

Ed. Holmgren and Norton
(Prentice Hall, 1972)

PAUL KLEIN

*The Men Who Run TV
Know Us Better
Than You Think*

For nearly twenty years I have been watching people watch television. In my time as a specialist in audience measurement at one of the networks, thousands of ideas for new shows have been kicked around, hundreds of pilot scripts have been shot, several dozen new stars and series have come and gone, and a relative handful of programs have survived more than a few seasons. I have brooded about why some programs get, and why so many more fail to get, an audience of commercially acceptable size. I have reached several conclusions. One of them is that when it comes to television, a lot of you otherwise nice people out there are compulsive liars.

You lie to your friends. "I don't watch television much except for the news, maybe a movie, and an occasional special or sports show," you keep telling them. And you lie to yourselves. "I think I'll watch a little TV tonight," you say to yourself. You don't say, "I think I'll watch a little TV tonight *just like I did last night*," because you cannot admit, even to yourself, the nature and extent of your addiction to TV. Watching television seems to be in our day what sex was in the age of Queen Victoria—a filthy little habit best not spoken of.

Paul Klein is president of Computer Television Inc., which he founded in 1970 after five years as Vice President in charge of Audience Measurement for NBC. He is also President of Schools for the Future, a non-profit group which fights illiteracy in this country and abroad. "The Men Who Run TV Know Us Better Than You Think" is excerpted from *New York Magazine*. Copyright 1970. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Make no mistake, though, you *are* hooked, chained or otherwise enslaved by your vice. No one can say whether television programming is better or worse this year than it ever was. But the audience out there in prime time, between 7:30 and 11 at night, is as big as ever. This year, in fact, it is a little bigger because of:

an increase in color-TV penetration; you are buying more expensive receivers so that you can hate the damned thing in living color;

an increase in community-antenna subscribers; you are signing up for CATV service so that you can get a wider choice of hateful images and see them more clearly in the bargain;

an increase in multi-set homes; you are buying second, third, and even fourth TV sets so that several members of the same family can be bored by different programs simultaneously;

a decrease in competition from other media; the increase in clear, colorful video pictures has denied other vehicles for advertising—magazines, for example—their uniqueness.

This year, as a result, 36 million homes—75 million people—are watching TV in prime time at any given moment, and the three networks command over 91 percent of this huge audience. (Independent and educational channels get the rest.) The bigger a network's share of this audience, the more it can charge for the time it sells to advertisers. The rating points which express share of audience are, in effect, the only way the networks have yet figured out to price their merchandise, which is *your* time and attention.

The single most important thing to know about the American television audience is its amazingly constant size. At any given moment in prime time most of the week it stays at about 36 million sets, whether the network shows at a given hour are strong, weak, so-so, or one of each. It's not the same person in each home watching through the evening. It isn't even the same 36 million homes. The precise composition of the audience is changing every half-hour. The point of nearly every strategy and tactic a network can devise is to get the largest possible share of that audience in each half-hour.

Why does the audience remain so constant even though you say you don't care that much for what's on? After contemplating this curious behavior over the years, I have worked out a theory. I call it the Theory of the Least Objectionable Program. Theory, hell. A few explainable exceptions aside, it has the reliability of natural law. According to my theory, you don't watch particular programs. *You watch television*. The medium. The tube. You turn on the set because it is there—you *can't resist*—and you then settle down to watch that program among all those offered at a

given time which can be endured with the least amount of pain and suffering.

You view television irrespective of the content of the program watched. And because the programs are designed to appeal to the greatest number of people—rich and poor, smart and stupid, tall and short, wild and tame—you're probably watching something that is not *your* taste. Nevertheless, you take what is fed to you because you are compelled to exercise the medium. The result, after a night's viewing, is guilt. That's why you lie to yourself and your friends: You keep thinking you should have been reading, or something.

The dynamics of LOP are observable elsewhere. In politics, for example, it is called choosing the lesser of two (or, lately, three) evils. The League of Women Voters demands that you vote, dammit. The act of voting—irrespective of the content voted for—is held to be essential to the preservation of democracy. If you don't vote, you are warned, the lesser evil you voted for last time may disenfranchise you.

LOP is the same demand, only it is a demand we make of ourselves. The alternative to submitting to LOP is to turn the damned set off and find something else to do. Fat chance. Television viewing, like nail-biting, is something you will stop tomorrow.

The thing I like about my theory is that it explains several phenomena that are otherwise inexplicable. In an age that prizes novelty, LOP explains why some new and even likable faces vanish so quickly and why some old ones hang in there. It explains why New York's taste frequently differs, radically, from national preferences.

Most importantly, LOP explains why some interesting programs die and some stupid programs seem to thrive. Place a weak show against weaker competition, LOP teaches us, and it inevitably looks good; it may even look like a hit—get huge rating and a quality audience if the time period it fills has that audience. Place a strong show against a stronger show and, never mind whether it is far superior to a dozen other shows on the air in other time slots, it will look like a bomb.

The theory of LOP has a corollary that derives directly from it. Since one man's Green Acres is another man's Slough of Despond, you may confidently bet the family jewels that, regardless of quality, the winner in a given time period will be the network that is *counter-programming* that slot. Just as Buckley counter-programmed Ottinger and Goodell and won, a weak *old* folks' show will beat two *young* folks' shows because all the old folks will gather before "their" show while the two youngies must share their audience.

A very old law has also become more and more useful in figuring out program popularity. I didn't discover this one. Sir Isaac Newton did. I mean his First Law of Motion, the one that says that a body at rest tends

to stay at rest. Once a viewer chooses his LOP, he may have to fiddle with a lot of knobs should he decide to switch channels, especially if it's an older color set. So, because a viewer in a chair tends to stay in his chair, an LOP renders great service to the program following it. It can become, in the trade's argot, a strong lead-in.

Incredible as it may seem, then, despite the money, creative juices, and intelligence that often go into a quality network program, the payoff is really determined by 75 million different thresholds of pain plus the law of inertia.

The best network programmers understand this. They are not stupid. They like most of the stuff they put on about as much as you do. But they also know that a program doesn't have to be "good." It only has to be less objectionable than whatever the hell the other guys throw against it.

For the October–December period of the 1970–71 season, the National Broadcasting Company—my old outfit—had a very slight lead over the Columbia Broadcasting System in their perennial battle for the largest share of the prime-time audience. On the basis of the latest Nielsen data, NBC is getting 32 percent of the available audience, CBS 31 percent. The third network, the American Broadcasting Company's, is running third, with a 29 share, but ABC is doing interesting things.

Next month, network salesmen will start selling time for the new season starting next September. They will have their hands full. Like the rest of us, programmers and advertisers try to read the future by analyzing the past. . . .

Next season the scheduling of prime-time programs will be a whole new ballgame. The Federal Communications Commission has decided to allow the networks only three hours of prime-time programming. (They had been allowed three and a half hours.) The jockeying for position under the new rule has already begun. However simple it sounds, the decision greatly complicates the networks' lives.

NBC was first to announce which three-hour period it would program. It chose 8 to 11 P.M., thereby returning the 7:30-to-8 P.M. slot to its affiliates to program themselves. I think the decision pleased the stations. They'll undoubtedly find it easier to program 7:30 P.M. than 10:30 P.M.

CBS digested the NBC announcement and then announced that it would program 7:30 to 10:30 P.M., giving its affiliates the 10:30-to-11 P.M. period to program themselves. This, CBS told *Variety*, would give CBS a huge audience lead at 7:30 to 8 P.M., some of which it will keep all night long. Some will remember that ABC started to raise hell with the ratings of CBS and NBC back in the late fifties by programming action-adventure at 7:30 to 8 P.M. At the time, CBS and NBC had been programming network news strips.

CBS' logic is only half right, I think. If ABC goes the same way as CBS,

NBC will get huge audiences at 10:30 to 11 P.M. This audience will lead into the late-night news on all NBC-owned local stations. In New York, for example, this would mean that NBC's news show on Channel 4 would, for the foreseeable future, enjoy very much higher ratings than its competition on CBS' Channel 2 and ABC's Channel 7. This, in turn, would give a huge advantage to Johnny Carson over Merv Griffin (or his replacement) and Dick Cavett (or his replacement). The combination of a strong 10.30-to-11-P.M. half-hour with its naturally good demographics plus the strength accruing to both the local news show and the *Tonight Show* make NBC's 8-to-11-P.M. move a sound one—but, again, only if ABC goes along with CBS at 7:30. If ABC goes at 8 P.M., CBS' lead at 7:30 P.M. may be too great to bear.

A lot also depends on the local programming plugged in at 7:30 P.M. Despite the FCC's interest in opening up prime time for many more program producers, the public may end up with significantly less program choice. An NBC station, for instance, may end up carrying one half-hour program "stripped" across five nights instead of five separate programs on the five nights. We are entering the *Let's Make a Deal* era of prime-time programming. Cheap strip programming, if it can get the audience, is a better economic move for local stations than good films. The quiz/game show is just that kind of programming. And since the FCC has ordered that, beginning in 1972, the top 50 markets must play, in prime time, only original programming (no *Dragnet* repeats), these stations must go the strip route.

But I think many stations will choose to expand their news coverage. I think it would make sound economic sense in the long run. News, well done, with an adequate staff, builds a local program with strong local interest that is more salable to advertisers than bimodal stripped games. In the short run, though, news is risky. If NBC affiliates play news at 7:30 P.M., CBS stations playing network bimodals [appealing to young and old viewers in the same audience] such as *Family Affair* will get huge ratings. It is imperative, therefore, that more people in the business learn about the lingering irrelevancies of ratings.

Ratings have not always had a stultifying effect on TV programming. When television started, those who acquired sets first tended to live in the larger marketing areas, and they tended to be people who had the dough to pay for a 10-inch Dumont. Given the high correlation between money and education, these early TV viewers tended to be high up on various socio-economic scales, and the programs that appealed to them tended to be the more sophisticated visual fare. That's how the so-called "golden-age" of TV (live drama and all that) was possible.

But in the mid-fifties, set ownership proliferated furiously, entering small towns and rural areas. Mindless situation comedies and the Western

suddenly became the dominant program types as viewers with decidedly different tastes became the majority audience. They were not a real majority in terms of the population as a whole, but they did the majority of the viewing.

This is all to say that the period after the golden age—the family age—led to rules which executives lived by (sit-com will always beat dramas, for example) which *were* valid and are now increasingly irrelevant. Just how irrelevant they have become has been obscured, however, because by now everyone is addicted to TV.

But people's willingness to settle for the least objectionable program available has made the advertisers who want them *less* secure, not more so. The young-adult and upper-income audiences are a fickle bunch, and programming by the old rules is an increasingly costly and, I believe, ultimately, self-defeating game. Time will tell.

These uncertainties notwithstanding, the three-hour rule is a boon to the networks—at least a temporary one. With cigarettes gone, there will not be enough advertising dollars around to buy all the available time even at distress prices. The forced cutback to three hours of network programming amounts to a forced reduction in inventory. The cut, eliminating one-seventh of all available time, nearly equals the time previously bought up by cigarette dollars. Of course, the cut *adds* inventory to the local stations, which had been sharing in the networks' tobacco revenues. They will now have to pay for their own programming and scrounge around for ad dollars, some of which will inevitably be monies that used to go to the networks. In effect, then, the networks will have a considerable lower gross next season—with a lower profit, if they have any profit at all.

CBS has broken the "minute" dam going to thirty seconds as the basic unit of sale. There used to be three minutes of time to sell in a prime-time half-hour. Now, there are six thirty-second units to sell. This will open up prime-time to small-budget advertisers. In fact, some daytime advertisers will graduate to night time, creating some problems for daytime sales. But you will see a lot more USO, United Fund, and other public-service advertisements on all networks until the inventory is reduced. . . .

In the long run, though, all this may lead to better TV for the addicts among us—that is, just about all of us—because the lowest-priced programming will end up being *reality* programming—news and public-affairs documentaries, and such—which, after all, the networks are uniquely equipped to do well.