
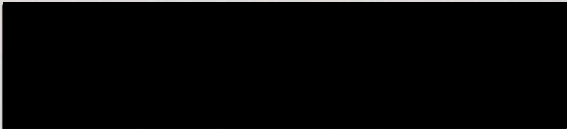


09-17-96

C-Span:

I'm sure that by now you all have seen the Sept. 16 New Yorker article "Only Disconnect." Copy attached.

I couldn't agree more. Frequently I have wondered why a C-Span host doesn't tell off some crackpot callers. So few of the callers are worth listening to that I have ~~taken~~ to keeping the volume off until I see that the host or guest is moving his or her lips, then up goes the volume. I suggest that you gradually reduce the number of callers by increasing the usually informative discussion of host and guests.

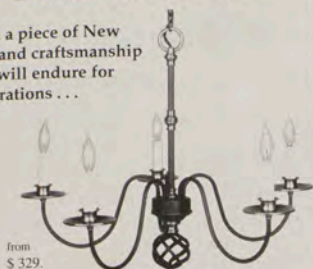


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MIXED MEDIA



ONLY DISCONNECT

Of cranky callers, instant polling, and MSNBC's new old-fashioned news.

BY JAMES WOLCOTT

IN the old days, it was called audience participation. Today, it's called interactivity. Whatever the buzz phrase, the concept remains the same—to interrupt the one-way flow of media traffic and invite the viewer to become "part of the program," as CNN's Larry King likes to say. Interactivity flings the airwaves open to the great, throbbing passions of the citizen-viewer and promotes active involvement rather than passive consumption—i.e., it should remove some of the glaze from America's eyeballs. Nice idea, but in practice it almost never works. I've seldom seen a talk show where taking phone calls provided extra bounce or illumination. Let any average schmo get through to any movie star appearing with Larry King or Tom Snyder, and the first question invariably is: "Of all the films you've made, which one is your favorite?" (Followed by: "What advice would you give someone just starting out in the business?") The callers lob the same golly-gee questions the hosts do. They're the autograph hounds of the airwaves.

The political arena proves no more uplifting. Each day, C-SPAN broadcasts a perusal of the morning papers with elected officials, journalists, and policy wonks. It's usually a very well-informed, civilized, even-keeled discussion (the hosts on C-SPAN are saints)—until they go to open phones. You might think that a network this thoroughly rooted in Jeffersonian ideals would draw from the deep end of the I.Q. pool. But no; it's like prying open the lid on the national id. Rush Limbaugh dittoheads, drawling male loners who sound as though they have a crick in their brains, conspiracy theorists, crusty old crackpots (like the recent retiree who grumbled, "Every morning at seven o'clock, all I see is the Clinton Commies"): C-SPAN's

newspaper roundup attracts the latest specimens of what Richard Hofstadter has called the anti-intellectual tradition in America. (The few liberals who phone often whimper like Beavis and Butt-head's hippie-dippy teacher, but at least their remarks seem relatively sane.) Many of the



Larry's the King of viewer call-ins, but is interactive TV a kingdom worth ruling?

callers boast about not being beholden to any party, taking a plague-on-both-their-houses position (they ain't fooled by them politicians), and the C-SPAN panelists never challenge their intellectual pride. If anything, these callers are coddled. As Walker Percy wrote, it's O.K. to attack greedy crooks or bleeding-heart liberals, "but don't lay a finger on the voter, especially not the independent voter who despises politics and breaks away from his TV once every four years to vote for a man—because he looks sincere on TV. It is this very flattery which the Federalist authors warned against." People: the weak link in democracy.

Interactivity isn't confined to the telephone. It now includes faxes (the faxes on

YES!

wonder and finality." But in this performance, astonishingly, the gesture is omitted. Instead, McDonnell gives the statue a dry wash, eying it from head to toe before ambling unsteadily offstage.

The omission is serious; Warren has mounted the play but has not really understood it. The lapse doesn't spoil the audience's pleasure—just the play's meaning. In Williams's vision, Alma's undoing of her own development is a blessing—the same romantic abdication that would be the springboard for the next thirty years of his life and work. Onstage, it's a recipe for memorable drama; in life, it's a recipe for disaster. By the end of the sixties, a decade Williams referred to as "the Stoned Age," he was an exhausted and drugged-out shadow of himself: he was betrayed by his romantic imagination. Over the decades, his life and his beautiful plays measured the sad, inevitable trajectory from blessing to barbarity.

"OLD WICKED SONGS," at the Promenade, is a well-written piece of sentimental sanctimony, with one hand on its heart and the other on the public purse. The play, by Jon Marans, asks the question, Can a blocked, arrogant twenty-five-year-old piano prodigy find wisdom under the tutelage of a suicidal singing teacher who survived the Holocaust? Between talk of "Dichterliebe" and Dachau, they swap attitude and exposition; ultimately, they save each other's lives. The evening is carried on the cool command of Justin Kirk, who plays Stephen Hoffman, the enfant-not-so-terrible, and owns the stage with his swaggering, rebarbative style. Hal Robinson, as the wily coach, hangs in there, too, but sometimes the dialogue and his dialect let him down. The literature play, which is unobtrusively directed by Seth Barrish, is crafted to a recognizable commercial formula, in which each new scene quickly reverses the expectations of the previous one. (Mr. Marans did time as a script editor for Columbia Pictures.) What the play can't reverse is its chronic glibness. The characters neatly go through changes, but the audience isn't changed—it arrives at the station long before the engine of the plot reaches its destination. Perhaps this is why, despite my indigestion, theatregoers on the night I saw the play ate it up. Nobody ever went broke playing soft-pitch with the American public: look for "Old Wicked Songs" soon at the multiplex near you. ♦



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C-SPAN are crankier than the calls), E-mail, and instant polls, which contradict each other depending on how they're worded and thus yield what one Internet critic has called "statistical non sequiturs." (Comedy Central's "Politically Incorrect" kids the process by conducting mock polls on such hot-button topics as which rock singer has the biggest lips.) No network has made all modes of interactivity more integral to its programming identity than the new cable network MSNBC, a marriage of Microsoft and NBC. With its promotional tag line "It's time to get connected," MSNBC heralds itself as the boldest link so far between on-line and on-air; it has synergy coming out of its ears. The newsroom at MSNBC, with its faux-brick walls and active clutter of monitors, control boards, and map-size screens displaying enlargements of electronic circuitry, resembles a cross between a hip ad agency and the command station at NORAD. On a TV monitor behind an anchorperson marches a binary stream of ones and zeros.

Like CNN, MSNBC boasts its own Web site ("Send us your opinions about current events, and we may publish them!"), but it has made a more ambitious and adventurous effort to court the keyboard surfers of the MTV generation. Each week night, it broadcasts a show devoted solely to the Internet called "The Site," hosted by Soledad O'Brien, who bops around a set conceived as a space-age coffeehouse: "Star Wars" meets Starbucks. The coffeehouse even has its own groovy virtual-reality counter guy with purple pineapple hair: he lays his own special kind of love vibes on Soledad. Along with serious news updates ("Here are some of today's headlines from the digital domain"), "The Site" features a nightly tour of nifty Web sites, which presents the opportunity to stare at your TV screen and observe other people staring at other screens—the latest in vicarious non-living. For a more skeptical, holistic perspective, there's regular commentary from Cliff Stoll, the author of a free-swinging book about cyberspace and cyberhype called "Silicon Snake Oil." His segments, shot like home movies, are intended to be a low-tech subversion of a high-tech format; with an absent-minded-professor befuddlement, he wanders the grounds of his house in Oakland, California, and feigns that he's musing at random. One recent installment had him picking a plum from a back-yard tree and meditat-

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"A pod of attorneys to see you, sir!"

ing on homemade jam. After a ramble about the value of a personalized gift versus an impersonal computer-generated message, he concluded, "Rather than seeing a real cool graphic on your World Wide Web page, I'd rather send and receive a jar of homemade plum jam." Go back inside, Cliff.

The irony is that what's dynamic about MSNBC has little to do with interactivity (though "The Site" is an entertaining try) and more to do with old-fashioned journalistic enterprise. The network outpaced CNN at the outset, with its coverage of the T.W.A. crash, and has continued to be more flexible than its all-news rival—less locked into its programming blocks. MSNBC excels at live cutaways to events like Bob Dole's "Hollywood II" speech or Mike McCurry's press conference announcing Dick Morris's resignation. The coverage doesn't seem canned. Adding lustre and authority is a nightly lineup starring NBC-news bigfoots like Jane Pauley, Tom Brokaw, Bryant Gumbel, Bob Costas, and Katie Couric, who are able to conduct interviews at a length impossible on their parent network. Couric has shown the sharpest zip. Pundits who were surprised at her ruffling of Bob Dole over his stand on tobacco (which cost the "Today" show a booking when Elizabeth Dole refused to make a return engagement) shouldn't have been: smiling and relentless, Couric

has become the killer rabbit of TV interviewers. On MSNBC's "InterNight," she performed the best grilling I've seen of the former political strategist Ed Rollins, at one point asking him, "When it comes to Michael Huffington, you basically say there was no 'there' there. If there was no 'there' there, why were you there?" (His lame reply: "That's a complicated question. . . .") When Rollins lamented the rise of negative campaigning, she told him to quit acting so "pure"—he had done more than his share of it. Couric's unflinching eye contact is far more squirm-inducing than Robert Novak's dripping sarcasms or John Sununu's McCarthyite barking on CNN's "Crossfire." They ham up their high dudgeon and engage in melodrama, which allows their adversaries to become equally bombastic. She keeps it clinical.

Bench strength is provided by the second-tier NBC talents who host the news hours, including Ann Curry and Brian Williams (Chuck Scarborough with a serrated edge); and by the dry, ironical John Gibson, who has become the station's Mr. Sardonicus. MSNBC has also hired personalities from other networks, allowing them to display unaccustomed grit—most noticeably Bill Moyers, who has shed the moss he's accumulated from years of pondering the imponderables of God and virtue on PBS, and has returned to his political

roots (he was Lyndon Johnson's press secretary), refereeing bull sessions on "InterNight" with newfound pith and assurance. He's stopped all that empathizing.

On September 3rd, the network unveiled its gutsiest programming ploy: a live video simulcast of Don Imus's morning radio show. Imus has been simulcast before, on C-SPAN, where his song parodies, rude speculations, and sheer cussedness clashed with the network's civic-minded ethos. Here his personality cult should be more at home, though the very idea of televising a radio show seems iffy. Visually, it's just a bunch of guys with headsets sitting in glass booths. It's one thing to listen to Imus—to the low rumble of trouble slowly erupting from his throat as Rabelaisian put-down (calling the President a "pant-load")—and quite another to see him first thing in the morning. I look at Imus and I can't help thinking of that line in Ring Lardner about giving the wolf a sitz bath. (I say that with love, I do.) But there's no question that for a frank, funny-profane scroll of political news no one cuts to the quick better than Imus, whether he's sparring with the columnist Mike Barnicle, of the *Boston Globe*, or indulging in one of his incendiary rants.

It's too soon to judge how Imus will fare, since his debut was cut short by President Clinton's statement on the missile attack on Iraq. Yet even a truncated show gave Imus time to rag MSNBC, suggesting that it hire "snappier babes" and "get rid of John Gibson," who "looks creepy"; tease Mike Wallace of "60 Minutes" over the "hatchet job" his colleague Lesley Stahl tried to do on Bob Dole; and interrupt a news item with a tantrum over the cold, horrible coffee he was being served. The unique quality of Imus's show is that it books not only slick media pros, like Mike Wallace, Tim Russert, and Jeff Greenfield, but idiosyncratic free-associators whose careers have been in and out of eclipse, such as Mort Sahl and Dick Cavett. (Imus, whose career has taken its own shadowy dips, has an affinity with those who come through the other side of fame.) When Imus and his guests gibe and go at each other, his show doesn't need input from the outside. Taking calls or faxes would only mess up the flow, like interrupting a jam session to let an amateur play a few bars. And I suspect that as MSNBC evolves the network will quietly deactivate its interactive formula, let its anchors do their stuff, and leave the *hoi polloi* to Larry King. ♦