

TELEVISION AND ADVERTISING

In day-to-day commerce, television is not so much interested in the business of communications but in the business of delivering audiences to advertisers. People are the merchandise, not the shows. The shows are merely the bait.

• LES BROWN, *TELEVISION: THE BUSINESS BEHIND THE BOX*, 1971

Call television whatever you want—"idiot box," "American dada," "Charles Dickens on LSD," "plug-in drug," "chewing gum for the eyes," "the bland leading the bland," "summer stock in an iron lung," "dream machine," "vast wasteland," "white noise for the brain,"—this electronic medium is the greatest advertising medium ever concocted, bar none.

Television is *the* primary force in Adcult. Whereas growing up generations ago was defined by a progression of books read, for my parents by movies seen, for those of us born since World War II it has been marked by a progression of television jingles memorized. Print took about two centuries to gain currency as communal memory, photography was in general use after 1900, the telephone took half a century to become part of everyday life, radio was absorbed in thirty-five years and movies in twenty. Television happened overnight. At some mysterious point in the 1950s television ceased to be just an odd-looking gizmo—a radio running a picture track—and entered the bloodstream. It became part of our nervous system.

In our culture most people watch television for most of their "free" time. After sleeping and working, watching images on a video tube is what we do with ourselves. It is our favorite way to pass time. More than 95 percent of American households have at least one television set, and it is on more than six hours a day. We spend the equivalent of a day a week watching it. Well over eighty million households have this thing as part of their lives, and asked if they would give up the thing or a family member, most respond that the thing stays. More American households have televisions than have indoor plumbing. The New York state legislature passed a bill stating that television is a "utensil necessary for a family." The experience of watching this utensil has become the social and intellectual glue that holds us together, our "core curriculum," our duomo. Television has co-opted many of the ceremonies of American life. Religion, politics, and sports have gone into the box. "Did you see . . . ?" has replaced "Do you know . . . ?" "Did you read . . . ?" or "Have you heard . . . ?" Television displays most of what we know and much of what we believe.

And who decides what is displayed? For a while the networks had in-house censors. No longer. The only gatekeepers are the advertising agencies.



They have their own ever alert watchdogs whose job is not to protect the viewer but the sponsor. The Advertising Information Service, which is owned by twenty-one large advertising agencies, employs twenty people to screen shows for problems. Examples of what they do: a scene in which wild dogs chase a girl on an episode of *Little House on the Prairie* was cut because one of the sponsors was Puppy Chow. No cat food commercials appeared on *Alf*, because the alien threatens to eat the family cat. General Motors wants to be sure that none of its commercials is in the neighborhood when Michael Moore is touting his anti-GM movie *Roger and Me*. The Advertising Information Service is not in the least concerned about the steady infiltration of product placement in prime-time television. Quite the contrary. Its staff checks to be sure that Coca-Cola has a red coke machine in the series *TV 101*, that *Alf* is eating only Hershey bars, that Oneida silverware is identifiable on the tables of *Dynasty* and *Dallas*, and that Budweiser beer is drunk at Roseanne's house, whereas Stroh's is served over at *Cheers*.

This all sounds rather ominous to those who vibrate while reading *Brave New World*, but I think it is not. The agencies have no agenda other than to assure the sponsor that the network is providing the audience as promised. Audience share is the commodity that ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox sell—not the shows. Or, seen another way, production companies sell video sequences to the networks, which broadcast them in order to rent the attention of the audience to advertisers. No one in the business pretends otherwise. Robert Niles, vice president of marketing for NBC, puts the matter like this: "We're in the business of selling audiences to advertisers. They [the sponsors] come to us asking for women 18 to 49 and adults 25 to 54 and we try to deliver" (Harmetz 1986:21). Niles's predecessor, Sonny Fox, now an independent producer, makes the point more politely at a lecture series sponsored by the Annenberg School at the University of Southern California: "The salient fact is that commercial television is primarily a marketing medium and secondarily an entertainment medium" (Andrews 1980:64). And Roger King, in charge of syndication for King Brothers (*Wheel of Fortune*, *Jeopardy*), contends, "The people are the boss. We listen to the audience, see what they want, and try to accommodate them. I know it sounds simplistic, but that's exactly what it is" (Dunkel 1989:80). Or here is Arnold Becker, erstwhile vice president for research at CBS: "I'm not interested in culture. I'm not interested in pro-social values. I have only one interest. That's whether people watch the program. That's my definition of good, that's my definition of bad" (Andrews 1980:64).