

TELEVISION/ John Horn

The President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders has taken the essential step of clarifying to whites what has been obscure to them because of chronic self-deception: that white racism is father to racial injustice. Yet the commission's view of television is so curiously narrow—regarding it as one of the news media, not as the wall-to-wall, sunrise to sunrise, social environment of Pop culture it more importantly is—that one wonders whether the superficiality stems from ignorance or intent. At best the Kerner commission, by looking at television as merely one of the news media and considering only their collective role in the amelioration of racial tension through wider, better and integrated news coverage, suggests that even it has not yet faced up to the profound upheavals that are necessary in the hearts, minds and practices, both individual and institutional, of the white majority.

To newspapers and broadcasting the

commission recommended expansion of news coverage of the Negro community, integration of Negro and white coverage, recruitment and training of more Negroes as journalists, improvement in the reporting of riots and coordination with police. All these proposals are to the good, but to consider television in its relatively minor role as reporter, while ignoring its major role as social conditioner—creating a social climate, setting standards and examples of morals, goals and behavior, stimulating desires and expectations—is to be blind to the medium's effect on our society.

Television is a fifth column bringing into Negro homes white nonsense, white violence, white affluence, white materialism, white indifference to fellow Americans of color. To all human beings television is a continuous assault on the heart, the mind and the spirit. To Negroes, as to all racial minorities, it is a major alienating force.

The promise of television was that of a window on the world. The reality of television today is a shop window on a world of commercial-studded frivolity created by broadcasting and advertising interests. Negroes in their ghettos look at this artificial world and see that it is white, hedonistic, violent, affluent and exploitative. The situation comedies, the game shows, the Westerns, the adventure tales, the dramas, the movies, variety, comedy, discussions and commercials—just about all the fare is aimed at the white middle class. Black viewers did not need the Kerner commission to tell them that "our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." Television by and large excludes Negroes. It denies them the public air waves. It tells them the great white society does not care for them. It gives them a false image of themselves.

The world of television, of course, is a false image of the white world as well, but it is a true reflection of white values. Affluent whites who have control of television employ it to their own economic ends, not for human communication. It is a deprivation of grave consequence.

There have been unusual instances when Negroes were addressed by television as Negroes and people. It was startling to hear, during local station breaks, a plea from Negro leaders to the Negro community of New York City to cool it during the Harlem riots of 1963. Startling because television is seldom used for such direct, social communication. Several years ago the program, *The*

Comers, on New York City's educational Channel 13, gave a group of racially and economically diverse youngsters, mainly high school juniors and seniors, the opportunity to get to know one another in free-wheeling discussion on camera. In the process they learned and at the same time taught the television audience that we are all of us, no matter the race, creed or economic position, one community. By having freedom of microphone and camera, the youngsters learned too that the community cared. Typically the program was dropped, on pretext of insufficient funding, after the kids got into a frank discussion of sex that offended adults in the TV audience.

Such examples are rare and they exist now only as history. Every night of the week television offers the more usual sights and sounds of fiddling while civilization burns.

The prospect of changing television into a tool that would help rather than exploit America is not hopeful. The FCC has been permissive about public service. Congress has been more concerned with private broadcasters than public welfare. The most recent proposal to better American television, the still-in-prospect Public Broadcasting Corporation to aid noncommercial television, may need, according to its chairman, Frank Pace, Jr., twenty years to develop into a potent social and educational force. The slow build-up will put America where England was when it began its television system in 1936 by creating the autonomous British Broadcasting Corporation. A communications gap of fifty-two years is ludicrous for an America with crucial and urgent problems to solve now.

Was it too much to expect the Kerner commission to examine television in some depth? The commission was cautious about treading on freedom of the press in discussion of news coverage of riots. It completely overlooked the responsibility of television stations—not their news organizations but the stations themselves—to operate "in the public interest, convenience and necessity." That is how their licenses read. But television is used to amuse the whites and to move their goods. It gives no one, least of all Negroes, a sense of community or a feeling of human dignity. It is divisive. It deprives minorities, especially Negroes, of a part in the American present and future.

The frightful thing is that we have institutionalized white American prejudice by entrusting television to commercial interests which are committed to the majority (white) audience on a limited, materialistic basis. We have in effect given away the instrument that could save us.

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