

# Children's Television Workshop

Charlie Smith

I do not know what you think about television. But like it or not, it will not go away. You can not pray it away, wish it away, you can not legislate it away. We had better learn to live with it.

Yet nothing you think of, individually or collectively has so impacted and changed your lives. In less than 40 years nothing has changed you the way television has. It is awesome in its power, it is arrogant, it will not change. There is nothing in its place that will basically change the way it functions in this society. The sole purpose of commercial television is making money. That is a fact of life. To change it would cause a philosophical change, and we are not yet up to changing our philosophies.

There are how many kinds of television—commercial, public and educational, and cable? Cable is yet to come upon you. But it is on its way. And, if you think the programming on television is bad now, wait until you see cable. We will do just exactly what we are doing now—laugh about it and do nothing.

Let me tell you how arrogant this medium is. How many seasons are there in a year? Four. Football, basketball. . . well almost. We name the four seasons starting with spring. This medium is arrogant, it divides itself into two - fall and the second season. It is so arrogant it has now a high holy

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day, Super Bowl Sunday. Think about it, 120,000,000 - plus of us bow down to worship it on that day. Nothing functions in this country on that day except television.

How much money do you think it costs to make a high band color 60-second spot that will air across this country? In normal times you are safe with a \$100,000 guess. That same 60-second spot on Super Bowl Sunday gets \$750,000 to \$1,000,000. It is Fort Knox multiplied in units of 10. It has been alleged that when you have a television station you have a license to print money or to make money without any compulsion. You just go out and do it. It is that awesome in its power, and it has changed us, the way we think, the way we are. We no longer really listen to each other. We talk in the new language, the 30-second and the 60-second spot language. We have cute little phrases to fit those little funny gaps of time. And not much is going to change that.

How would you get a program taken off the air if you do not like it? Write the sponsor? Do not buy the product? Turn to another channel? Do not watch it?

The best way to get to the programming situation is to write to the advertising agency that puts it on. Write a letter with pen and ink. Tell what is in your heart and mind. They will hear that. They will not take the program off, but they will hear what you had to say. It is as simple as that.

Television is the most believable instrument in this society. Most people go home at night and turn on the set. Why? It is habit, devotion. What is the salvation for television generally in the country? TVS. Why? It offers an alternative. The American household at the last count has something in excess of 4½ television sets.

Television has made demigods of men, because when they tell us the way it is we believe it. "That is all the news you need to know 'dummies,' good night." And we sit there and nod our heads, walk out to the refrigerator feeling good that we know about the fire in Ireland or something like that. That is a sad commentary on all of us who have gone to schools and who read and who function, who are gathered in a place at night and who are in our little cubes and the tube comes down to us.

I worked for a company that I think has brought some joy. It is called The Children's Television Workshop. It was experimental when it was conceived. Its purpose was to teach preschoolers basic concepts necessary for the human organism as it moved on to formal education. This is the

greatest adventure the human being will ever have. The adventure of learning.

It is the learners who will inherit the earth not the learned. The greatest period of growth within the human being is between one and four or two and six or birth and whatever, you know that sort of thing. But if we could get the process going, then when children arrived at school the professional could take over and work on that improved raw material. That is what we tried to do and what we did.

A woman founded the company. She came armed with her degrees in education and in business. She came to the fantasy world of New York City, to make a mark for herself because she had the credentials in her hand and, of course, at the time the society was chauvinistic. It is still chauvinistic. It will always be chauvinistic. She talked with the Ford Foundation about a children's program. They asked how much money? She reached up and got a figure of six million dollars, she really did not know. She got it. She pulled together a staff, stole bodies from everywhere. She laid out her ideas to try for 13 weeks. First, what about the preschooler? Everyone knew about the preschooler yet there was no real data. So, we flew experts to New York from all over the planet. They arrived with little brief cases and eyes gleaming to tell us about the preschool child. We learned something, they did not have the answers. But we kept them. They finally called out a curriculum that all preschoolers need.

In six months the experts were just chomping at the bit to produce the show. But we did not want them to produce it. They did not know how to do it. We set out to get the people who at that time were called kooks, you know sandals and strange looking clothes, but who knew their craft and were proud of it. We gave them the curriculum and asked them to put it on this screen in imaginative ways. They said let's try some animation; let's do some live action. It all culminated in a program called "Sesame Street." Do you know how we got our name? A little girl gave it to us—"Open Sesame." She was tired of researchers talking down to her. She asked, "Why don't you call it 'Open Sesame' and give me my sucker and let me go home."

We never intended to be on the air longer than 13 weeks. We did not know if we could catch on. But most of you made us. You know why? You were tired, or you had been led to believe you were tired, of what was currently on television. Nothing had really been on television that was

television oriented, most things in the early years were from the theatre, movies or cartoons. But we came with something that caught the imagination. "Mama," being truly interested in her child, wanting something to give to her child, decided that the Muppets were beautiful and wonderful, just magic. The stations cleared the air for us all the way across this country. Sesame used to roll out of the east in the morning at 8. As it moved across this country everybody was in tune with it, and we had two good years of no criticism.

It was success beyond our wildest imagination. We followed it with a program called "The Electric Company." Its sole purpose was to try to get young people interested in reading. Then we did a show on health called "Feeling Good." Remember that? It was a turkey. It was not a turkey because it was not good in production. Americans just did not give a tinker's dam about their liver and heart in prime time. We could not sell it.

There is much I can share with you about these things. I have only tried to hop and skip and jump. I do not know where television is taking us. Who knows where it is taking us. The tragedy is that we are allowing it to take us. We are masters here. We are. The simplest thing to do is to turn it off in your homes if you can and do other things if you can.

Q: If, as you feel, public television is the answer, what kind of things can we help change? What action do you think that either individuals or groups such as this can take to strengthen public television in this country?

A: I think that because public television is in essence handled by the Congress, we should put some pressure on them as a citizen-taxpayer to get some of our money going that way. If all of the print media just gave 1 percent or one-half percent of their gross advertising revenue for one year, it would give this thing more money than it has ever dreamed of. Now how do you make that palatable to them? You give them a tax write off. But until the administration of that mass called public television gets it act together, we are still going to be fumbling around. It is too much politics but we cannot do anything about it. Most stations in the public system want to be producing stations. I want to produce, I want my stuff to be seen all over the place. They all cannot. It takes intelligence to say that we cannot produce.

Q: What is the division of PBS into three networks? What kind of effect do you think that is going to have?

A: Basically three networks within PBS gives the inde-

pendent stations a chance to air one of three different things instead of only one. A local station should carry some national programming. But, it should be concerned with its local problems and should be allowed to deal with those at a local level.

Q: How can you weave the audiences away, a little bit, from the commercial television to see these things?

A: You cannot sway the audience away from commercial television. You can a little, but, keep in mind that while we glorify education in this country, the moment you mention that television is education they turn off.

Q: Is there any possibility for the new home video recorders, if they are used for anything other than just taping programs off the air?

A: There are all kinds of possibilities for cable television. But first, let me say something about the home video recorders—the video tape cassette. That is the big thing. But, the disc is here, and it will store easier. Before you sink a lot of money into this, give some thought to it. With disc you can build a totally different kind of library in terms of your own home and what you want to see.

Now, about cable. Cable can offer some excellent kinds of things. But it is difficult and expensive to wire. Cable was sold on the basis of movies. We sit in our homes and watch movies, and after 12 p.m. we can watch the little blue movies. Cable can offer some of the best alternatives possible, but most of us cannot afford the expense. Getting software to fill time is difficult. Producing something for cable is expensive because you have a limited group to pay.

Commercial television also can be educational. "All In The Family," for instance, was not just entertainment. There was an educational quality, too, a little undertone. It was America looking at Americans. There can be more of that kind of thing on commercial television. Norman Lear, who created the series, admits that was the underlying thing. He said that he was trying to entertain, but there was that teaching element. Archie was hailed as a bigot, he really was not. But, the problem is that the mass audience pictured him as such. Whether they caught the educational message underneath and could in a sense analyze themselves remains to be seen.

Q: I hope that you are tapping those things that are in agricultural research so far.

A: Now let me be candid with you, I did not know you existed. Occasionally, I would run across something. But, I

could not focus in on it because you are focusing in on many other things. You know that the science show (Editor's note: Children's Television Workshop is developing a science series) is going on. Somebody ought to be writing a letter. That is important, I do not know how it gets into the mix, but that is important.

Everyone of the so called agricultural issues can be interpreted in terms of meaning to all the people. It does not matter what happens in agriculture at all unless it has some meaning to the rest of the people. As far as I know, no one seems to be seeing this opportunity to do it. They are transferring some outfit like yours to do this in an easy to understand way.

Let me ask you a question? Why don't you produce? No I mean as a group. As a unit. Each of you in your own attitudes. You have certain attitudes that you work in and you do things. Is it possible for some group to be formed here that produces shows for a national television? But, I am just speaking in terms of market—regional and national. Yes it is possible. But in all candor it does not have a chance of a snowball in a furnace.

EDITOR'S NOTE: It was suggested that ACE members could work to develop regional television news, just as we have in developing regional publications. Perhaps some of the news clips, generated regionally, could be used on the new Science Series of the Children's Television Workshop.