it were another country.

When the action reached a climax, it was the first time a U.S. federal appeals court had ever taken away a TV license, and the first time that a television station had lost its license over programming issues.

What's more, the court ruled for the first time that the public had a right to participate in FCC business. It was the right the public would exercise to seek equal employment opportunity rules, to try to improve children's television and to affect the outcome of other license renewal proceedings and sales of TV

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stations.

Nowadays, the FCC has virtually abdicated its regulatory watchdog role. The FCC does not like to police the way stations fulfill their public interest obligations.

In the 1950s, black faces were invisible in much of American television...Minorities had little or no access.

Citizens have lost much in the waves of deregulation that have inundated broadcasting over the years, Mills judges. They've also suffered from "the creation of communications megalopolies," as Mills puts it.

In the 1950s, black faces were invisible in much of American television, especially in the South. Racism was endemic. Minorities had little or no access. A program featuring Oprah Winfrey, born in Kosciusko, Mississippi, would not have been carried on any TV station in her native state. Network interviews with newsmakers like civil rights attorney Thurgood Marshall were not broadcast on many southern stations.

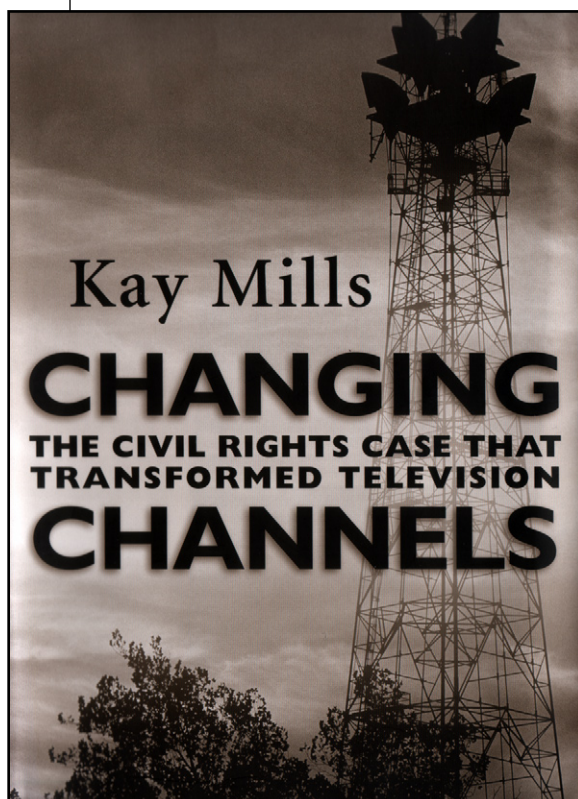
Local newscasts and commentaries presented civil rights activists as "outside agitators" bent on fomenting trouble in a local black community supposedly content with second-rate schools and second-rate citizenship.

TV in the South and indeed in most of the U.S. "was not giving a full and accurate portrayal of

the world in which its viewers lived," as Mills reports.

One of the most powerful stations at the time was WLBT Channel 3 in Jackson. It was frankly racist in a market that was over 40 percent African American. Without fear of sanction, WLBT could pull the plug on a network interview with Marshall, who was later to become a Supreme Court Justice.

In the final analysis, it was not the FCC, the federal government agency charged with protecting the public interest, that seriously took up the issue. A small band of blacks and whites along with the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ defined local customs of segregation to work together to challenge the license of



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WLBT.

The challenge was led by memorable figures like the Rev. Everett Parker of the UCC and two black Mississippi activists, Aaron Henry (who later became the station's chairman of the board) and the Rev. R.T.T. Smith, a Baptist minister who had been denied the right to buy air time when he ran for Congress, the first black to do so since Reconstruction.

A federal appeals court panel headed by Warren Burger, before he became chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, ruled twice in favor of the challengers after the FCC regularly backed the station management. It took a 16-year legal struggle in which, as Mills notes, "all the money and all the power were arrayed on the station's side at first." Eventually, the license was awarded to an integrated group with majority black ownership. The group hired the first black TV stations manager in the South.

It was a dramatic time. The blood of Emmett Till and Medgar Evers had been spilled in Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s. But WLBT would deliberately blot out any coverage of the civil-rights movement, while allowing the local White Citizens Council to get plenty of air time. Station management would preempt, or tamper with NBC's news and public-affairs programs. If African Americans were mentioned locally, they were subjected to prejudice or bigotry, and never referred to as "Mr." or "Mrs."

The TV universe has changed. By the beginning of the 21st century, the WLBT staff was about 40 percent minority. Jackson had a black mayor and a black police chief. The Mississippi House of Representatives was almost

30 percent black, and the State Senate almost 20 percent black.

WLBT's management also has changed over the years. No longer minority owned, WLBT is now run by a chain, the Liberty Corporation. Still, Liberty defines itself as an equal-opportunity employer.

TV is substantially deregulated. Affirmative-action programs, Mills declares, are "dormant if not dead." The Fairness Doctrine is not enforced. The public-interest movement is an idealistic dream.

Nevertheless, the WLBT case has had a lasting impact on the industry and the community.

Kay Mills tells this dramatic story with fairness, intelligence and historical perspective, expertly navigating the sometimes labyrinthine maneuvers and tedious details. She helps the reader through the narrative with a list of the cast of characters, a timeline calendar and reasonable notes.

Good journalists are also historians. Mills is well trained and disciplined enough to play both roles well. Once a United Press International broadcast news reporter, she also worked for the *Baltimore Evening Sun* and the *Los Angeles Times* before she went on to write several important books: *A Place in the News: From the Women's Pages to the Front Page*; *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*; *From Pocohontas to Power Suits: Everything You Need to Know About Women's History in America*; and *Something Better for My Children: The History and People of Head Start*.

Changing Channels will be valued by all who want to understand and

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remember the changes that shaped American broadcasting, the role of the FCC, and above all the impact of public opinion on social change.

It is an important book for all media professionals and for those who identify with the long struggle for civil and human rights.

A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, Bernard S. Redmont is Dean Emeritus of Boston University College of Communication, and served as a correspondent for CBS News and other media outlets. He is the author of *Risks Worth Taking: The Odyssey of a Foreign Correspondent*.

A Public Betrayed: An Inside Look at Japanese Media Atrocities and Their Warnings to the West

By Adam Gamble and
Taekesato Watanabe

*Regency Publishing, Inc.,
Washington, D.C.*
(428 pages, \$27.95)

By Bruce Dunning

One of the first things a newcomer to Japan is taught is to try understanding the difference between “tatemae” and “honno.” Tatemae is the “image” of how things are supposed to be, the ideal, while “honno” is the “reality” of how things really are, the blunt truth.

This phenomenon can be as simple as the sweet and simple hypocrisy of telling a friend that he looks terrific, when in fact the person looks awful. And, say the authors of *A Public Betrayed*, it can be as vast and complicated as to distort the truth about the very essence of the Japanese government. In their view, there is a dangerous disconnect between the ideal of Japan as a modern, democratic nation and the actuality in which Japan is a nation that has undergone more than a half-century of virtual one-party rule and a nation that can brutally suppress dissent. In short, they say, the Japanese public has been betrayed by journalism as practiced in Japan.

The authors—Takesato Watanabe,

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professor of media ethics at Kyoto's Doshisha University, and Adam Gamble, a Massachusetts-based writer and publisher—set out to show how Japanese journalism says all the right things about the public's right to know and about high ethical standards (*tatemaie*) and actually practices a highly controlled, narrowly rigid form of journalism in which enterprise is punished, not rewarded, and the journalistic “pack” rules (*honne*).

Japan's journalism mainstream consists of the major national daily newspapers, the news agencies, and the national television networks. These organizations gather much of their news, especially political, financial, and economic developments, through institutions called “kisha clubs,” *kisha* being the Japanese for “reporter.” There are hundreds of these clubs throughout Japan, each maintaining a monopoly on news from government ministries, major financial institutions, the Imperial Household, sports teams and corporations.

Only reporters from the top mainstream organizations are admitted, and the organizations know that all news must be released through the *kisha* clubs. For many years, foreign correspondents were totally barred from the *kisha* clubs, though in the past 25 years or so, the barriers have eased somewhat. Still, it was not too long ago that CBS News, for whom I was working, was told by officers of the Tokyo High Court that they could give absolutely no information or cooperation on a

case involving a foreigner because CBS was not a member of the *kisha* club.

The result of having news filtered through the mainstream news organizations is that the content winds up dull, bland, and non-controversial, boring and fact-oriented. The idea of enterprise reporting, or investigative reporting, is not part of the mainstream news traditions.

But outside this rigidly controlled hierarchy is another uniquely Japanese institution, the *shukan-shi*, or weekly magazines. These publications operate without access to official news sources. Their peculiar qualities are the object of the authors' study which is in part subtitled “An Inside Look at Japanese

A Public Betrayed

An Inside Look at Japanese Media Atrocities
and Their Warnings to the West



Adam Gamble & Takesato Watanabe

FOREWORD BY ELLIS S. KRAUSS

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Media Atrocities.”

There are about a dozen or so of these magazines, and generally they feature sensationalist articles on political, financial and social issues liberally flavored with salacious celebrity gossip. Most feature spreads or covers of pretty young women models. Some of the magazines definitely fall over into soft-core porn. Most are owned by major publishing houses which also produce serious literature or newspapers. Three of the major newspapers—*Asahi*, *Mainichi* and *Yomiuri*—each publishes a weekly magazine; though these magazines eschew porn, their covers are still likely to feature attractive young women.

But more than the racy content, these publications run articles that can well be called, in the authors' words, “atrocities.” The best and lengthiest part of the book is devoted to studies of five such “atrocities,” which are unfortunately all too representative of the irresponsible content of these magazines.

The first case study is particularly interesting in that it has an American parallel. In 1994, the Aum Shinrikyo cult decided to try out its success in producing sarin poison gas. In early 1995, the cult would carry out a terrorist raid by releasing sarin gas in the Tokyo subway system, with devastating results. The cult picked the city of Matsumoto for its trial run. Yoshiyuki Kono and his wife were the worst-affected victims; in fact, Mrs. Kono remains in a coma more than a decade afterward.

Police at first investigated Kono as the possible perpetrator of the gas attack, but fairly quickly dropped him

as a suspect. Nonetheless, the Japanese news media continued to attack him as the probable guilty party. The weeklies ran the most negative and personally damaging coverage. Not until the attack in the Tokyo subway system nine months later did it become obvious that Kono was in no way guilty.

The case study then compares the Kono case to the case of Richard Jewell, the security guard at the Atlanta Olympics. Jewell first warned people about a suspicious bag found in a park near the Olympic site, but was later accused in the U.S. media of having planted the bag in order to be hailed as a hero for discovering the threat. He suffered a long period of media attacks before being exonerated. The interesting difference, the authors point out, is that Jewell was able sue several media organizations and win financial compensation. Kono received nothing.

Another case study focuses in the continuing rabid anti-Semitism in the Japanese weeklies. Exactly why Japanese are so virulently anti-Semitic is hard to understand, but as the authors show, attacks on Jews apparently boost sales and so are regular features of the weeklies. Holocaust deniers are always welcome in the more sensational magazines.

When foreign advertisers, including Volkswagen, complained about an article in one magazine that said the Holocaust and the death camps were fabrications, Bungeishunju, the prestigious publisher of the magazine, shut down the magazine and claimed that this was done to prevent “Jewish terrorists” from wreaking vengeance on Japanese people.

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Another case cited is the 1999 article about the take-over of a Japanese bank by the U.S. investment group, Ripplewood Holdings. The headline for the five-page article read:

“Finally unveiled: The Human Network of Jewish Capital that Devours Five Trillion Yen of Our Hard-earned Taxes.”

One more case study dissects the case of the weeklies’ two-year attack on the leader of a major Buddhist leader in which he was accused falsely of raping a woman. The weeklies dropped the campaign when it was proven false, but never reported that fact.

The final two case studies deal with Japan’s unwillingness to confront the atrocities committed by Japanese military forces during World War II. In an eerie parallel to the Holocaust deniers, there is a steady diet of articles denying the Nanking Massacre of 1937. Despite reliable eye-witness accounts, there is a steady drumbeat of contention that any casualties that may have occurred were the normal result of battle, and that the Communist Chinese have exploited the “incident,” as it is called in Japan, to get more money from the Japanese.

The final case study deals with the issue of the wartime “comfort women,” an estimated 80,000 or more women from territories conquered by the Japanese who were forced into sexual slavery to serve the Japanese troops. The issue has gained international attention, but the Japanese weeklies continue to claim that the women were largely “volunteers” and paid well for their work.

The authors use these case studies to warn Americans that U.S. media

seem to be heading in the Japanese direction, citing the growing tendency toward consolidating media ownership, the increasing sensationalism and “dumbing down” of news in America, and the unquestioning nationalism that has crept into U.S. media after September 11, 2001.

Frankly the comparison seems strained and not all that well backed up, but it does serve as a warning that U.S. news organizations may well be losing their edge.

Bruce Dunning recently retired from CBS News after 36 years, of which he spent 24 in Tokyo—as correspondent (1973-81) and Asia Bureau Chief (1989-2005). He is now living in the U.S.

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Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture

Susan Murray and
Laurie Ouellette (ed.)

New York University Press
(345 pages, \$22.00)

By David Marc

During the 1950s, as American broadcasting was achieving national saturation for television, the critic Dwight Macdonald observed that a mass culture industry, like any enterprise requiring large-scale investment, must persist in a constant state of expansion in order to survive. In terms of technological formats, the television industry has consistently expanded and thrived. To illustrate this, one need only connect the dots (and add all the missing milestones): the replacement of tubes with solid-state wiring, color service, VCR, cable, surround-sound, DVD, flat-screen, HDL, plasma, etc.

Content, however, is another story. Dramatic forms adapted from radio, such as the sitcom and the detective series, emerged as the meat and potatoes of prime time, and television's appetite for fresh narrative grew increasingly voracious. Continuing expansion drove the industry beyond what new material its writers could produce, including what they could adapt from the high culture

pantheon and folk culture traditions. As those resources were tapped out, television turned to other mass media for fodder, adapting stories from comic books and best-sellers as well as dated movies and old TV shows (making mergers with copyright holders increasingly attractive). Under such desperate conditions, the Hunchback of Notre Dame might show up on video as the singing, dancing, romantic lead of a feature-length Disney cartoon—and, with no permission from Victor Hugo required, he did. Here again, a list of prime-time milestones underscores the point: the demise of weekly anthology and comedy-variety sketch programming in the late 50s; the



Reality TV Remaking Television Culture

Edited by Susan Murray
and Laurie Ouellette

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introduction of theatrical feature films in prime-time during the early 1960s; the migration of soap opera from daytime to prime time; the spectacular spiral of made-for-TV movie production; and so on.

But what happens when the industry's thirst for narrative becomes so voracious that it can no longer produce enough material to keep its own recycling bins filled? Phrased otherwise in several ways, this is the question taken on by editors Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette and more than a dozen contributors to this anthology of essays on Reality TV.

Rowing against current tides in academic products, the book offers readers some measure of historical context for understanding its subject matter. Reality TV's generic ancestry is acknowledged in essays concerning such prime-time series as Allen Funt's *Candid Camera* (CBS, 1960-67) and Craig Gilbert's *An American Family* (PBS, 1973). Anna McCarthy uncovers a buried history of serious academic interest in *Candid Camera*, although the show was packaged as nothing more than a novelty comedy series. While some intellectuals worried about *Candid Camera's* nonchalant invasions of personal privacy, it was hailed by others for bringing "sociological realism" to the homescreen. No less an authoritative figure than David Reisman, author of *The Lonely Crowd*, called Funt "the second most ingenious sociologist in America" (placing him just behind Paul Lazarsfeld). By contrast, as McCarthy points out, contemporary Reality TV is usually derided as "a cheap, endlessly recyclable and licensable programming

format, a [by]product of the collapse of the three-network system and the rise of cable."

Looking at the collection as a whole, the treatment of pre-cable models for Reality TV is likely to be less than satisfying for readers interested in the genre's historical roots. *Real People* (NBC, 1975-79) gets only passing mention and other seminal works, including *People are Funny* (NBC, 1954-61), *That's Incredible!* (ABC, 1980-84), and *Divorce Court* (syn. 1957-69) fall beneath the radar. *American Idol* comes up for discussion in the book; *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts* does not.

A group of essays on the economic underpinnings of the Reality boom is more comprehensive. Ted Magder, chair of the Department of Culture and Communication at New York University, takes the reader beyond the well-known cost advantages of replacing salaried actors with amateurs willing to accept a leap through the looking glass as adequate compensation. Magder lays out a broader picture of the economics of the genre in comparisons of production costs between reality shows, scripted dramas, and other options. He demonstrates how, in particular, the success of CBS's *Survivor* in 2001-02 changed the business model for prime-time television, redefining a set of decades-long relationships between networks, sponsors, and production companies. Seeing this economic paradigm shift from another angle in his essay, Chad Raphael asserts that the 1988 writer's strike played a crucial role in the rise of the Reality shows by piquing network interest in dramas without scripts. Reality TV, Raphael

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contends, has since become “an integral part of network strategies to control labor unrest.”

Jon Kraszewski’s “Country Hicks and Urban Cliques: Mediating Race, Reality, and Liberalism on MTV’s *The Real World*” is among the most thoughtful works of criticism in the collection. Attempting to show how cogent messages are delivered in *The Real World* by means other than conventionally scripted speeches, the author examines the construction of context by the producers through decisions on casting, setting, and visual and aural editing. Saving his most telling anecdote for the essay’s conclusion, Kraszewski describes an incident that occurred when Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray, the show’s producers, held an open casting call for *The Real World* on the campus of Indiana University in Bloomington: “One student, a huge fan of MTV, admitted wanting to try out, but not knowing what to say. Another student chimed in, ‘Just say you’re a racist from a small town in Indiana and you want to expand your mind. They’ll pick you.’ To which the first student responded, ‘But I’m not a racist. I don’t have a racist bone in my body.’ The other student replied, ‘That’s okay. By the end of the show they’ll portray you as a non-racist. They always do.’” *The Real World* and shows like it are perhaps not so much “unscripted dramas” as they are dramas without need of traditional scripts.

Survivor, the pivotal CBS hit, receives the most attention in the collection, including an essay by Kathleen LeBesco that examines how the series influenced the emergence of gays as stock characters

in Reality vehicles. Other programs that come in for various types of focused critical treatment include *Big Brother*, *The Osbournes* and *Judge Judy*.

Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture is a highly readable book, largely free of academic diatribe and only rarely lapsing into jargon. The scope of the collection does not extend to influential marginalia at the genre’s deep end, such as staged talk shows (*Jerry Springer* or *Jenny Jones*) or parasports (professional wrestling or roller derby). This is probably a good thing, given the largeness of these targets for smug academic cheap shots. Also absent from the collection is comment on influence of Reality TV upon an older and intimately related genre, “the news.” But no shame to the editors on that account; the topic requires a book of its own at the very least.

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