

## **ABC and the Destruction of American Television, 1953–1961**

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THE INTRODUCTION of television in the late 1940s and 1950s involved more than a struggle for audiences. Through the fifties, the three national networks offered sharply contrasting models of programming. And TV arguably was more diverse because of this rivalry. Almost from the beginning of regularly scheduled telecasts in 1947, national networks determined the programming of TV, especially in the evenings, when most consumers used their receivers. One of the chains, National Broadcasting Company, included managers who believed TV could be a new form of mass amusement, suitable for experimentation. Columbia Broadcasting System relied on radio in looking for programming ideas and transferred successful radio shows to TV. A third chain, the American Broadcasting Company, by succeeding in the late 1950s with a different philosophy of programming, eventually imposed the film industry's standards onto nightly entertainment. As audiences turned to ABC, the other networks followed. Television took on a standardized, movieland quality for the next twenty-five years [33, 99, 100].

Ironically, the federal overseer of television, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), had anticipated a different outcome. The FCC historically championed "diverse" programming; that is, licensees and networks should offer different types of programs so consumers had a true choice among the limited number of radio and TV frequencies available [91, 93].<sup>1</sup> In 1941, the FCC had forced NBC to divest itself of its second radio chain, the Blue Network [9, 120]. This weak system became ABC. Twelve years later, the Commission permitted the financially ailing network to be acquired by United Paramount Theatres (UPT). The agency had determined that ABC's continued operation would enhance American television. With little attention to the economics of broadcasting, the Commission concluded that Americans would be better served by three

rather than two networks [18; 19; 29; 30; 73; 121, pp. 264, 319, 333]. Yet by creating ABC out of the Blue and then keeping that system alive by agreeing to the UPT merger, the Commission ultimately lessened the diversity of network television. The FCC promoted new rivalries that came to have a deleterious impact on the most popular cultural form in postwar America.

The Commission's February 1953 approval of the UPT-ABC merger had little immediate effect on network competition. TV networking then for all practical purposes was a duopoly, with the National Broadcasting Company and the Columbia Broadcasting System, dominant. ABC and a fourth chain, the Du Mont network, were way behind. At the time of the merger, ABC was in a very weak position. With thirteen affiliate stations (less than 10 percent of either CBS's or NBC's chain), ABC programs could only be seen in one-third of the nation, compared to virtual national coverage for CBS and NBC. The network had two mildly popular series (*Ozzie and Harriet* and *Beulah*) and was experiencing difficulty persuading advertisers to sponsor *anything* else offered. The network produced twelve and one-half hours of programming a week. "We weren't a network," recalled one executive in 1961 [60, 68].<sup>2</sup> Indeed, ABC was so far behind that two years after the merger NBC was able to blackmail Westinghouse into switching ownership of TV stations by exchanging its desirable Philadelphia-owned outlet for one in Cleveland, owned by NBC. Westinghouse otherwise would have lost its NBC affiliation, and its Philadelphia station would have had to become an ABC affiliated station [35; 83; 122, pp. 427, 432; 133].

Within six years, however, ABC was not only challenging NBC and Columbia for the ratings leadership, but leading the older networks in programming trends, which arguably lessened the diversity of television. ABC led in shifts to filmed series, increases in the number of western and detective dramas. As CBS and NBC followed, they in the process canceled many live and dramatic programs identified with the mass medium's "Golden Age." ABC, in fact, proved sufficiently successful that by late 1959, both CBS and NBC had former ABC executives serving as presidents of their TV networks. In 1961, Martin Mayer, a journalist who had followed TV from the beginning, observed,

ABC has become, in a surprisingly short time, the industry leader in matters of programming, selling and dealing with affiliated stations. In each area, the rival networks, most of the advertising agencies, and the staff of the FCC believe, rightly or wrongly, that the ABC influence has tended to destroy what integrity the network business had [68, p. 59].

A few TV critics noted this transformation with horror. John Crosby of the *Herald-Tribune*, who in 1952 had bemoaned the "dominant duopoly"

of CBS and NBC, was six years later terming ABC a “pernicious” influence on the medium [72, 113].

Differences in management experience at the three networks partly explain ABC’s role in fifties television. At the beginning of network telecasting, CBS was run by figures tested in radio broadcasting. They dreaded, perhaps to excess, the possibility of government intervention [13, 54]. Programmers at NBC included old radio hands and a former advertising executive, Sylvester L. Weaver. Chief programmer between 1949 and 1956, Weaver was determined to make TV distinctive, not the imitator of radio or film. And in 1953, Weaver developed the 60-to-120 minute “spectacular,” a special live musical or dramatic production aired monthly [31, 69, 136].

At ABC, in contrast, the merger with UPT was soon followed by a slow struggle to bring Hollywood’s standards and product to television. ABC President Robert Kintner and UPT-ABC Chairman Leonard Goldenson, despite promises to the FCC that the new ABC team would adhere to broadcast traditions,<sup>3</sup> were soon in California seeking film companies to produce series for their network. Most motion picture makers had been boycotting TV. But Kintner, a gruff, chain-smoking former journalist, was an especially forceful presence in the movie colony. Indeed, he was reputedly a match for the notoriously rough-hewn Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures.<sup>4</sup> Goldenson, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard law school, also used his pre-merger contacts as the UPT executive to negotiate [97].<sup>5</sup> Late in 1954, ABC broke the Hollywood quarantine of TV. Walt Disney Studios agreed to produce programs for ABC after the network agreed to help finance Disney’s planned amusement park, Disneyland [1, 22, 95]. A year later, Warner Brothers, one of the largest film makers, crossed the line and signed a deal with ABC. Others, including M-G-M and Fox, soon followed [2, p. 15; 75; 101].<sup>6</sup>

Both the Warners and Disney programs proved extraordinarily successful. Indeed, the first hour-long Disney show was such an immediate hit with children that even stations unaffiliated with ABC sought to pick it up. At ABC’s New York headquarters, secretaries wore Mickey Mouse ears. Congressmen reported of constituents angry over certain stations airing the program past youngsters’ bedtime. Three different Disney hours about the life of Davy Crockett touched off a coonskin cap craze so widespread that Senator Estes Kefauver abandoned that headgear as his political trademark. The coonskin cap, his daughter averred, had become too much identified with little boys [32, 41, 53, 74, 78, 123].

For ABC, Warners, too, enjoyed success in television by producing Western series. Efforts to adapt into series old feature films, *King’s Row* and *Casablanca*, failed, while ones involving the frontier, including *Cheyenne*, *Sugarfoot*, and *Maverick*, drew large audiences to the third network. Soon,

all three networks were offering more westerns. And in January 1959, one fifth of *all* evening series were westerns [4, 7, 102, 109, 115 128].<sup>7</sup>

The westward movement — initiated by ABC — was quickly followed by an emphasis at American on the detective series. Mass produced by Warners, each had a regular cast of unknown, younger actors who a decade earlier would have been featured in a B movie. Series like *77 Sunset Strip* and *Surfside 6* were distinguished only by their locale. A private investigation firm of two or more handsome men aided the beautiful and the damned, week in, week out. And just as *Cheyenne* had proved popular in Bayonne, programs like *Hawaiian Eye* won the hearts of viewers from Portland to Portland. With such popularity came still more young detectives. As Warners increased its output of detective series into the 1959–1960 season, a San Francisco critic wrote, “The Warner Brothers are turning out so many private eyes this season they ought to be forced to take out an optometrist’s license.” [64, 94, 137]

The detective and western programs have been commonly classified by communication researchers as “action/adventure” series. Gunplay, not words or humorous situations, ordinarily resolved an episode’s “crisis.” Leads were set, week in, week out. And critics had some difficulty praising any of them. *77 Sunset Strip*, wrote one, proved “principally that Warner Brothers can still make a B movie” [45; 65; 68, pp. 61, 62; 130, 131].<sup>8</sup> But then Goldenson of ABC, wrote Martin Mayer in 1961, “believes that the B-picture is the correct television show as it was the correct show in the neighborhood movie house” [68, pp. 59, 61, 62; 105, p. 6].

The action/adventure series had a special appeal to an audience ABC coveted. Well behind CBS and NBC at the outset, ABC sold programs to advertisers on the basis of the *quality* rather than the sheer quantity of the network’s audiences. Most ABC westerns and detective series regularly featured young adult males who in turn were found to attract young families. Kintner’s successor, Oliver Treyz, president of ABC TV between 1956 and 1962, skillfully used such demographic data in selling programs to advertisers. The 18-to-49-year-old cluster of viewers, many with families, frequently preferred ABC programs. They were also more likely to spend money on a wide range of consumer items. ABC, Treyz argued, appealed to the “get set” [21; 23; 88; 97, p. 391; 105, p. 6].<sup>9</sup>

Then, too, most of ABC’s action/adventure programs succeeded because of the network’s “counter-programming” philosophy. Counter-programming called for the network scheduler to locate vulnerable programs on his rival’s schedules and then offer in contrast a very different type of show. This practice owed something to the movie house managers of the 1940s looking for a different type of film (western) the week a rival ran another type (musical). Mayer observed, “If Clausewitz saw war as the continuation of politics by other means, Goldenson has seen network

television as the continuation of the movie theatre business by other means” [21; 23; 88; 97, p. 391; 105, p. 6].<sup>9</sup> In the case of ABC TV, Treyz determined that if NBC and Columbia aired live variety programs, as they each did at 8 p.m. (ET) on Sundays in the fall 1957 season, then a filmed Western (*Maverick*) might win audiences to American. Similarly, the next season, a CBS anthology, *Lux Playhouse*, might be vulnerable to the detectives working at *77 Sunset Strip*; in the fall 1959 season, ABC set *Adventures in Paradise* against *Alcoa/Goodyear Playhouse* (NBC). ABC also scheduled potentially popular sixty-minute series one half-hour ahead of the competitions’ hour-long programs [23, p. 28; 68, p. 59, 62; 88, p. 56].

Counter-programming proved profitable for American. By the 1958–1959 season, ABC could boast for the first time of being competitive in those larger urban markets where it had affiliates competing directly with CBS and NBC stations. Advertisers like Procter & Gamble, which had heretofore shunned the third network, now answered Treyz’s calls. “Respect for ABC has increased,” one underwriter commented. “ABC has programmed much ‘junk’ and a substantial part of its schedule is ‘still junk’ but nevertheless ABC is a serious contender and no one can dispute that” [23, p. 28; 25; 34; 40; 55; 92; 103; 110; 129].

Treyz and Goldenson defended counter-programming by contending it actually increased the diversity of programming available to viewers. If ABC offered a western to variety programs on NBC and CBS, the consumer had a choice. Moreover, ABC executives insisted that the total network TV schedule, not just American’s, be considered in calculating diversity. “We do not believe that ABC — or any network — can be all things to all people,” Treyz told a Cincinnati audience in April 1961, “It is not a network but *all the networks* collectively which should be in balance” [80; 128].<sup>10</sup>

This contention was not then in keeping with FCC practice. By offering little other than standardized entertainment programming, ABC left to Columbia and NBC the burden of less popular informational and cultural programming, even though the FCC never defined diversity by types of *entertainment* programming alone. The fall 1958 Tuesday evening schedule, for example, consisted of three westerns and a detective show [97, p. 308]. A critic for the *Christian Science Monitor* poring over the 1961–1962 schedule found, “Take away the action-adventure films, animated cartoons and situation comedies, and all the American Broadcasting Company’s other [evening] programs could be telecast between 7 and 11 o’clock on a single evening” [37]. ABC concurred. In its 1962 annual report, ABC described the addition of two World War II series, *Combat!* and *McHale’s Navy*, one an action drama, the other a comedy, as examples of the network’s efforts to bring diversity to programming ([6]; compare

[40, p. 5]). A prominent TV producer told the FCC in 1961, "ABC is beneath discussion. It seems to me to be a combination of *Wild West Magazine* and *True Story* and *Real Mysteries*. I think it should be taken to task, soon and severely" [59, p. 20].<sup>11</sup>

FCC commissioners and staff did recognize ABC's programming philosophy and part in the decline of television. When, in February 1962, Dwight Macdonald interviewed FCC Chairman Newton Minow and Commissioner Frederick W. Ford, one a Democrat, the other a Republican, both acknowledged ABC's role in ending the Golden Age.<sup>12</sup> FCC staff members similarly saw ABC accelerating the shift to standardization, forcing the competition to discard some diverse programming [125].<sup>13</sup>

Yet the Commission did nothing. Once, during a hearing on programming in early 1962, Minow lost his temper at Treyz. Otherwise, the chairman and his colleagues preferred to avoid any hint of berating a particular network or censoring a specific program by grouping all the networks together and indicting what Minow dubbed "the vast wasteland" of television.<sup>14</sup>

The Commission was also guilt-ridden. Although sanctioning the UPT acquisition in February 1953, the agency had not created enough Very High Frequency (VHF) stations (channels 2–13) for a true, three-way network rivalry. As a result, because of its slow start, ABC found it had fewer stations with which to affiliate; a disproportionate number of ABC's stations lay in the weaker Ultra High Frequency band (UHF) (Channels 14–83). Even though ABC programs sometimes proved popular in larger markets where it had strong affiliates, many advertisers discriminated against the network. ABC lacked "comparable coverage" in smaller markets lacking a third VHF station [47, 81, 119, 124, 135].<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, in no area did ABC continually disappoint more critics and regulators than nonentertainment programming. ABC, despite the FCC's enthusiasm for informational fare, was decidedly weak in news programming. Unlike NBC and Columbia, the network did air live the Army-McCarthy Senate hearings of 1954. But this decision had more to do with the network's nonexistent daytime schedule than altruistic programming values [20, 138].<sup>16</sup> That same year, Kintner deliberately counter-programmed entertainment against the CBS and NBC nightly newscasts, which were then coming on at 7:30 (ET). Kintner's actions drove both to an earlier hour with smaller potential audiences [52]. Despite greatly increased revenues several years later, ABC actually *reduced* its evening news programming between the 1957–1958 and 1958–1959 seasons, even as CBS and especially NBC augmented their public service fare [97, p. 243; 111]. A TV season later, NBC aired 95 hours of news and public affairs programming; CBS 85 hours. ABC telecast 49 hours. "The incontrovertible fact of the past few years," wrote the *New York Times* TV

columnist in 1961, “is that ABC concentrated almost exclusively on the most popular money-making formats without bearing a proportionate share of the burden of maintaining diversity or public service in TV” [80; 105, p. 6; 114].

Two departures at ABC offer further proof of the network’s inattention to radio’s traditions or those of its rivals. In 1955, Chet Huntley, then a Los Angeles-based ABC newscaster, whom West Coast critics compared to CBS’s Edward R. Murrow, left the network. He had been asked to deliver the morning news in a milkman’s uniform [11, 76, 77]. Five years later, John Charles Daly, the network’s chief anchor, quit after Treyz decided to curtail coverage of the 1960 presidential election returns in favor of showing *The Rifleman* and *The Bugs Bunny Show* [70, 79, 116].<sup>17</sup> CBS and NBC had devoted the whole evening to democracy’s sweepstakes. Subsequent efforts to upgrade the ABC news division in the wake of Daly’s resignation proved merely cosmetic [26, 132].<sup>18</sup>

In addition to neglecting news programming, ABC disappointed the FCC twice regarding voluntary programming arrangements. Early in 1960, FCC Chairman John C. Doerfer persuaded the networks to devote six hours of programming a week to nonentertainment, news programming. Under the Doerfer Plan, each network would schedule in evening prime time two hours of public affairs fare per week. But when ABC subsequently refused to obey the guidelines of Doerfer’s agreement, NBC and CBS withdrew their commitment and the plan died. A year and a half later, FCC Chairman Newton Minow negotiated a “children’s hour” treaty, whereby each network would, in the interests of enriching children’s television, simultaneously telecast an hour of educational programming for the young. The preadolescent consumer would be compelled to view programming “good” for him or her. Again, however, ABC reconsidered its participation and abandoned Minow. His agreement collapsed [14, pp. 116–17, 121, 214–15; 90]

Such attitudes might be dismissed were it not for ABC’s influence on advertisers and the other networks. ABC’s rise strengthened the hand of more demanding sponsors. With that network finally presenting popular programming, some advertisers now had a place to go if CBS or NBC resisted their programming ideas or to scheduling more popular programs at the expense of “Golden Age” offerings [104].<sup>19</sup> Executives at CBS later denied that their decisions were so affected, and there were some instances of advertisers having to carry out their threat and take a program concept to American.<sup>20</sup> NBC President Robert Sarnoff, however, confessed in August 1959, “There’s no question that [ABC’s] program schedule has caused both us and CBS to make a number of changes.” By then, NBC had eliminated Weaver’s spectaculars and virtually all of its anthology dramas in favor of westerns and other action series [23, p. 34; 106].<sup>21</sup>

The fate of one program, *The Untouchables*, is revealing. Sometime in the late 1958 season, Desilu Productions offered CBS a violent action drama concerning US prohibition agents. For some reason, CBS Chairman William S. Paley rejected it on the advice of network vice president Hubbell Robinson [24].<sup>22</sup> ABC then agreed to Desilu's terms. *The Untouchables* subsequently proved to be not only an immensely popular entry in the 1959–1960 season but, as two TV historians observed, “perhaps the most mindlessly violent program ever seen on TV to that time.” For his poor intuition, Robinson, though an architect of TV's Golden Age, was passed over for the CBS TV presidency in December 1959. Instead, Paley named a former ABC vice president and Treyz protege, James Aubrey. Of ABC's rise, Aubrey confessed, “Ollie Treyz and I did it all” [28; 60, p. 68; 67; 111, p. 7; 117; 138, p. 264].

Aubrey's promotion over Robinson marked a peculiar triumph for American. With his elevation, the chief programmers at Columbia and NBC both had worked at ABC. In 1957, Robert Kintner had become an NBC vice president shortly after being dismissed at ABC. Soon president of the network, Kintner had imposed his philosophy of film and action onto the NBC schedule and canceled the network's anthologies and spectaculars. By all accounts, he oversaw all scheduling decisions at NBC between 1957 and 1966 [106].<sup>23</sup>

At Columbia, former ABC Vice President Aubrey became president of CBS TV in December 1959. Aubrey shared his past employer's enthusiasm for standardization. Although having to share some decision-making with CBS owner William Paley, Aubrey nevertheless exercised the greatest authority in deciding what went on Columbia television. Aubrey had already developed the western, *Have Gun, Will Travel*, and as president worked on the action series, *Route 66*. He went on to promote a number of new situation comedies in rural settings, beginning with *The Beverly Hillbillies*. These series came to replace the action dramas as the most watched genre on TV after 1961. Before his ouster, Aubrey had removed the last anthologies still aired by Columbia [46, 54, 82, 84].

The ruthlessness of Aubrey and Kintner should not be underestimated. Internal network memoranda (subpoenaed by a Senate committee in 1961) conclusively showed both men and their underlings ordering producers to infuse violence and sex into their networks' programs [97, p. 329; 126].<sup>24</sup> Their designs were all too apparent: ABC programs, especially the popular *Untouchables*, were breaking viewers' resistance to the third network. Something had to be done to check ABC's growth. *Life* editorialized in May 1961.

A sort of Gresham's law also operates to drive good programs out by bad. The worst offender in network 'wasteland' programming, American



Broadcasting Co., which devotes about half its prime evening hours to adventure shows or gangster bloodbaths like *The Untouchables*, has been taking both sponsors, viewers and outlets [sic] away from its rivals. If the public taste is so shoddy and sponsors so servile to it, how can better quality emerge out of such ruthless and irresponsible competition [62, 134].<sup>25</sup>

Although both CBS and NBC continued to spend two to three times as much money on their news divisions, each was prepared to sacrifice evening prime time hours to keep ahead of ABC. Counter-programming lessened the resolve, left from radio, to “balance” the evening schedule. Before counter-programming, anthologies might command good ratings [10], because viewers had only two choices and might risk art over Milton Berle. With *two* light entertainments to choose from, the network standing by an anthology or informational series was risking far smaller audience shares and more disappointed sponsors.

And by the 1959–1960 season, this was a risk that ABC’s rivals were no longer prepared to take. The three-network 1959–1960 season included twenty-eight westerns and thirteen crime shows. Almost all of the anthologies were gone. The B-film TV series predominated on all three chains. And later studies by communication researchers confirmed what a few discerning critics had noticed in the late 1950s: ABC destroyed American television.

“Ferocious competition,” observed one reporter, “drove the older networks once able to indulge themselves in an occasional stretch of quality into programming that made the shows on all three networks look interchangeable” [44; 45; 51; 56; 57; 58; 59, p. 18; 98].<sup>26</sup> One writer for the departing anthologies bitterly remarked in 1961 that the three networks were now “satisfied to become mainly a purveyor of the worst kind of Hollywood C-picture junk” [8].

Of course the “interchangeable” series had preceded ABC’s productions, just as some programs had been on film from the very beginning of network telecasting. But the differences in the extent of filmed, action series before and after ABC’s rise are telling. In June 1953, 81.5 percent of all network programming came over live. Six years later, 49.1 percent was live. Each year, ABC led in the shift away from live transmission: 52.2 percent live in June 1953, 38.0 percent in June 1959 (for CBS, 86.7 percent to 54.0 percent; NBC, 81.9 percent to 52.0 percent) [27, 112]. Each year in the late 1950s, ABC led in the move to action/adventure programs. Wrote two communication researchers,

The ABC network led the way in the early growth of this programming, showing an increase of 800 percent from 1955 to 1960. As ABC escalated, it was followed in turn by NBC, which increased its action/

adventure time by approximately 1,200 percent from 1956 to 1960. CBS also followed suit, although not as drastically, by increasing its action/adventure time by 100 percent from 1956 to 1959 [38; 42; 50, p. 75].

In the process, various elements identified with the Golden Age were lost. Evening programming hours are finite. If a western was added to the schedule, something had to go. What went were costly programs drawing smaller audience shares. Some of this programming remained on TV, but on Sunday afternoons, not evening prime time. More often, these programs left the air altogether.

No program form was a greater casualty of Hollywood's ascendancy than the weekly original and live teleplays, usually made in New York and relying heavily on the talents of writers, producers, and directors connected with legitimate theatre. Called "dramatic anthologies," most of these programs were sacrificed as a consequence of the late fifties concentration on California-made action serials. In 1961, commented one who had written some of the anthology scripts, "When most of television moved to Hollywood, one of the most signal changes, it seems to me, that took place was that immediately everybody started trying to make television look like movies."<sup>27</sup> "Drama [on TV] has been narrowed down and down," said another writer four years later, "until drama is really no longer on television. Melodrama is."<sup>28</sup>

Such a development need hardly be regarded as the blow to art that, say, the recent decline of the novel has been. Many of the most praised Golden Age productions were decidedly middle brow. Individual efforts like *Marty* and *Bang the Drum Slowly* stand out. Others are best forgotten. Some of Weaver's spectaculars were spectacularly unrewarding. And not surprisingly, industry leaders and figures tied to the new, standardized television, like Ronald Regan, host of *GE Theatre*, later dismissed the idea that TV "declined" in the late fifties and early sixties [66].

Nevertheless, the Golden Age was more in keeping with the FCC's encouragement of diversity. Programming in 1953 was more likely to be produced in cities other than Los Angeles than in 1959. Production values (notably, live telecasting) were less uniform in 1953. More types of programs were available to consumers prior to the emergence of ABC.

Yet most of these changes undoubtedly would have occurred regardless of ABC's situation in the late 1950s. The decline in live production can be attributed in part to the development of tape, the major film studios' lifting of their boycott of TV, and the financial advantages of syndicating or renting for retelecasting filmed series [118]. Then, too, the size of the national TV audience grew, though mainly by region as opposed to class or education. Many more viewers in southern and western areas finally

had TV in 1959–1960 and were perhaps more enthusiastic about a Hollywood-made than a New York product [16; 49; 86; 96]. Finally, more product advertisers entered TV and demanded more time and larger, mass audiences compared to the early, institutional sponsors like US Steel and Alcoa [43]. ABC alone cannot be accused of “destroying” TV.

Furthermore, many students of broadcast history see the fate of the medium as “inevitable,” the result of market forces that rewarded the manager able to find the largest share of the mass audience. This successful operator normally promoted programming that, though popular, appalled better-educated Americans. The real problem here, many maintain, was consumer preference: popular taste was not often good taste. Put differently, it is a grave error in reasoning, as George Stigler wrote, to blame a waiter for obesity [12, 108].

As Alfred Chandler and others have shown, however, the twentieth century manager had choices. To regard the entertainment industry as nothing more than the captive of consumer decisions would contradict the work of those seeing business executives exercising real power in other areas of enterprise. Studies of the British Broadcasting Corporation suggest that the evolution of that system owed much to the character and determination of one figure, Lord Reith, the first BBC chairman [36, 39].<sup>29</sup> Similarly, historians of mass unionism often forget to note how much labor strife in America was avoided in the late 1930s when certain large corporations, notably US Steel, accepted outside labor organization while others literally took to the trenches. The “inevitability” of a change never explains why a transformation occurred *when* it did, or *who* slowed or accelerated the shift.

Different managers, different regulators, might have made for a different television in the late 1950s. A more discerning FCC, for example, might have insisted in 1953 that ABC be acquired by a company with an established record in broadcasting. Mindful of federal overseers, network radio had developed a standard of service through the 1930s and 1940s; schedules included not only mass entertainment but programs for opera enthusiasts and those seeking headlines and opinions. In contrast, the motion picture industry, not subject to national regulation, had only to contend with private groups or local governments that might censor features for their inclusion of excessive sex and crime. Otherwise, Hollywood was under no pressure to produce anything but entertainment. “Balance” or diversity of output was defined differently at each studio, with some making more of an effort than others to create different types of films. TV’s future was all but sealed when Goldenson of UPT-ABC, he told a friend, chose Universal Pictures, which specialized in B films, as the model for his TV network [68, p. 61].

UPT’s record and Goldenson’s intentions did concern the FCC’s staff

and dissenting commissioners in 1952–1953, though apparently for the wrong reasons. During the hearings preceding the Commission's decision, FCC lawyers pursued UPT's role in the antitrust violations of the large film companies. There were also questions about UPT's interest in a pay TV system using theaters. But relatively little attention went to the very substantial gulf separating Sunset Boulevard from Radio Row [17].<sup>30</sup>

At the time of the merger, the Commission might have more closely examined UPT's financial resources. Although capable of absorbing ABC, United Paramount within three years after the merger found itself seeking financial assistance. Both UPT and the FCC had underestimated the heavy costs of TV networking. Only an eleventh-hour loan from Metropolitan Insurance in 1956 saved ABC-UPT from embarrassing encounters with bill collectors [3; 60, p.64]. Yet even after the Metropolitan advance, ABC-UPT only had enough money, apparently, to invest in entertainment programming. The then unprofitable news division was chronically underfinanced. Into the sixties, ABC found itself groping for cash [21, p. 60; 89].

Weighing none of these factors, the Commission in 1953 held up a shopworn theory of competition as a social and political advantage to consumers, and contrary results followed.<sup>31</sup> The Commission's expectation that ABC's strengthening would foster more diverse types of programs was frustrated. If anything, the number of different types of programs on the air declined between 1953 and 1959; one form, the dramatic anthology, virtually disappeared. The greater "choice" at decade's end was limited to the specific city in which the detective was based. The series itself was manufactured in Los Angeles. Finally ABC ignored a long-held Commission preference for news and informational programming. Whether measured by ABC's own performance or its effects on CBS and NBC, the Commission's wish for three networks had calamitous results for American television.

## NOTES

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1. *NBC vs. US*, 319 (1942), p. 190, 218–19.

2. Docket 10031, Vol. 10, *Proc.*, Vol. 35, p. 5405, FCC MSS, Record Group 173, National Archives.

3. Compare Goldenson's comments in Docket 10031, Vol. 12, *Proc.*, Vol. 44, p. 6866, with those in [71].

4. Notes of interview with Kintner, n.d. [late 1950s], Martin Mayer MSS, Columbia University, Box 68.

5. Docket 10031, Vol. 9, *Proc.*, Vol. 33, pp. 4981–85.

6. Docket 12782, Vol. 11, *Proc.*, Vol. 21, p. 3917, FCC MSS, Commission Dockets Room.

7. Before the FCC in 1962, ABC president Oliver Treyz delighted in crediting his network for the late fifties trend to westerns and, later, detective series. Docket 12782, Vol. 21, *Proc.*, Vol. 61, p. 9365.

8. Docket 12782, Vol. 14, *Proc.*, Vol. 37, p. 5671, Vol. 15, *Proc.*, Vol. 42, pp. 6418, 6558. See also [48 and 50].

9. Press release ABC News, 8 May 1961, copy in Mayer MSS, Box 68; Docket 12782, Vol. 9, *Proc.*, Vol. 19, p. 3696.

10. Docket 12782, Vol. 9, *Proc.*, Vol. 19, pp. 3690, 3697, 3700, 3718, Vol. 21, *Proc.*, Vol. 61, p. 9428.

11. David Susskind in Docket 12782, Vol. 14, *Proc.*, Vol. 37, p. 5627.

12. Notes of interviews with Ford and Minow, ca. February 1962, MacDonald MSS, Yale University, Box 124.

13. Memorandum, L. P. B. Emerson to John S. Cross, 18 January 1962, copy in E. William Henry MSS, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (hereafter, SHSW), Box 53.

14. Docket 12782, Vol. 21, *Proc.*, Vol. 61, pp. 9426–9428.

15. Memorandum, James Sheridan to Commission, 29 April 1964; handwritten memorandum, E. William Henry, n.d. [ca. August–September 1964], Henry MSS, Box 53. Docket 12782, Vol. 21, *Proc.*, pp. 9356ff., 9664ff.

16. AT&T charged the networks a flat rate regardless of whether the afternoon hours were used. Docket 16828, Vol. 34, *Proc.*, Vol. 14, p. 3315, FCC Records, General Services Administration.

17. F. N. Littlejohn to John Daly, 25 November 1958, Daly MSS, SHSW, Box 23.

18. ABC waited three years after CBS and NBC to expand its nightly newscast to thirty minutes.

19. Docket 12782, Vol. 2 *Proc.*, Vol. 5, pp. 619, 620, Vol. 6, pp. 767, 768, 858–59.

20. Docket 12782, Vol. 19, *Proc.*, Vol. 54, p. 8363; Interview with Michael Dann, 14 June 1979, Columbia University Oral History Collection (hereafter COHC) pp. 8–9.

21. Docket 12782, Vol. 2, *Proc.*, Vol. 6, pp. 855–56.

22. Dann interview.

23. Unabridged notes of interview with NBC executives, 28–29 October 1959, p. 51, Office of Network Study, FCC, FCC Records, General Services Administration, Inv. No. 72A1986, Box 12; Docket 12782, Vol. 14, *Proc.*, Vol. 38, p. 5878; William S. Shirer to Morris L. Ernst, 9 April 1959, Ernst MSS, University of Texas, Box 542.

24. See also the novel written by former NBC Vice President David Levy [61].

25. Clipping in Newton Minow MSS, SHSW, Box 52.

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28. “WCBS Radio Looks at Television,” transcript of an interview with Ernest Kinoy, 16 August 1965, WCBS Radio MSS, SHSW.

29. Because newspapers like TV networks combined to enjoy a natural monopoly (or have until the advent of cable TV), it could be argued that network executives could have agreed among themselves to air anything (that is, quality programming) without fear of lost audiences and revenues. See [15].

30. Interview with Frederick W. Ford, 19 June 1978; Exception of Curtis B. Plummer, Chief of Broadcast Bureau, to Initial Decision of 13 November 1952, separate brief accompanying...of Frederick W. Ford, et al., in Docket 10031, Vol. 41.

31. The Commission apparently had no trained economists at the time of the UPT-ABC decision. An economist at the agency might have read Peter O. Steiner’s warning against moving from a two-way to three-way competitive model. Steiner postulated that

diversity would *decline* as a result [107]. Commissioners and staff members apparently read administrative law journals, if anything. Subsequently, Steiner's thesis has been supported and attacked in numerous studies, including Stewart L. Long [63], Bruce M. Owen [85], and David Perry [87].

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