L. MARSLAND GANDER

WASTELAND OR WONDERLAND

When primitive television was first demonstrated nearly fifty years ago, the most frequent comment that I heard, amazing as it may seem now, was 'What's the use of it?' Intelligent, well-educated people, including many industrial tycoons thought that television was simply an ingenious toy. At best, the thinking ran, if it could be improved sufficently then perhaps we might see the announcer Stuart Hibberd reading the news in his dulcet tenor voice. We would not be allowed to see A. J. Alan, the raconteur, because mystery and anonymity were his stock in trade.

Dance bands were also there to be heard not seen, reversing the traditional role of Victorian children. Would it add to our enjoyment if we saw concert pianists or speakers? And so on. Some far-seeing prophets thought it might become a home cinema, but then the film-makers and exhibitors were implacably opposed and in any case, it was generally argued, the screen was too small for audiences accustomed to the giant images of the cinema. Note that today when our homes are flooded with films the screen sizes are only slightly greater.

Disbelief was shared by the wealthiest and most influential in the land. The first Lord Camrose, a brilliant journalist-financier and builder of *The Daily Telegraph* from a circulation of 100,000 to over a million was one who was not greatly impressed. Astutely he had allowed my appointment in 1935 by the D.T. Editor as the first t.v critic in the world just after a Government committee had recommended a joint experiment, to be conducted by the BBC, with Marconi-EMI and Baird in

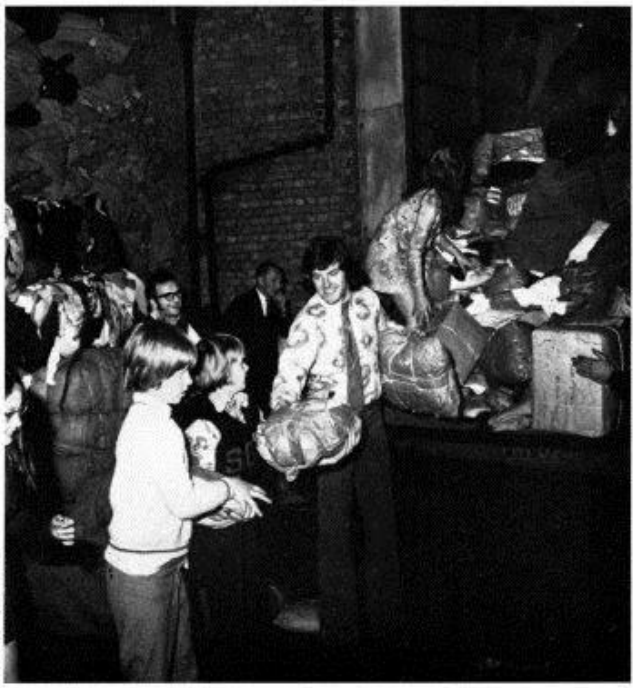
The Granada presentation 'Coronation Street', one of the most popular British programmes since the first episode in December 1960. Six of the original cast still regularly appear.

competition. Marconi-EMI quickly demonstrated that their 405 line system – used to this day – was much superior and it was adopted.

The idea of the *Daily Telegraph* was to be first in the field with something new and to flog it, for all we were worth, in journalistic style. It was a serious drawback that at the time the BBC were still only transmitting on the crude Baird 30-line system, using medium wavelengths and producing barely recognizable shadowgraphs on what were called mirror-drum sets. I struggled, with a shocking paucity of material, to produce a weekly column of 'TV Topics'. Much of the matter was speculation about the site of the new high definition station eventually located at Alexandra Palace. I prowled round the Palace, roundly abused the BBC for being so secretive and wrote little pieces about the variety shows, the singers and actors. It was short lived, for the BBC closed down the 30-line service in September, 1935.

I soldiered on with one of the first double standard t.v sets that had now become available. One day Lord Camrose came to see a demonstration in the office. There had been trouble with interference from radiotherapy at Bart's Hospital but, surprisingly, I persuaded the doctor to suspend his treatment while the great man looked at his first t.v. He was in the room for precisely two minutes and asked three questions. 'How much is the set? How long do the programmes last? Is that the biggest screen available?' It was the end. My t.v column was killed.

My purpose in this preamble is to emphasize the violent revolution of thinking in half a century and, more particularly, within a generation. (When Lord Camrose was passing judgment David Frost was not yet born). From a toy which the great Reith treated with indifference – despite the boundless enthusiasm of some BBC t.v staff – television has surged irresistibly into a dominant position, feared and abused, yet still holding the majority of the population in thrall.



(BBC photograph)

As a result of a Christmas appeal during the BBC programme 'Blue Peter' no less than one million parcels were received from viewers for distribution to children.

The value that television offers in 1972 by comparison with other media of entertainment or information is fantastic, almost incalculable. Until recently BBC-1 and BBC-2 combined were broadcasting on their networks a total of 6,545 programme hours in 52 weeks, or about 126 hours a week. Someone whose mathematics are obviously better than mine has calculated the approximate distribution costs at 2·5p per viewer-hour for black and white and 5·5p for colour reception, (assuming a rented receiver, 16 million sets each within 2·4 potential watchers and each person looking for an average of 14 hours a week).

It is hard, if not impossible to find a basis of comparison with other media. I live near Worthing, Sussex, from where there are three theatres within easy reach by car in Worthing, Brighton and Chichester. The most attractive is the Chichester Festival Theatre where the best seats giving the equivalent of colour t.v sight and audibility cost £1·90 each, plus the cost of running the car the 32 miles there and back, and, usually, a meal which could cost anything.

Of course it's good to escape from within four walls and to see live, three-dimensional people strutting the stage. Worthing and Brighton are nearer and could be cheaper. But this is only one type of entertainment, live drama. The scope of t.v offerings is so wide that it is difficult to find some subject, some variation of human activity, some nuance of education, some trifle of information that has not been covered in triplicate.

The classification of content by the BBC is in fourteen categories; on ITV in thirteen. They range from talks, documentaries, and other informative programmes to sport; from British and foreign films to drama in a multitude of forms; from light entertainment and family programmes to the esoteric mysteries of the Open University; from news and weather to school lessons and religion.

Are the viewing public delighted with this infinite variety, this triple deluge organized for their amusement and edification? The sad fact is that such is the perversity of human nature, they are not.

Will they be any better pleased this autumn when, now the Government have lifted the absurd restriction of hours, ITV will begin to fill up the rest of the clock and the BBC will follow suit with repeats and a lunchtime magazine? Incidentally the Corporation says that its £75 million income for television is barely sufficient to run the two networks and even the repeats will cost a mint in extra fees to artists and scriptwriters.

So will there be joy in 16 million households when at last we have three-quarters round the clock television? I predict, with the utmost confidence, that there will not.

(Yorkshire Television photograph)

Very close to the top of the popularity charts is the Yorkshire Television production 'The Main Chance'. Each episode describes the work of a ruthless and ambitious lawyer.

All this is not to deny that there are addicts who cling limpet-like to favourite sections. To sport, for instance. Those who watched, work permitting, every accessible second of the Olympic Games from Munich during the sixteen days, Wimbledon and the Test match. The trouble is, partly, that enthusiastic approval from one group produces a counterblast of criticism from another. Millions of housewives object vociferously to the obsession with sport.

These same housewives were probably enamoured of the BBC's *Forsyte Saga* or *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* or *Elizabeth R.* But the conflict of taste and opinion among the millions who form the television audience is only one reason why t.v, the wonder of yesterday, has become the universal Aunt Sally of today.

Television is blamed by eminent people for encouraging permissiveness, which, in fact, it merely reflects. It is attacked for causing delinquency and encouraging violence when its output of educational material has never been higher. It is accused of encouraging industrial unrest when great pains are taken to balance current affairs programmes and news.

Above all it is persistently criticized for alleged persistent political bias, the most difficult of all the accusations to refute. To take these charges seriatim.

Permissiveness

To include nudity, frontal or otherwise, sex rearing its ugly head, bed hopping and bad language. Television is as a modest maiden to the great Whore of Babylon when compared with contemporary stage and film. Personally I think the 'bloodies' are far too numerous and reveal a poverty of thought and dialogue but there are much more offensive words, used more sparingly and often creeping in by accident. Recently, scripts have slightly improved in this respect.

Violence

Does television encourage violence by example? I have written about this subject for years *ad nauseum* reporting the condemnation of priests, politicians and prigs. Both the BBC and IBA have produced codes to restrain script-writers, producers and directors from introducing needless viciousness and, briefly, to use moderate violence only when it is essential to the natural unfolding of a story. But in all my research, all the books and speeches I have read and reported on, all the opinion polls I have looked at I cannot see any real shred of evidence that t.v has, in general, increased the incidence of violence. There have been one or two instances of direct imitation of evil acts; nothing has really been proved on anything but an infinitesimal scale.

Television, it is often argued, makes war and particularly urban guerilla war too vividly horrific in the home. I know many women viewers who simply will not look at the latest film from Vietnam or Northern Ireland. But after all t.v is merely doing what newspapers and books have been doing for centuries. It is simply covering the world scene in a far more realistic way than has ever been possible previously and bringing the insane cruelties to the comfortable fireside.

What television does in the field of violence is to generate a sickening revulsion which in many cases causes people to switch off to avoid another basinful of misery. I have one reservation on this subject. There are some psycopaths and exhibitionists who love to see themselves and to air their views on the 'telly'. This small minority, which includes fanatics of all types and ages, from demonstrating students to strikers' pickets, could be encouraged by the box to do silly things. Again, however, this is largely conjecture and there is no really solid evidence that it is an important factor. In any case they could achieve similar results through newspapers and magazines. It might be objected that the written word, even the printed picture has far less impact than living images projected straight into ten or twelve million homes.

Against this is the fact that most prominent people have achieved their eminence through media other than t.v and only when they are already in the news do they qualify for the home screen. One example of a national celebrity who did this against heavy odds is Mary Whitehouse whose utterances were virtually ignored by t.v for years. Yet through sheer persistence and hard work, using public meetings and the written word exclusively, Mrs Whitehouse found fame and a measure of success. Eventually even the t.v studio was opened to her.

The Gilbert Hardings who make their name exclusively through television are a rare breed. Even he relied on newspapers to some extent. I recall that once I rang him up on a Sunday morning to ask if a story in the Sunday Express that he had signed an exclusive contract with the BBC was correct.

Harding, who was presumably nursing a hangover, snapped back 'If anyone asks me that again I shall bite through the telephone line.' I said: 'Well it's in the Sundays. You can't keep it quiet.'

Harding blew his top: 'Who do you think you are? etc, etc.' But he did give me the story. I reported the conversation in print and it was months before he forgave me.

Briefly, I contend any form of publicity and not merely television encourages the nuts and the nuisances. Television reaches more people than any single newspaper or film and that is the only important difference.

Does it encourage industrial unrest?

The quickest and the best answer to this is that the General Strike occurred in 1926 when only the most primitive t.v experiments were taking place. Nobody at the time thought of blaming the new fangled wireless and the BBC. On the contrary it became plain that broadcasting was the chief strike breaker. During the recent miners' strike there were many occasions when the pickets and demonstrators obstructed the t.v cameramen and prevented them from carrying out their duties. An unwise censorship on their part, I thought.

Does it show political bias?

This is an accusation constantly made by politicians of all shades of opinion, coupled often with complaints about the aggressive style of the inquisitors. Any fair-minded person must agree that the BBC, in particular, does attempt to balance its political discussions. The tough style of questioning, borrowed from America and first applied here by Robin Day irritates many who believe that t.v nonentities should be more polite to studio guests. Yet it is evocative. The questioner automatically takes the opposition, putting to his victim the most awkward points that he can think of. But then tackling somebody of a different persuasion he switches to the opposite still hostile approach. In fact Mr Day has considerably modified and improved his style since the days when he was denounced as a rude prosecuting council. If t.v went back to the days of mealy mouthed subservience I am sure there would be a nation-wide outcry.

No branch of television illustrates the immense scope and variety of output more strikingly than the educational programmes. There are now about 25,000 schools using television programmes and many supplement them by hiring films made available by the broadcasters. Science is a chief subject for t.v while languages are mainly, though not entirely, dealt with by radio. Everything from sex education and maths to social history and the many kinds of music is purveyed. At the invitation of the Ford Foundation I reported to them on in-school television in the United States, touring the country from coast to coast and I sat in many classrooms, comparing the effectiveness of their t.v instruction with ours. There they make no bones that t.v is essential to cope effectively with the double explosion of knowledge and numbers and to off-set the shortage of staff. Here we are coy about these aspects; yet it is plain that in both countries so different in many ways t.v is producing a revolution in teaching by bringing the outside world into the classroom more vividly than ever before. There by the way, it is mostly closed circuit t.v. Our programmes, I feel, are better prepared by far.

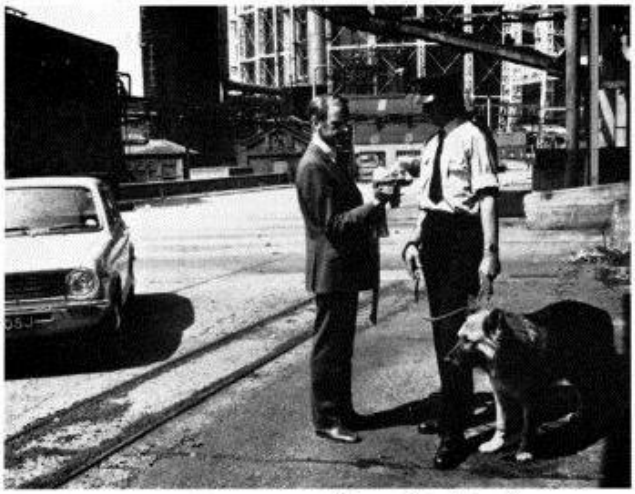
The Editor asked me to comment on children's fare and his request in itself makes a cogent point. Short of staying glued to the screen for ten or twelve hours a day it is quite impossible for any one person to watch more than a fraction. I have just seen *Playschool,* slightly annoyed that it clashed with the Test match yet seeing enough of the improvised simple creature fun to realize that young kids must love it. In fact I learnt one or two tricks myself – such as how to make a ladder out of newspaper. *Dr Who* I would have thought is frightening to children. Critics often say so and, as far as the majority are concerned, they are totally wrong.

The truth is that people tend to undervalue what is free or cheap or too easily obtained. They take for granted the air we breathe vital to our existence, though lately there have been signs of concern about that equally important element, water. Television has become like air and water. Moreover, although the average set is switched on for nearly five hours a day, most of the viewing done is between the peak hours of 6 and 10 p.m. Therefore the grousers are referring to about one-seventh of the total output of the three networks.

This concentration is reflected in the Top Twenty. The BBC and ITV have different systems of audience research and the conflicting figures that they produce has roused some scepticism and derision. Briefly the BBC uses interviews and reporting panels while ITV relies on measuring meters which record viewing time. Both depend for the accuracy of their results on the representative character of the sample they have taken. The never ending back-street serial of Granada *Coronation Street* has appeared more persistently at the top of the charts than any other programme, and all other choices in the Top Twenty are, as might be expected, network productions easy on the eye and mind. Except that, recently, reflecting the troubled times, *News at Ten* has cropped up frequently.

(BBC photograph)

A long running BBC international 'Fun and Games' programme – 'It's a Knockout' – has a viewing audience of many millions.



(BBC photograph)

One of the longest running programmes 'Dixon of Dock Green' portrays the life of a friendly police sergeant and the running of a mythical London police station.

The BBC's nearest approach to a 'Top Twenty' is contained in the Handbook. We find that light entertainment and comedy lead the field with Cliff Richard and Cilla Black at the summit each holding more than 14 million viewers. Then comes our old friend Jack Warner in *Dixon of Dock Green* followed by the international mock Olympics of *It's A Knockout* nonsense. The BBC's biggest audience (not mentioned in the Handbook) was for the *Miss World* contest, a cool 26 million.

Sport does not rate particularly high – around the 10 or 11 million mark except for the World Cup which ran to 21 million.

What are we to conclude from all this? Principally that people may grouse about the one-eyed monster in the drawing room but it holds them helplessly with its hypnotic stare. And truly it is no monster but a kindly dispenser of knowledge, wisdom and entertainment, offering the most fabulous value that the world has ever known as a balm for leisure hours. It has moved with the years from a so-called toy which nobody knew how to use to a medium that deals with everything one can possibly imagine. We have seen men in space and walking on the moon, itched at the repulsive miscroscopic pictures of the creatures that infest our beds and our skin. Even chess is now being covered.

There is so much that habitual viewers become like tired channel swimmers, exhausted and, without the sense of achievement, irritable. Yet paradoxically, I do not think that there is enough. I mean enough choice in the critical peak hours. So roll on the day when we have not three networks but the maximum possible of six and in the nearer future four. As I was finishing this opus I switched on the tail end of the *Open University* and a professional voice pronounced 'We've come away from equilibrium deliberately.' I don't really know what he was talking about but come to think of it, it could apply to a more varied, provocative and challenging t.v of the future.