

REVIEW AND COMMENT

We Interrupt This Newscast: How to Improve Local News and Win Ratings, Too

By Tom Rosenstiel, Marion Just,
Todd Belt, Atiba Pertilla,
Walter Dean, Dante Chinni

*Cambridge University Press,
New York*

(244 pages, \$75 hardcover, \$22.99
paperback)

By Bernard S. Redmont

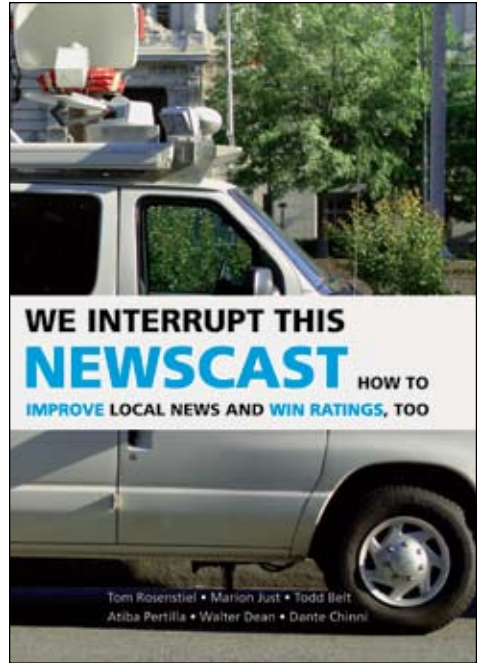
Prepare to discard your notions about how to do local TV news.

No, local news doesn't have to "bleed to lead." Crime doesn't pay. Nor does mayhem, extreme weather, and celebrity gossip. Quality sells. The local news doesn't necessarily have to be "live, local and late-breaking." The latest word is: Try a new approach.

Producers, news directors and station managers now can shed the conventional wisdom that serious broadcasts are money losers. This so-called "wisdom" is now called demonstrably false.

Take a look at local TV newscasts around the country. For the most part they look alike. They're filled with "CAD"—crime, accidents and disasters.

Interviews with thousands of TV journalists show that the news looks this way because of the belief that "eye-ball grabbers" are the only way



to build an audience.

Now we have the data to disprove the myths prevalent in the local TV markets. Research groups have spent five years gathering material from 1,200 hours of newscasts from 154 stations—more than 33,000 stories, followed by three more years of analysis. They've consulted more than 2,000 local TV news people—professionals, academics, statisticians, print and broadcast journalists, and media observers. This is without a doubt the largest survey of local TV news ever done.

They've come up with data that demolish the myths that dominate the world of local TV news. Nearly every station operates unquestioningly by these myths:

The myth that a newscast should emphasize stories that shock and amaze. The myth that immediacy is the most important value in local TV news.

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The myth that flashing police lights, yellow tape, and other “hot” visuals are “eyeball magnets.”

The myth that TV is an emotional medium in which pictures are more important than words or ideas. The myth that every lead story must have a live shot from the scene. The myth that viewers are voyeuristic and like to be titillated.

The myth that viewers care only about local news. The myth that some stories are more important as promotion than as news. The myth that viewers won't watch long stories about issues.

The study shows that viewers for the most part see these myths as gimmickry and show business, fed by wrongheaded consultants. Research suggests that what the professionals consider most important—crime, accidents and other misfortunes—are usually not the same things that affect the daily lives of the audience.

The study has become a book with the title, *We Interrupt This Newscast: How to Improve Local News and Win Ratings, Too*. It has six authors, headed by Tom Rosenstiel, who directs the Project for Excellence in Journalism. The Project compiled the data and worked with the Committee of Concerned Journalists.

This is not a “do good for goodness sake” project. It aims directly at the bottom line, seeking intelligent business practice. Commercial success is the goal.

The study shows that how a story is reported is more important for building ratings than what the story is about. It turns out that local journalists can succeed in making money for

their stations by putting in the extra effort to get good stories, finding and balancing sources, seeking out experts and making stories relevant to the local audience. This means that covering health issues, tax debates or educational policy may attract as much or more interest than a celebrity divorce or a brewing storm.

What works best, according to the study—bolstered by audience measurement, charts and graphs—is what the book calls “The Magic Formula.”

This consists of six steps:

1. Cover Important News—and give it resources and emphasis.
2. Invest in Enterprise—Time and effort pay off. Give reporters time to investigate important issues in the community.
3. Make Sourcing Authoritative. Use data and consult experts.
4. Provide Perspective. Get more sources and viewpoints into stories. Have a balance of views on controversial issues, especially political questions.
5. Look for Local Relevance. Viewers watch if they know how stories affect them. The authors observe that “even

“Local stations that take the trouble to produce higher quality newscasts attract more viewers than other stations.”

local stories need some explanation about why the audience should pay attention.”

6. Make Important Stories Longer—and don't pad shallow ones. A newscast can contain a mix of story lengths.

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In the end, the authors prove that doing good means doing well. They argue that the broadcast industry has already invested untold fortunes in technology, sets, audience research, consultants and talent contracts. But they contend that “to improve content, the most important factor in viewing, it’s time to focus on the people who produce content.”

The authors argue that stations should reconsider such things as the need for dual anchors on every newscast, “a practice that is probably the most economically inefficient in local TV.” They suggest that with the salary paid one anchor, most stations could hire two reporters and in some cases three or four.

In the future, they assert, anchor talent will not become irrelevant, but it may become less dominant.

Old ways will have to be jettisoned. There is evidence that audiences are getting wise to the “flash and trash” approach taken by many stations. The culture can be changed.

The authors show how “good journalism means more ratings points that can translate into tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of dollars to local stations.”

Some of those who are unconvinced cite the failure of the “noble experiment” by WBBM-TV in Chicago. In February 2000, WBBM, the CBS affiliate in Chicago, decided to offer a no-frills presentation of news featuring a single anchor, who would deliver important stories without hype and happy talk.

“You don’t have to dumb down the news to get more viewers.”

What went wrong was that the newscast appeared to be cold, aloof and one-dimensional. The newscast had pedestrian writing and unimaginative production. Some critics suggested it was “PBS on CBS.” After eight and a half months, the experiment was abandoned.

Much of what the books says may startle you. But the hard data collected shows that “local stations that take the trouble to produce higher quality newscasts attract more viewers than other stations, even taking into account other factors that increase ratings, such as the lead-in program, time slot, station size, and network affiliation.”

The facts show, for example, that “newscasts that run longer, more detailed lead stories, attract larger audiences.”

Survey research indicates that local TV audiences have almost as high an interest in national and international affairs as they have in local issues.

News audiences prefer hard news to entertainment. “Doing stories that focus on issues, policy, and civic institutions leads to greater station revenue... Continuing down the path of celebrity, human interest, and superficial sensation does not.”

As CBS News’ Bob Schieffer puts it, “You don’t have to dumb down the news to get more viewers.” His prediction is that if enough news directors just read this book, TV news could be changed forever, and for the better.

Americans depend more on local TV news than any other news source, say

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the authors. “It attracts a bigger audience than cable or national news. Local TV news is the main source of information for many Americans about what is happening in their neighborhood, their economy and their culture. How well local news serves its audience matters not only for the station’s bottom line but also for the bottom line of the democratic enterprise.”

All in all, this is an important “must-read” book for all TV professionals. And for everyone who cares about the future of TV news

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

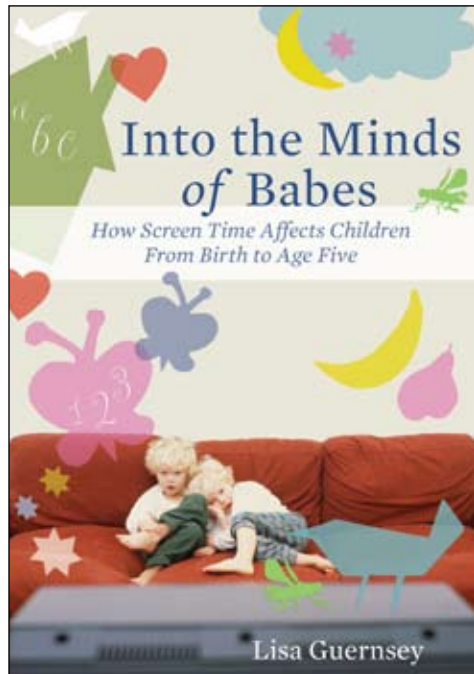
Into the Minds of Babes: How Screen Time Affects Children from Birth to Age Five

By Lisa Guernsey
Basic Books, New York
(287 pages; \$25.00)

By Carla Seal-Wanner

Reading *Into the Minds of Babes* reminded me why, as a developmental psychologist, I decided to become a creator of children’s

educational and interactive media. I wanted to synthesize all that is known about children’s cognitive, emotional, social and moral development and build it into exemplary programs that would be accessible to all. I was convinced that well-designed, precisely targeted educational media would benefit all kids and could even help level the playing fields— that children growing up in educationally stimulus-deprived environments who gained access to these programs and products might have an advantage that they would not otherwise have. Call me naïve? No, as Guernsey aptly describes, my fellow co-conspirators from educational and commercial media companies can fairly boast that some of us have been privileged to have taught children valuable lessons and entertained them along the way. Her book offers the



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insight that it is due to the emergence of these very claims, that media can educate as well as entertain, that has led to the significant role “edutainment” media has come to play in children’s lives today. In this context she analyzes the question: for better or worse? She informs the incendiary debate over whether media is beneficial or not in the developing child’s life by taking a microscopic look at the claims made by producers, the content of the media itself, research findings on the impact of these media and parental expectations.

Guernsey is motivated as a journalist and as a parent who frankly recognizes how overwhelmed she is figuring out what media is good for her own young daughters. Considering the 24/7 multiple-media landscape created just for children from birth to school age there is a lot of media out there to discuss. She is correct, starting with the cluster of preschool programs on PBSKids that surround *Sesame Street*, perhaps the most important evolution (or revolution?) caused by media that claims to both educate and entertain was the creation of developmentally designated programming blocks on the major kids channels. The development of Nick Jr., based on the success of *Blues Clues*, being perhaps the best commercial example. Preschoolers suddenly had media destinations all their own with shows intentionally designed to meet their developmental needs and the intrinsic preoccupations of toddler hood. And since CD-ROMs emerged as a “user-friendly” home computer product in the early 1990’s the resident and wireless edutainment media available from birth to senility has exploded. Enter the all-

media-all-the-time universe that children grow up in.

Talented producers and children’s media experts have contributed superb shows and products, have done exacting research to keep improving them and others in the academic community have attempted to objectively assessed their value and summative impact. In general, we are a field of optimists, devoted to getting it right for kids. But despite the best (and usually pure) intentions of producers, all children’s media are not created equal – or equally well; leaving pediatricians, cognitive and developmental psychologists, teachers and parents worried about its potential negative impact.

One rarely discussed honest explanation for this is that making excellent children’s educational media is monumentally difficult. Despite the best training and intentions, we – too often – do not get it exactly right. Understanding the complexity of the child’s cognitive and socio-emotional development and translating it to a media experience that will stimulate, benefit, perhaps even inspire is an intellectual and creative challenge that is extremely hard to achieve. Trust me, it is not out of lack of trying, that children’s media sometimes falls short of its intended “learning objectives.” This is why extensive formative and summative research is a critical part of any program or product development budget!

Additionally, parents must become savvy about the fact that the media creators are not alone in this endeavor. The dirty little secret is that children’s media is a HUGE business. There are the company executives who have to care about such trivial things as the

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BOTTOM LINE. There are those who are charged with marketing the programs and products we make to ensure that they make a profit. Imagine that? To keep making more quality media for kids it is necessary for them to be a financial success as well as a hit with the target audience. Therefore, unfortunately too often, the business elements behind the screens encourage the hyping of educational goals and outcomes to attract viewers and sell products. Buyer Beware: children are a market!

Add to the sometimes inflated messages used to sell children's media the pressures parents seem to feel today raising kids in a world where there is a (perceived or real) hyper-competitiveness in schools from preschool to college entrance. Can we blame them for seeking out the shows and products that will give them confidence that their child will not be "left behind"? Herein, lies the downside of the 24/7 multimedia supplementary "learning environment." What's a parent to do? The American Academy of Pediatrics is telling them that children under age two do not need any of these additional mental stimuli to be ready for school—arguing that one-on-one interaction with parents and caregivers is the only 'educational' experience they need. In the meantime, media producers are filling the airwaves and the shelves of Target with such parent guilt-inducing titles as *Baby Einstein*.

This is where Lisa Guernsey's considerable talent as a science, technology and education journalist comes into play. She dutifully analyzes

the claims of producers against the extant research on the positive and negative effects of media on growing brains and minds. She employs her journalistic skill to tackle the tedious task of sorting hype from reality in the children's media-marketing maelstrom. Examining current research on how exposure to television and other "screen time" affects babies and toddlers, Guernsey helps to allay parents' fear that any use of media before age two will be detrimental. She argues that the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) 1999 guideline instructing parents not to allow children under two to use any screen media is too extreme given the lack of robust evidence of negative effects. Yet she wisely does not conclude that parents should let down their guard about what media children can watch and how much of it. Moderation, moderation, moderation!

Her approach is a gift to parents because she encourages them to decide what the best media choices are for their particular child. She presents this recommendation in a clever mantra suggesting that parents focus on "the three C's": context, content and the individual child. An obvious prescription, yes, but for many exhausted parents who grow overly anxious from the constant barrage of contradictory messages concerning how media may affect child development, some welcome, calming common sense.

Going beyond this simple notion, she digs into the careful meta-analysis of volumes of research studies she has conducted and pairs down findings to digestible facts such as: avoid the hype to use media to stimulate your infant or

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toddlers brain to give them a cognitive jump-start on schooling (brain development does not require jumper cables); media modeling behavior that leads to happy social relationships and good habits (sharing and caring) is valuable at this tender age when children are just beginning to interact with peers; media with age-appropriate language activities reinforces natural literacy skill growth; etc. Even these types of recommendations, and there are many other valuable ones sprinkled throughout the book, are nuanced and complex concepts not necessarily obvious to many parents.

As the old adage goes, *“The stork does not deliver the baby with a training manual.”* Ironically, despite the vast number of articles and books addressing these concerns, many busy parents are overwhelmed by the task of parenting well when it comes to inculcating healthy media habits. This book will give them a short cut to the GPS mapping system they otherwise need to navigate through the ever-changing media landscape.

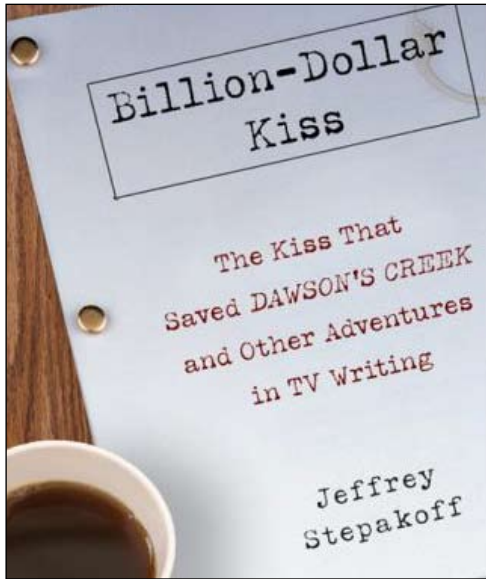
My only worry is that the book is being hailed as allowing parents to ignore the AAP’s recommendation (and those made more recently by other pediatric associations and research institutes). This is a misread of the author’s genuine intent, which is to put parents in charge of the menus for their kid’s media diet by helping them become more critical media consumers themselves. She emphasizes how important it is to recognize that screen time should be used in such moderation that the beneficial interactive time between parents/caregivers and children is not significantly reduced. Let’s face it, babies and toddlers are not

awake very much of the day; their alert time should mainly be spent with the best nurturers of language and social development – parents and caretakers who hold them, look them in the eye and react to their speech and gestures.

For this reason I hope that parents are not the primary target audience for this book. It is equally important for all children’s media creators to read, ponder and assimilate the careful research synthesis that Guernsey has provided. In particular, it should give anyone making media for preschoolers pause that there is so much controversy, all with the noblest intentions, about whether or not the very youngest minds should be spending any time in front of electronic screens. Those making shows and products for this target audience must not simply do so because they are a new lucrative market, but because they believe there is truly a benefit for wee hearts and minds. As I have said before in these pages, any media intended for a child younger than preschool must be used in moderation because no electronic toy will ever be able to provide the immediate and individual feedback that face-to-face interaction with a loving parent provides.

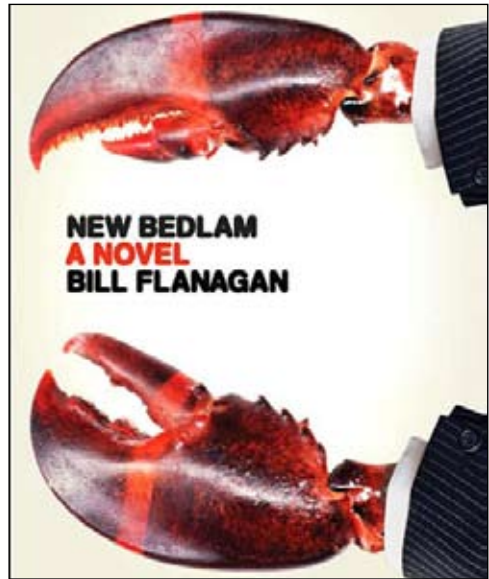
A former professor at Columbia University, where she created and directed the graduate program in instructional technology and media, Dr. Carla E.P. Seal-Wanner is the Founder/President of @access4@11, a public-interest advocacy organization promoting universal access to quality interactive media for children. She received her doctoral and master’s degrees in developmental psychology from Harvard and her BA in psychology from Hampshire College.

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Billion-Dollar Kiss:
The Kiss That Saved
Dawson's Creek
and Other Adventures

By Jeffrey Stepakoff
Gotham Books, New York
 (323 pages, \$26.00)



New Bedlam
A Novel

By Bill Flanagan
Penguin Group,
New York
 (342 pages, \$24.95)

By Ron Simon

Over the last 15 years the new digital technology and a profusion of programming have transformed the television industry. There have been a multitude of books on how this media revolution is affecting the consumer, but little has been written on how talent and management are coping with the broadband challenges. Two newsbooks, a memoir by one-time *Wunderkind* writer Jeffrey Stepakoff and a novel by a MTV executive Bill Flanagan, give a report from the creative trenches of a

business in constant flux.

Jeffrey Stepakoff believes that modern television was invented while he was in college. He graduated from Carnegie Mellon, whose alumni include Steven Bochco and John Wells, hot writer/producers who revolutionized the cool medium. Stepakoff's entry into this "West Coast Drama Clan," where quality television was produced with mind-boggling perks, is the narrative core of his engrossing and informative *Billion-Dollar Kiss*. With a revealing honesty about his economic success, Stepakoff places his rise to creative power against

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Sopranos Update

Since I reviewed *The Sopranos: The Book* in the fall 2007 issue of *Television Quarterly*, there has been an updated version released four months after the series ended on June 10. This new tome, *The Sopranos: The Complete Book*, offers 35 more glossy pages and added commentary about the final nine episodes. Not only is there a map of Jersey where one can find the restaurant where the family had their last supper, there is a four-page spread, photographed by Annie Leibovitz, with cast members recreating Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece. To the very left of the grouping is creator David Chase peering outward, revealing little. Chase did generate a lot of the headlines from an interview in the book stating definitively that there is "nothing definite" about the ending. Although Chase first indicated that the ten-second blackout suggested Tony's demise, he is now leaving the door open for future mob hits.

Before that shooting begins, there will surely be more Sopranos product. HBO has just released the DVD set of the final episodes, Season Six, Part II. Although there is good-hearted commentary by some of the actors (several of whom argue they feel there were seven seasons, not a super six season), nothing is revealed about the meaning of the finale. Chase only reveals the meaning of his sound track in a bonus feature. We will have to leave the search for profundity to such scholars as Maurice Yacowar, who has now updated his *The Sopranos on the Couch* (Continuum) three times, still trying to illuminate "the central tension between the viewer's familiar morality and its violation by this criminal subculture." Yacowar and other professors will gather for a conference, *The Sopranos: A Wake*, at Fordham University in May 2008. Fans of the departed series can gather and mourn together, until something becomes definite.--R.S.

the backdrop of structural upheavals and seminal strikes that galvanized television during the later eighties and nineties. Stepakoff also brings his own experience to the party, having written for 14 different series, including the Emmy-winning staff of *The Wonder Years*.

Today's television writer is more than an artistic loner with a laptop, Stepakoff points out that the writer is involved in the entire production process, from casting to editing. Because of the strike of 1988, the

television writer attained a wealth and an influence never dreamed by the budding Reginald Roses or Rod Serlings of the past. A staff writer who creates the average four scripts a year, while assisting on production advice for the entire series now makes \$800,000 for nine months work, which translates into more than a million with the standard pilot-development deal. Stepakoff considers the nineties the "golden age" for the writer in Hollywood, with the emphasis on gold.

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Much of the writer's clout comes from the union's focus on residuals, which allows the scribbler to maintain future ownership of something that he creates. Because of Writers Guild of America's efforts, writers now receive up to 17.5 percent of syndicated revenues when their shows are sold in syndication. Stepakoff points out that writers, like everyone else in the entertainment complex, "have either great abundance or they live hand-to-mouth."

The "Billion-Dollar Kiss" of the title was an effort to keep the youthful franchise *Dawson's Creek* afloat after the departure of creator Kevin Williamson. Stepakoff, then in his early thirties, got on the staff, having eliminated some of his earlier credits like *Simon & Simon* that made him seem too old. The writers devised a kiss that would foment a love triangle among the three main characters, helping to propel the series into TV nirvana, syndication. But when *Dawson's Creek* finally hit that magic 100th episode, it was questionable how profitable the teen soap would be in a business wracked by so many changes.

Stepakoff is chagrined by the direction of the industry in the 21st century. A writer's strike was averted in 2001, but executives had their ammunition in place: reality productions, which Stepakoff describes as "the sweatshops of modern day Hollywood." Although Stepakoff realizes that strikes now deal with revenue streams not working conditions, he worries that another prolonged strike could be devastating to everyone involved. It could be 1988 all over again

with television losing of "a large part of its continually shrinking and highly fragmented audience for good."

Bill Flanagan knows the contemporary TV business from the inside. He is executive vice president of MTV Networks and free-lance commentator on all things pop culture. He has transmuted the insanity that envelops the industry into a wickedly, laugh-out-loud romp, skewering the medium as much as he delights in its wackiness. Like Stepakoff, he recognizes the change is the name of the game, with executives and businesses disappearing at a moment's notice.

His protagonist, TV executive Bobby Khan, knows the rules all too well. Even though he has one prerequisite of the modern suit—he loves to fire people—he realizes that being in his early thirties is "late middle age for a television executive." When a reality show scandal costs him his job, he hooks up with a dysfunctional family dynasty (think *Arrested Development* meets *Dallas*) trying to revive its cable operations in the sleepy town of New Bedlam, Rhode Island. As an adolescent, Bobby created fantasy television schedules, counter-programming against the dominant network of the day. In his new position, he now must revitalize the idiosyncratic cable channels set up by the patriarch's children: from the pretentious arts station Eureka! to the final resting home for tired sitcoms, BoomerBox.

With lucid, goodhearted prose, Flanagan delights in the way good and bad TV has shaped our cultural sensibility. He relishes in the fact that children growing up from the sixties on

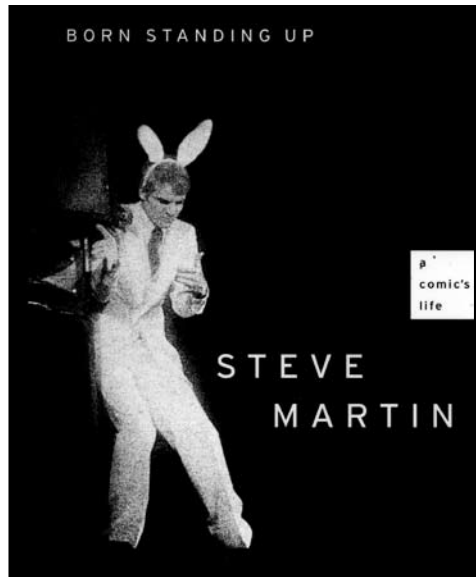
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all share useless reference points: cutting across all social and class differences, every kid can name every member of the Brady Bunch. Bobby, the born TV programmer, creates a series of stunts on the cable channels that mashes up fiction and history, as well as high and low culture to save the family fortune. One of his brainstorms is devoted to “Three generations of America’s First Families”—the Kennedys, Cartwrights, and Corleones. Yes, he programs *Bonanza* episodes with the *Godfather* saga, sprinkled with every Kennedy-related movie. His cable company becomes the talk of the town, even mentioned in a Conan O’Brien monologue. Being referenced in a comedian’s monologue has become a new parameter for success, as anyone who watches the “Sunday Funnies” section of *This Week with George Stephanopoulos* knows for sure.

Both Stepakoff and Flanagan stress that the TV business now changes almost as frequently as viewers switch the channels. *The Billion-Dollar Kiss* is essential reading for any novice writer, providing the juicy details and dollar amounts of making it in new millennium Hollywood. *New Bedlam*, the title itself a perfect description of the industry today, is a hilarious take on the manipulations at the lower end of the cable spectrum; hustling is still one of the business’s art forms, at any level. Both writers are guys you would like to hang out with, and technology now makes that possible. Stepakoff has a page on MySpace, the popular social networking website, and provides updates on his life. Flanagan regularly appears on *CBS*

Sunday Morning, examining the state of pop culture; viewers are welcome to post comments about his thoughts on CBS’s website. Being a writer in this new media environment means interacting with your audience; as Bobby Khan would say, “it comes with the turf.”

Ron Simon is the curator of television and radio for the Paley Center for Media, formerly The Museum of Television & Radio. The Center changed its name to embrace the new digital and broadband worlds, with a mission to examine the impact of all media on our lives.



Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life

By Steve Martin
Scribner, New York
(210 pages; \$25.00)

By Earl Pomerantz

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In his career as a stand-up comedian, a career escalating to rock-star proportions, Steve Martin went to war against show business, and won. The enemy? A longstanding show-biz cliché:

“You’ve been a wonderful audience.”

Most people, I suspect, had little problem with “You’ve been a wonderful audience.” Maybe they believed they actually *had* been a wonderful audience, and maybe they didn’t. Maybe they didn’t care much, but appreciated the kindness of being told they’d been a wonderful audience, whether they’d actually been one or not.

Maybe they knew “You’ve been a wonderful audience” was a cliché and it didn’t bother them. The only thing they knew for certain was when a performer said, “You’ve been a wonderful audience,” the performance was coming to a close. “You’ve been a wonderful audience” was the show-biz equivalent of the Two-Minute Warning. Look for your coat, find your purse, slip your loafers back on, it’s time to go home.

“You’ve been a wonderful audience.” A harmless affectation, most would say, if pressed for an opinion. But Steve Martin was having none of it. Quoth Steve:

“Closing the show, I’d say, ‘I’d like to thank each and every one of you for coming here tonight.’ (This is the more personal cousin of ‘You’ve been a wonderful audience.’) Then I would walk into the audience and, in fast motion, thank everyone individually.”

The battle was on. “You’ve been a wonderful audience” and other rickety show business clichés would be laughed into oblivion. Along with

the conventional comedy we knew and loved, and now found increasingly passé.

We’re talking comedy revolution here. Steve Martin, David Letterman and Lorne Michaels of *Saturday Night Live* fame, among others, came of age in the flower-powering sixties, when everyone over thirty was viewed with mistrust and irony-free sincerity was branded as laughingly hypocritical.

Some comedians (Mort Sahl) took aim at government; others targeted the impossibility of relationships (Nichols and May). Comedians also skewered the absurdities of the workplace (Bob Newhart, Shelly Berman). And then there was race (Richard Pryor).

Steve Martin attacked show business.

No target was too trivial for Steve’s sardonic tomfoolery. “In my opening seconds, I would say, ‘It’s great to be here,’ then move to several other spots on the stage and say, ‘No, it’s great to be here!’ I would move again: No, it’s great to be here!” Not satisfied with annihilating “You’ve been a wonderful audience,” Martin proceeded to eviscerate “It’s great to be here.” You can never hear those words again without thinking, “Oh, come on!”

Steve Martin was the Sultan of Smartass. And when anyone challenged him for being childish or immature, sardonic Steve was ready was an Oscar Wilde-worthy retort:

“Well excuuuse me!”

When you think about it, show business seems a curious target. Who expects entertainment to be real? Sure, there’s good entertainment and shoddy entertainment. And yes, the best

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performers obscure the illusion, making the incredible totally believable. But why lampoon as dishonest an enterprise, which, by its nature, is grounded in illusion? On top of that, show biz is the greatest racket in the world. As Irving Berlin lyricized, "Everything about it is appealing." Steve Martin himself agrees, explaining his precarious career choice by asking, "Who wouldn't want to be in show business?"

Why make fun of the business you love? Or is that even the right question?

To explore the issue, we turn to Steve Martin's *Born Standing Up*.

Born Standing Up is a beautiful book. Literally. The font is sharp and super-easy to read. The graphics are tastefully arranged. The punctuation is impeccable. The paper is so thick, every time I turned the page, I thought I was turning two pages. The entire endeavor is the equivalent of slipping between the coolest, crispest sheets at the finest hotel. *Born Standing Up* is a Five-Star production.

It's also graceful, elegant, generous and humble, attributes all emanating from its enormously decent author. No girlfriend was ever a bitch, no show biz associate ever stabbed him in the back. Everyone mentioned is portrayed flatteringly, or, at least, protected. Early on, Martin noticed another comedian cribbing material from Lenny Bruce's act; he graciously omits the thieving comedian's name. When Steve talks about collaborating with Bob Einstein on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, no mention is made of Einstein's arguably more comically inventive brother, Albert Brooks. Most writers

would have thrown that in. Not Steve. He was writing about Bob.

Only once did Martin's acerbic aggressiveness come to the fore. Martin's then girlfriend who, while on a film shoot in Budapest, was "swept away" from Martin by the film's director, John Frankenheimer. Martin then reports that 20 years later, the same director tried to seduce his then wife, Victoria Tennant. Martin completes this improbable tale with the words, "Frankenheimer died a few years ago, but it was not I who killed him."

Born Standing Up chronicles Martin's rise from teen-aged magician's helper at Disneyland to performing at Knott's Berry Farm, to writing for tv variety shows, to years performing on the road with occasional visits to *The Tonight Show*, to headlining performer, to *Saturday Night Live* guest host to superstar, entertaining crowds of up to 45 thousand. As a performer, he was as meticulous about his craft as the greatest illusionist. Honing his material and, more importantly, his accompanying physical moves, Martin accumulated valuable insights, including those concerning his onstage wardrobe. "I really wore the vest so my shirt would stay tucked in my pants." That wasn't his most important insight, but it was the most trivial one. I'd rather not give the important ones away.

Blending concepts from magic, philosophy, absurdist poetry and modern art, Martin crafted a new, participatory form of comedy. Traditionally, the comedian told a joke and the audience, as if on cue, would laugh. Comedian Jack E. Leonard *literally* signaled the audience to laugh by slapping his gut at the end of each punch line. George

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Burns did it by puffing on his cigar. The audience barely had a choice; they were programmed to laugh. Steve's innovative approach sent old-style comedy into permanent retirement. As Martin describes it: "The act's unbridled nonsense was taking the audience – and me – on a wild ride, and my growing professionalism, founded on thousands of shows, created a subliminal sense of authority that made the audience feel like they weren't being had."

Then, at the top of his popularity, Steve Martin quit performing stand-up comedy. It wasn't the same working in front of those massive crowds; creativity surrendered to spectacle. "I was a party host, presiding not over timing and ideas, but over a celebrity bash of my own making." So that was that. Martin went on to other ventures, including movies, retaining throughout his endearing humility. Steve tells the story of a woman, who, after seeing *The Jerk*, came up to him and announced, "I loved this movie. And my husband loved it, and he hates you!"

Did Steve Martin hate show business? Of course not. It wasn't show business Martin was mocking in his act, it was Appropriate Behavior. Old-fashioned Orange County good manners. "Is that stuff stupid, or what?" his performance was saying, defying the entire Emily Post instruction manual by talking seriously with an arrow stuck through his head. On stage, Martin could engage in the outrageous rebellious behavior he was smart enough not to try and pull at home, where a

compliant mother yielded to a scary and, at least once, abusive Dad. Steve's anti-authority persona is a "Take that!" to Mean Poppa Glenn Martin. He then adds insult to injury by becoming enormously successful in a profession his father secretly aspired to but was never gutsy enough to try.

It was Steve's good fortune to attack proper behavior when proper behavior was ready for a fall. Every kid hated to "behave," and Martin was their ringleader. Can you imagine how many times a father in those days snapped at his offspring, "I do not appreciate that tone of voice, young man" only to hear back the totally unrebutable "Well excuuuse me!"?

The irony is, as I mentioned, that Martin himself is relentlessly polite. On the few occasions I was fortunate to meet him, the man was scrupulously decent, once even searching me out to apologize for a slight he felt he had committed. The incident embarrassed me, hinting perhaps that I was the one at fault and I perhaps should be apologizing to him; unfortunately, I lacked the comparative good manners to pull it off.

Many show folk write memoirs, offering little more than the disclosure that they'd once had sex with Eve Arden. Steve's work is 50 levels above that. As I was reading his memoir, I couldn't help thinking of Cyrano de Bergerac, a character Steve played in the self-written movie, *Roxanne*. I don't think it was an accident that Martin chose to take on that role. Fictional Cyrano and real-life Steve are two of a kind:

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elegant, decent, dangerously funny, graced with what Steve Martin's *Born Standing Up* happily overflows with from beginning to end...

Panache.

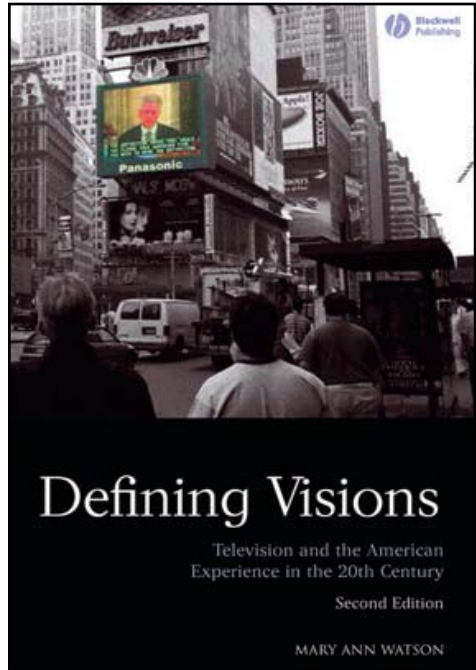
A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, Earl Pomerantz was executive producer of *The Cosby Show*. His comedy-writing credits include *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Cheers*. He has won two Emmy Awards, a Writers' Guild Award and a Cable Ace Award. He has recently completed a book titled *Both Sides Make Me Angry*.

Defining Visions: Television And The American Experience In The 20th Century— Second Edition

By Mary Ann Watson
Blackwell, Boston
(320 pages, \$34.95)

By Michael C. Keith

In the last year or so, I've noticed an increase in the number of car bumpers sporting the sticker, "Kill your television!" I first came across this moving message in the late 1990s while inching my way through the congested streets of metropolitan Boston on my way home after teaching my course in broadcast history at an area college. It immediately struck



me as an indicator—a sign, if you will— that I should be more fully probing the dark side of the medium's influence in that course, and in the ensuing months my lectures were instilled with a solemnity uncommon for them. Up to that time I had been far more inclined to wax positively about the medium for the many gifts I believed it had imparted than to condemn it for its shortcomings.

My lectures soon became fraught with examples of the video screen's power to corrupt and contaminate the youth of the world through its violent and sordid images and mind-numbingly banal programming. Alas, my students were about to take to the streets with placards condemning the networks for their numerous tyrannies when a new book crossed my desk that mitigated my admittedly overwrought rage and indignation. It was the first

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edition of *Defining Visions*, and its cogent and discerning assessment of television's place in American culture steered me toward a much-needed reevaluation of my course's thrust. Indeed, it was the perfect balm for someone suffering from chronic telecondemnititis—a widespread condition whereby individuals perceive only toxic content emanating from their television sets.

Mary Ann Watson has now refined her powerful antidote to this contemporary affliction with a comprehensively revised second edition, which further sharpens the picture of television's role in our lives. It does (as its promotional flyer justifiably claims—a rare example of truth in advertising) provide high definition to our understanding of the medium's message and meaning through a powerful narrative social history that examines television's rise as the great "certifying agent" in American life. It achieves this through extended and updated coverage and analysis of key historical events of recent years, such as the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Columbine shootings, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, while adhering to its sound initial approach to the subject. It worked then and it works now.

As one of our most astute media observers, Watson makes an estimable case for a connection between television and American culture from beginning to conclusion when in her prologue she writes, "It is the premise of this book that in the second half of the 20th century, TV has been the primary means by which

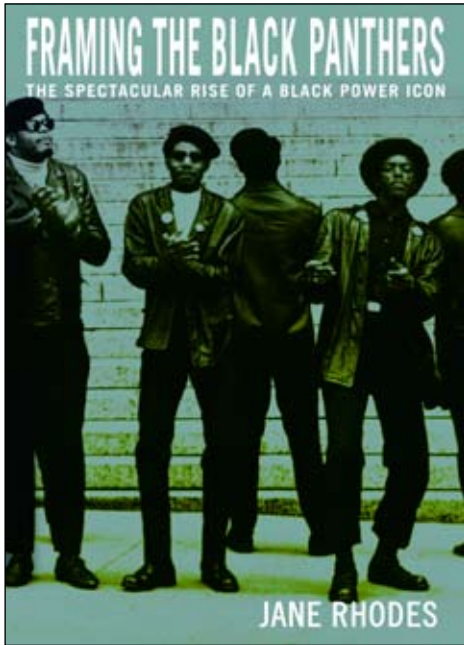
Americans have defined themselves and each other;" and when in her epilogue she declares "Television's most transforming power has been to provide social scripts for postwar America. The medium did more than just hold up a mirror. It provided validation for ideas and behaviors that have had impact on the life of every citizen." What lies between these defining statements is a myriad of corroborating evidence eloquently and vigorously conveyed.

Indeed, Watson's book adds enough to our understanding and appreciation of the medium that it is no longer necessary to pull an Elvis on our TV sets. Turning them off is enough.

One final note, I'm glad to see the second edition has been better packaged. The first edition of *Defining Visions* was misleading in that its contents were far more substantive than the made-for-junior-high-school-library packaging they were wrapped in. Thankfully, Blackwell has improved on the overall look and feel of the volume to make it reflect the quality and weightiness of its interior.

Michael C. Keith is a member of the Communication Department at Boston College. He is the author of two-dozen books on a variety of broadcast topics, in particular those related to radio's role in American culture.

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Framing The Black Panthers – The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon

By Jane Rhodes

The New Press, New York

(416 pages, \$35.00)

By Howard A. Myrick

It was the 1960s, the decade in which television news found its voice – its niche in the panoply of voices competing for attention in a season of turmoil. Not unlike a teenager or college freshman with an undeclared major, television news did not really know what it wanted to be when it grew up. This was the stormy, cacophonous decade so aptly described by Tom Brokaw (in his book, *Boom! Voices of the Sixties*)

– a time of successive booms coming at a cataclysmic pace with concussive impact.

It was also the decade in which television news became a business and discovered the entertainment value of news and its marketability, its economic bearing and identity. What television news is today is, in large measure, attributable to what happened socially, culturally and politically in the 1960s. This relatively new medium of television, trying to process and respond to the dramatic and, often, frightening stimuli resulting from the crises of the era, had to mature rapidly. The television “business” began to perform like a fast-grinding mill trying to keep pace with raw material being fed at furious speed and facing the necessity of turning out a useable product which informed, entertained and produced a profit. Among the entities and phenomena providing grist for this industry-defining mill was a group representing themselves as the Black Panthers – a group presenting dramatic visual impact and even more dramatic rhetoric – imagery that was simultaneously attractive, engaging and fear-arousing and attended by language that was exceedingly disturbing.

The Black Panthers, beyond the public persona projected by the media, who were they? Briefly – and, admittedly, too glibly stated – they were the 1960s group of self-avowed militant African Americans whose mantra was Black Power, a radical ideology rooted in seeking redress for transgressions against black people committed, notably, by the white “establishment”. In many ways they looked and acted like central characters from blaxploitation films, Hollywood films which they both inspired and

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mimicked. Their ideological and political platform was based on addressing the grievances of the black “community,” inspiring self-pride and seeking self-determination for oppressed black people. In word and deed, they espoused their willingness to achieve their goals by “any means necessary” (a threat borrowed from Malcolm X, the *bête noire* of “blue eyed devils” everywhere).

Of special relevance to the mass media, especially television, was the Black Panthers’ intent to take back the control of their image and presentation (i.e., the framing of their identity) from the mainstream media. In the 1960s, to an even greater extent than is the case today, who black, brown, yellow and, indeed, all “other” people were was a product of the construction of mainly the white male-dominated mass media. Not only were racial and ethnic minorities nearly absent, when they were not, their presentations were too often caricatures and stereotypes –mostly negative. Thus, a sizable amount of the Black Panthers’ effort was directed toward the media – in the process becoming quite adept at manipulating the media, especially television. Their relationship with the media was, indeed, symbiotic: they used the media and the media used them ...sometimes to their mutual advantage and, variously, to their disadvantage.

Were it not for the efforts of such scholars and social anthropologists as Jane Rhodes, author of *Framing the Black Panthers*, today’s audiences and, indeed, contemporary journalists would probably refer to the Black Panthers as just old news. The epithet “old news” being used in the manner that some CBS network officials have used it recently

to denigrate former CBS anchor Dan Rather’s \$70 million law suit against his former employer, charging malfeasance and prejudicial treatment associated with his “forced” retirement brought on apparently in connection with his “inadequately vetted” (although, not proven false) news report concerning President George W. Bush’s military service (or lack thereof).

But are the Black Panthers old news? Jane Rhodes asks her readers to consider the significance of the appearance of a group calling themselves the “New Black Panthers” showing up in their signature regalia and demeanor at the arraignment of Zacarias Moussaoui, the 9/11 terrorist suspect; later sentenced to life in prison for his role in plotting the tragic September 11, 2001 hijacking. Their stated purpose: to serve as self-appointed guardians of people “of color” everywhere. That act, although not making much good sense, did make the evening news. Not mentioned by Professor Rhodes, probably because it happened after the publication of her book, was a most ironic instance of another “New Black Panther” spokesperson (also accorded TV news exposure) defending the rights of a white Texan to bear arms in a case in which that person was being charged with the fatal shooting of two unarmed would-be-burglars. So, are the “Black Panthers” like the proverbial bad penny that cannot be gotten rid of, or are they recurring manifestations of a dormant malignancy which reemerges when the requisite social, cultural and political climate reappears?

The question is not whether the media should report such “news”. The lesson of *Framing the Black Panthers* is: the media

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can and does influence the way subjects are portrayed; people and groups can and do manipulate the media...and singularly and/or jointly...the net effect on public discourse and the formulation of public policy can be profound. In the case of the Black Panthers, it was television that provided the first combined “visual and aural glimpses of the group to a mass audience”. Such glimpses (combined with so-called credible FBI “intelligence”), no doubt helped frame J. Edgar Hoover’s perceptions of and lethal actions against this “subversive” group.

So is this all just so much old news? Jane Rhodes apparently anticipated the question; thus, reminding her readers of the admonitions of the nineteenth-century freedom fighter, Frederick Douglass, who exhorted the nation not to forget the era of slavery and the trauma of the Civil War. In 1884, Douglass wrote “It is not well to forget the past. Memory was given to man for some wise purpose. The past is the mirror in which we discern the dim outlines of the future, and by which we may make them more symmetrical.” Whether knowingly or not this has to be the guiding motivation of the really serious television documentarians.

In this reviewer’s opinion it is a tribute to Jane Rhodes’ intellectual acuity and her gift to contemporary media practitioners that she focuses on the dialectics of the Black Panthers using the media to “frame” themselves and “frame” the media (i.e., placing the media in an establishmentarian posture allied with the dominant, power-holding majority society}. Her analyses shed light on the “spin” phenomenon

in contemporary media operations by recounting how J. Edgar Hoover planted fabricated information to the media for the express purpose of denigrating and discrediting, not only the Black Panthers, but all civil rights organizations, their members and leaders – including former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Andrew Young, former Georgia State Senator and current NAACP Chairman Julian Bond, and the venerable Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – all products of the turbulent 1960s civil-rights movement – all dedicated to the actualization of the “American dream”, so proudly proclaimed to the world.

Framing the Black Panthers is an exceptionally good read. Its relevance to contemporary issues in the mass media is what makes it so valuable; for the incomparable American dream is not yet fully realized and “the mirror in which we may discern the dim outlines of the future” just may be the television screen or some technological configuration of what we now regard as television.

Howard A. Myrick, Ph.D., is a professor of Broadcasting, Telecommunications and Mass Media at Temple University and a commissioner of the Pennsylvania Public Television Network. His article, “The Live Television Debate that Could Have Been,” appears on page 44 of this issue of Television Quarterly.