

TV: An Interim Summing-Up

MILLARD C. FAUGHT

THE BIG problem with television," complained one of its observers, "is that it's hard to lie about it fast enough to keep up with the truth."

Part of this difficulty stems no doubt from that awesome characteristic of television which its enthusiasts describe with their now favorite word—impact. They will tell you that because you can see as well as hear television it has from three to ten times the impact on your senses as does radio, which can get at you only through your ears.

But aside from what television may do to you, there is no longer a shred of doubt that television has hit society with a force that would justify the strong word impact. It may be a reflection on our sense of values, but the sundered atom is far behind the television tube as the greatest new technological influence on the daily lives of millions of Americans.

Architects are already redesigning houses so as to make the living rooms more like "theatres" than parlors; fireplaces are losing out to give their preferred position to the TV set; the office swivel chair is being adapted for home use so that viewers can easily swerve back and forth between watching the screen and keeping an eye on the kids or an ear cocked to whatever conversation is able to survive TV's competition. There have been several invidious suggestions for printing the evening news on transparent paper or else in luminous ink so that a modicum of reading could still be done without interfering with the watching of television.

TV portables are not yet available, and the police take a dim view of television sets in cars. (Just to make sure, some states are drafting laws against such "traffic hazards.") Even so, the TV screen is already pursuing man outside his living room. A California bus has been experimentally equipped with television, and so has a transcontinental airliner. Both these

tests were pronounced "successful."

A New York laundry complains that stay-at-home TV owners are dirtying up 40 per cent fewer dress shirts, but an enterprising department store in the same area is now featuring special clothing as the "right wardrobe" to wear while watching video.

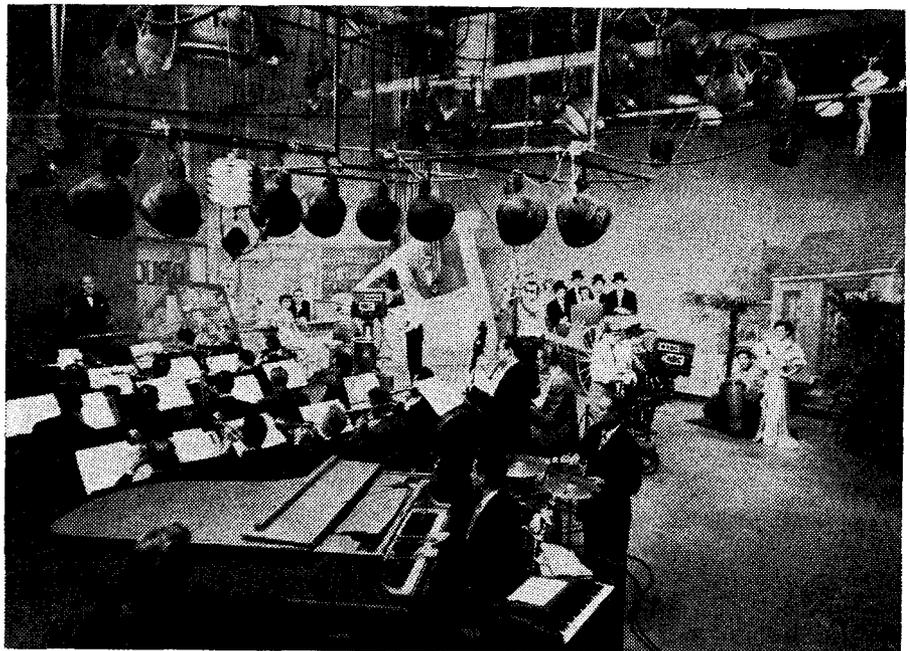
The small fry in TV homes have already decided that the only fitting clothes to wear in the television age is a cowboy suit and in the past year have cajoled their parents into buying some \$200,000,000 worth of boots, hats, pants, guns, and other gear as specified by their favorite TV horse-opera heroes. Latest thing for children's rooms is Hopalong Cassidy wallpaper.

Here are some other developments in TV that make it hard to keep up with the truth about this burgeoning phenomenon. Over two billion dollars have been invested in television by business and the public since V-J Day. A California bank estimates that we have recently been buying \$40 worth

of television for every \$100 worth of new automobiles.

In the first six months of 1950 upward of 3,000,000 sets were sold at an average price plus installation costs of over \$300 each. An estimated six out of ten sets are currently being sold on credit, with the poor crowding the rich away from the counters. It is already a significant issue in some cities as to whether a family should be dropped from the relief rolls for buying a television set.

NORMALLY the big season for television sets, as it has always been for the sale of radios, mounts during the fall to a Christmas crescendo. This year, due to the war scare set off by events in Korea, the "Christmas rush" on television sets began in July and has already forced many manufacturers to start distributing their sets on allocation. Even so, such has been the mushrooming growth of TV-set production capacity that the industry may still come close to its



Many a television fan "liked his own mental radio villains and heroines better."

1950 goal of around 8,000,000 sets. Current best guesses about the worst prospects are that military needs will not curtail TV production more than 25 per cent. There is no blinking the fact, however, that one more Korea could easily shut the luxury TV industry down overnight.

But in spite of the hot-cake sales records in receiving sets no new television stations have been authorized for over a year. How this situation developed is itself revealing. It can easily cost over a million dollars to get a television station on the air, yet the postwar rush for licenses in the present twelve inadequate channels was so great that the Federal Communications Commission, which regulates such matters, had to call a halt and freeze the permits for new stations as of September 1948. By August 1950 107 TV stations were on the air.

The reasons for this freeze may affect the decision as to when your hometown will get a television station, or another television station if you already have one or more nearby. Here is the problem.

A television signal is a roadhog on the airwaves in the sense that it requires a piece of the radio spectrum six megacycles wide. This is 600 times the width of the electronic path required by a radio signal. Moreover, television signals interfere with one another so badly that two stations on the same channel were first placed at least 100 miles apart. Even this proved much too close and the safe distance is still in dispute.

IT IS at least clear that there is far too little room for television in the VHF (very high frequency) band where the 107 existing stations are located. Therefore the FCC is looking around in the UHF (ultra-high-frequency) band for enough space for TV's future growth. No new TV stations will be authorized until this allocation problem has been settled, and the war situation has served only to unsettle it still further.

Even when the new television frontier has been unfrozen another problem will arise, because most present receiving sets will not pick up new stations on the future high band. Old sets will require converters and new sets will have to be equipped with two bands so as to receive current stations plus the new high-band stations.

But that's still not all the pains in the Commission's television neck—or in yours as a set owner. Color has to be added—and if possible added in such a way as to be receivable on present low-band sets as well as on future high-band sets. In the midst of

this dilemma it has been no comfort to the Commission to have listened for eight solid months to a violent argument among advocates of three different kinds of color television! The official hearings have been closed, but the arguments over what to do about color television grow steadily more lurid.

Biblical Job with his patience and Solomon in his wisdom would perhaps make excellent consultants to the FCC in settling these celestial problems of television; but in their absence—and even with Mars muttering on the sidelines—the Commission still has hopes of coming to final decisions and unfreezing television station growth by the end of 1950. Set makers and dealers are praying this will happen in time so that, even in the face of war-pressured rising prices and a threatened 10 per cent excise tax, they can cash in on the bonanza of television Christmas presents. Santa Claus probably hopes the freeze will stay frozen.

In any case, the public can contribute little but the pressure of popular impatience toward the removal of these technical roadblocks in TV's path. Meantime they at least have available the safety valve offered by the opportunity to kibitz television's early attempts to solve a wholly different set of problems in the field of programming. But even that opportunity is open only to about a third of the population which now has some reasonable access to their own or a neighbor's set. Just the same, with 107 stations on the air and with thirty to seventy hours of programming per week, either network or local, we at least have enough of a sample of this new and wondrous phenomenon to examine—and plenty of questions to ask about it.

Surprisingly, one of the most rewarding of these questions is "What is television?" New as it is, a lot of things are already being taken for granted about this revolutionary thing.

Among many people who have moved into telecasting from radio



—Photos by NBC.

"Nothing wrong with programming that money couldn't cure."

broadcasting the easy assumption has gone along that television is simply "radio that you can see." But efforts to simulcast a program on radio and television at the same time have quickly shown that this is far from the whole truth.

The full answer to the innocent question "What is television?" seems to be that it is radio plus motion pictures plus the legitimate theatre plus spectator sports plus a large measure of something new in the entertainment and communication arts which can best be described as giving the viewer a feeling of being there in the flesh.

As one housewife put it, "Turning on the television set is just like inviting the entertainers and other people on the programs right into my living room . . . some of them are welcome but some others have already worn their welcome out." Welcome or not, these new visual guests are demanding—and receiving—millions of family hours of attention daily that were formerly devoted to reading, visiting, movie-going, and to the consuming of a long list of leisure-time goods that must now compete with this new monopolist of people's attention and money. Television is even upsetting the established patterns of courtship and the marketing of beer.

All of which is simply corroboration of television's enormous impact, but it is also strong evidence that in television we have a social or cultural

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The World. *It is a time-honored practice of critics of fiction to watch the horizon for the appearance of promising new talents so that the tom-toms may be roundly thumped. In other fields the vigil is, unhappily, less keen-eyed, and many a writer of exceptional ability has had to write several books before receiving as wide a recognition as he deserves. Young John Frederick Muehl not only displays great promise as a literary artist but delivers a solid performance as a social historian and reporter in "Interview with India," which Louis Fischer reviews below. Two other of the world's numerous trouble spots are treated in "This Is Germany," a compilation of journalists' appraisals (preponderantly critical) edited by Arthur Settel, and in Walter Schubart's "Russia and Western Man," a curious mixture of Germanic-Russian philosophizing.*

Journey Through Misery

INTERVIEW WITH INDIA. By John Frederick Muehl. New York: The John Day Co. 310 pp. \$3.50.

By LOUIS FISCHER

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS never got there, but Americans have finally discovered India. What Prime Minister Nehru says, how his delegate votes in the UN Security Council, has suddenly become very important to the West. For India could be the anchor of Asian democracy or a dead weight dragging the huge continent deeper into the abyss.

But the real India seldom comes into our field of vision. Our curiosity seeks to penetrate the uncertainties of the Indian Government; our interest centers on New Delhi, still an island of palaces, cars, and good meals cut off from the hungry mainland. "India lives in her villages, not in her cities," wrote Mahatma Gandhi.

It is this India that John Frederick Muehl has tried to interview. That he survived it is a miracle. For six months, in 1948, he crisscrossed the countryside on horse, camel, bullock, cart, foot, and boat, never feeding up or washing up in a city, covering 2,300 miles, traversing deserts where his body blistered, jungles where backward tribes, cobras, tigers, and elephants live, living always in peasant huts, eating village food, and mingling with the vermin, disease, and misery which are the permanent companions of the Indian peasant. He contracted illnesses, lost much weight, grew somewhat hysterical, and in the end collapsed and was rushed to a clean urban hospital.

Mr. Muehl sure can write. You don't skip a word; even the most sordid conditions are exquisitely portrayed so that you enjoy the style while the contents turn your stomach.

He came out of India a bitter, angry man. "I was sick to death," he says, "of those who prate of 'the glorious traditions of India'. . . Even in the so-called golden ages there was less political freedom than in Nazi Germany." At times he felt that India's problems could never be solved. Perhaps progress had stopped. But in the end he decided that "with India, as with the rest of the world, the worst, and the best, are still ahead."



THE AUTHOR: John Frederick Muehl would seem to be a prime example of karma, defined in his book's glossary as "the system of duty, causality, and retribution elaborated in Hindu scripture" and in the dictionary, "destiny as determined by previous acts." A conscientious objector, he enlisted in the American Field Service (attached to the British Army). Acutely aware of India's starving—while on duty there, 1943-44—he poured his indignation into "Famine Is Like This" (*Asia and the Americas*, Jan. '46), "American Sahib" (John Day, 1946), and the present book. He is hailed by his publishers as "one of the three best nonfiction writers we ever had" and "a born fiction writer"—although he has still to write any fiction. He is now "doing practice pieces" in that form and planning a novel very soon, while teaching creative writing at Ann Arbor—though he had "never thought of making writing a career"! The girl he left behind at Royal Oak High School, Mich., when he entered the Univ. of Mich. in 1940 (A.B. '45) went along, as his bride, on the return trip to India. She "loved the people," as he had, and now they are eager to go back but think they "had better stay put for a while and raise a family." They have made a start in that direction, a ten-month-old daughter "born in the process of the book." In America Mr. Muehl, at twenty-eight, wears a mustache, but no beard; that was strictly for India and from necessity—"because of the danger of infection it is quite dangerous to shave when traveling around the country." He has the stocky build of the swimmer and tennis player he is, the handsomeness of the sculptor's model he once was while earning his passage through college (he waited on table and painted houses, too), and the mental discipline of the quondam debater and editor of the campus philosophical and ethical-thought magazine *Controversy*. He comes from a family strong on conviction: his father, after years as a Ford production engineer, broke with them over anti-labor policies; his brother is a Yale divinity student.—E. P. H.

This enigmatic, desperate conclusion is the distillation of a blackening experience. Mr. Muehl had seen privation on the world's vastest scale. Not only that: except in a few tiny areas where the Communists exercise effective though unofficial control as a result of hard work and cruel personal terror, he found the villagers prostrate under the intimate yoke of the feudal landlord, the usurious money lender, and the decadent Brahmin. These to the peasant are the rulers of India; Nehru is a vague, distant name. Independence, Muehl thinks, brought the people no benefits.

It is easy enough to accuse Muehl of distorting the picture. A new generation of bright-eyed, healthy youngsters is studying in the schools of India; women are beginning to use their new rights; idealists in the Congress and Socialist parties, and outside them too, are striving to ameliorate admittedly intolerable conditions. Yet if Indian intellectuals, politicians, and leaders spent six months, as Mr. Muehl did, in contact with the truth which is India, it might do them and the country a lot of good. Perhaps he exaggerates; perhaps his perspective is awry. But who am I to say so? I have never had the energy and courage to submit to the tortures he endured during his trip. I know of no foreigners and few prominent Indi-