BACKGROUND BOOKS

TELEVISION IN AMERICA

Television has replaced the popular novel—and the movies—as America's chief medium of entertainment, and scores of scholars and journalists have attempted to explain this phenomenon. The Library of Congress card catalog contains entries for more than 6,000 works on television. Yet, among them, truly illuminating studies are few.

The best one-volume history is **Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television** (Oxford, 1975, cloth; 1977, paper) by Erik Barnouw, a former Columbia professor of dramatic arts, television, and film. His well-written account is a condensation of his three-volume *A History of Broadcasting in the United States* (1966–70). In addition to providing crisp analyses of TV's evolution and of individual programs, Barnouw presents brief sketches of television's tycoons, including NBC's David Sarnoff and CBS's William S. Paley.

In **David Sarnoff: A Biography** (Harper, 1966), Eugene Lyons describes the dramatic incident that thrust the young Sarnoff into national prominence. On the night of April 14, 1912, while on duty as a wireless operator in New York City, Sarnoff received a startling message from the S.S. *Olympic:* "S.S. *Titanic* ran into iceberg. Sinking fast." To ease communications with ships near the scene, President William Howard Taft shut down all other radio stations. For three days, Sarnoff stayed glued to his earphones and relayed news of the tragedy to the press. An overnight celebrity, he later formed the NBC network to provide a market for radios—and later, of course, got into TV.

In 1948, William S. Paley, principal owner of CBS, brightened his network's prospects by raiding rival NBC of some of its biggest TV stars—Jack Benny, Red Skelton, and Frank Sinatra. Paley, who also pioneered in radio news with Edward R. Murrow, William Shirer, H. V. Kaltenborn, and Eric Sevareid, gives an often veiled account of his rise in **As It Happened: A Memoir** (Doubleday, 1979).

Paley touted CBS-TV as "the largest advertising medium in the world." And, indeed, TV's relationship with business is the medium's Big Story. For a complete account of that symbiosis, readers can again turn to Erik Barnouw.

In **The Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate** (Oxford, 1978, cloth; 1979, paper), Barnouw writes that the real message of TV is a commercial one; the result is "a dramaturgy reflecting the demographics of a supermarket."

Most of the TV-viewing public claims to dislike commercials, but there is little doubt among advertisers that they succeed in selling products. As the head of the "Creative Group" that produced AT&T's campaign to promote long-distance telephoning has remarked, "In thirty seconds, everybody notices *everything.*" A funny, behind-the-scenes look at the making of those brief "spots" for the telephone company is **Thirty Seconds** (Farrar, 1980) by *New Yorker* television critic Michael J. Arlen.

For six months in 1979, Arlen, the author of two excellent collections of essays on TV—**Living-Room War** (Viking, 1969) and **The View from Highway 1** (Farrar, 1976, cloth; Ballantine, 1977, paper)—followed the commercial-makers around. The result is a deadpan, camera-eye view of the people involved in an exotic process. "Basically," says an ad man, "we are targeting people who have already experienced making a long-distance phone call." The commercial's music composer admits that "Reach out and touch someone" was a "*good* line" but, he adds, "it was genius . . . that thought to extend the basic concept to 'Reach out, *reach out*, and touch someone.'"

How television has "touched" the public, or affected the way people behave, is a growing target of scholarly effort. An extensive roundup of 25 years of such research is found in **Television and Human Behavior** (Columbia, 1978, cloth & paper) by George Comstock et al. Not surprisingly, there are few firm answers.

Although no hard evidence links TV news treatment and shifts in public opinion, network news "bias" has long excited critics' suspicions. Edward J. Epstein's **News from Nowhere: Television and the News** (Random, 1973, cloth; Viking, 1974, paper), is a pioneering inside look at ABC, CBS, and NBC. Epstein clearly shows the preponderant (and nonideological) influence on TV journalism of budgets, competition for ratings, and keep-it-simple themes. The frustrations of TV newspeople bulk larger than their flaws in Marvin Barrett and Zachary Sklar's **The Eye of the Storm** (Lippincott & Crowell, 1980, cloth & paper), the latest Alfred I. duPont–Columbia University survey of broadcast journalism. More pointed is editor Paul Weaver's critique in **Television as a Social Force: New Approaches to TV Criticism** (Praeger, 1975, cloth & paper). The producers of TV news programs, he writes, seek to convey an impression of "authority and omniscience"; the final product is peculiarly unreliable because it tells the viewer more than its creators know or can know.

Reference books dealing with television abound. Most intriguing is critic Cobbett S. Steinberg's **TV Facts** (Facts on File, 1980). Its lists of top-rated TV shows, however, can be as dispiriting as the best-seller book lists in Sunday newspapers. The three highest-rated TV series for 1978–79 were *Three's Company*, *Laverne and Shirley*, and *Mork and Mindy*. *60 Minutes* tied for sixth place. The longest running prime-time TV series is *Disney's Wonderful World*. Since September 1954—under five different titles and on two networks—the show, perhaps appropriately for television, has offered the public a tour of Fantasyland.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Lawrence W. Lichty and Stuart N. Brotman suggested many of the titles mentioned in this essay.*