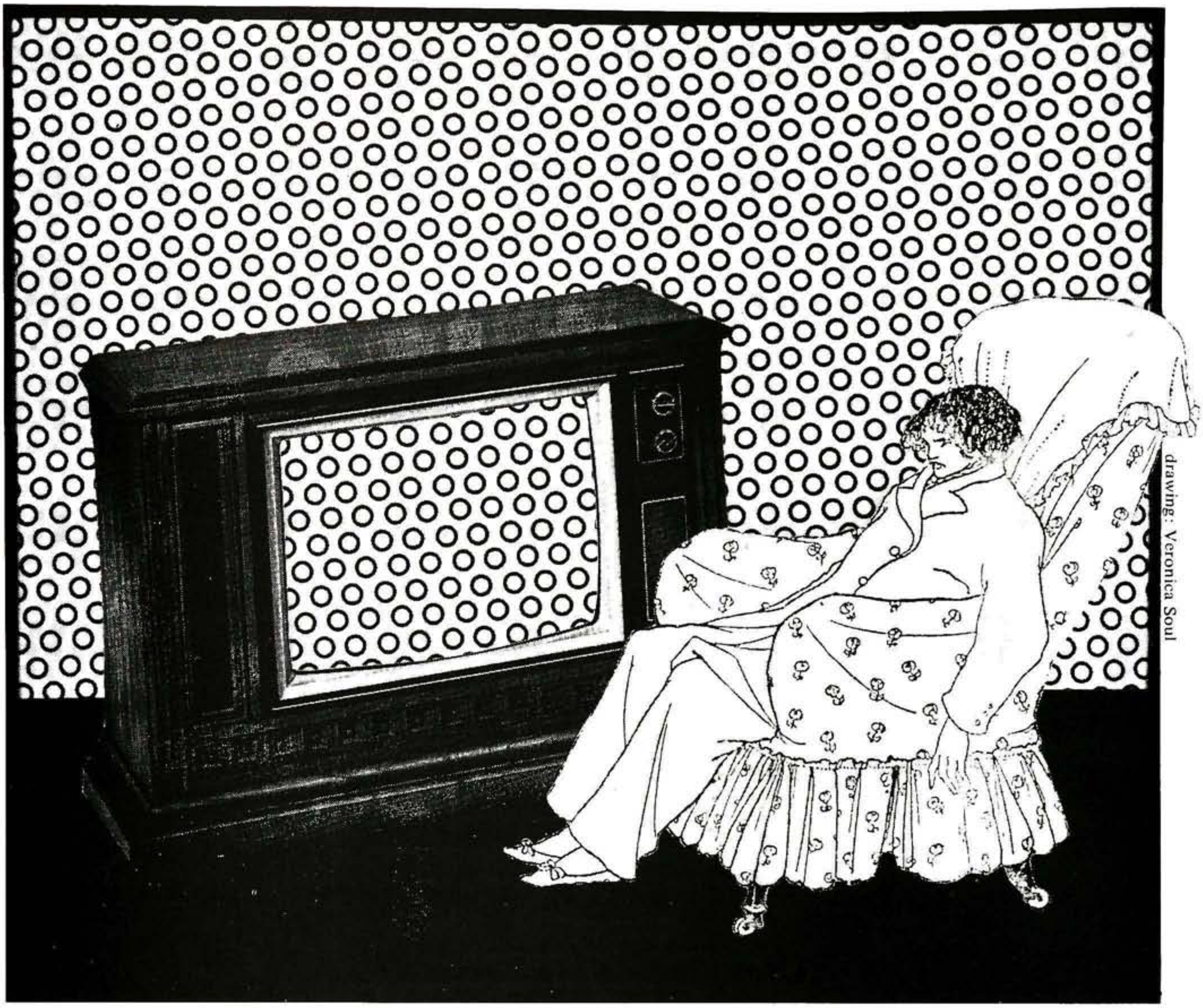


one way street

Toronto has led the way in bidding up the price of American television programming. Canada is now the source of 19 percent of the revenues which flow into the States from foreign TV sales. Joyce Nelson documents the reach and power of the American programming industry and the role of the major U.S. networks in creating a world-wide monopoly.

by Joyce Nelson

Last year in Finland, the top-rated program was "All in the Family." In Nigeria "Hawaii Five-0" is the big hit this year, while over in Australia, "The Love Boat" is the TV favorite. In England you'll find "Starsky and Hutch," "The Waltons," "Kojak," "The Rockford Files" and "The Wonderful World of Disney" on the BBC, while the commercial channel competes with "Charlie's Angels." "The Six Million Dollar Man," "Emergency" and "Little House on the Prairie." Around the world, the perennial best-selling series from Columbia Motion Pictures and Television is "Bewitched." In some Latin American countries, 85 percent of the broadcast schedule is composed of U.S. reruns like "Peyton Place," "I Love Lucy" and "Bonanza."

A writer for *Esquire* recently contemplated "the media barrage from Burbank and Manhattan" with specific reference to China's opening to the West. Noting that "it seems to be simply impossible to compete with the quantity and popular entertainment quality of the words and images generated in America," he concluded, "folks love our junk."

Actually, it's a little more complex than that. The *Esquire* writer was right about one thing, however; the quantity of popular entertainment generated in the U.S. and exported around the world is staggering. Researchers for UNESCO found that in 1974 the U.S. exported 150,000 hours of TV programming annually. Its closest competitors were the United Kingdom (with 20,000 hours), France (20,000 hours), and West Germany (6,000 hours). In other words, by 1974 the U.S. was exporting annually three times as much TV programming as the other three countries' combined output, and enough material to completely fill the broadcasting schedules of 22 networks operating 18 hours per day for an entire year. That was in 1974. Five years later the same UNESCO team is again studying the phenomenon of world-wide television-traffic, and while their figures are not yet established, current estimates put the U.S. figure at least at 200,000 hours annually. That doesn't include theatrical feature films, or records, or print. That is just television programming alone.

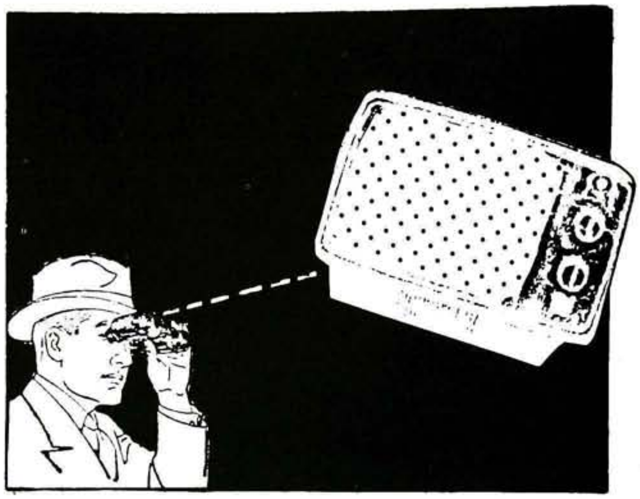
Last one conclude from these figures, like the *Esquire* writer, that they simply indicate how much folks love U.S. junk it's necessary to look behind the comparative date at the structure of the commercial television industry and its operating procedures. The first thing to keep in mind is that the U.S. domestic TV market is virtually closed to "foreign invasion." In other words, of those 46,000 hours of programming being exported in 1974 by the United Kingdom, France, and West Germany, only a minute fraction was going to the U.S. Jeremy Tunstall's *The Media Are American* (Constable Press, 1977) estimates that the three commercial U.S. networks import less than 2 per cent of their overall annual schedule. Their programming policy is absolutely xenophobic, and the slightest "invasion" of their domestic market brings on an attack of paranoia.

For instance, in 1976 the Mexican commercial network Televisa, based in Mexico City, made part-time affiliate of 9 U.S. stations, providing them with 25 hours of Spanish-language programming per week. The broadcast signal was carried by land-lines across the border to San Diego where one of the affiliated stations was located, and from there the signal was switched to the Westar satellite and beamed across the country to the other eight stations. Richard Wiley, who was then Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), was reported by the *New York Times* (Oct. 3, 1976) to have expressed great concern about the arrangement. While it didn't violate any FCC regulations, he felt the implications were "staggering" because "if Mexico can do it, why not also Canada?". He worried that the private CTV network might imitate this arrangement by Televisa and make some part-time affiliates of U.S. stations, and "Canadian television would come spilling across the border."

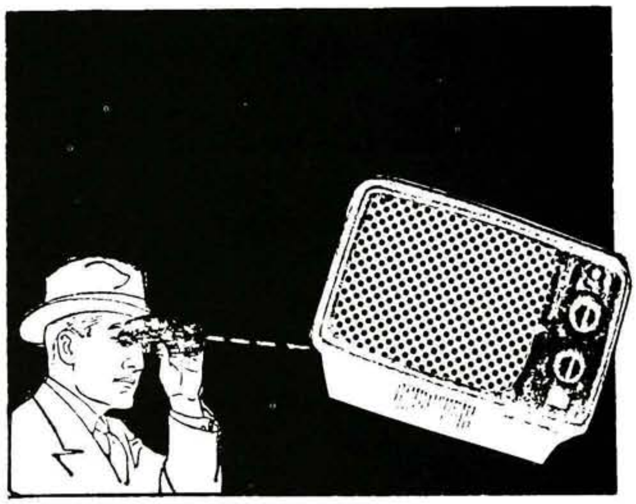
Meanwhile, Canada has been swamped by U.S. television for nearly thirty years and as of 1977 became the top foreign market for U.S. TV programming. It is estimated that 100 million dollars leave the country annually for U.S. TV product, a figure that takes on even more significance when placed next to current estimates of the value of total annual U.S. TV exports. Ed Zuckerman, writing in *American Film* for February 1979, placed the value of U.S. TV exports for 1977 at 240 million dollars. If that figure is correct, then Canadian purchases of U.S. TV product are accounting for over one-third of the total world-wide income from U.S. sales. Astounding as that may seem, it appears to be borne out by the UNESCO research of 1974, which found that even six years ago Canada's purchase of U.S. TV exports amounted to 19 percent of the toal income. It is not necessarily that Canadian networks buy so many U.S. programs as that they pay so dearly for them, and have been doing so increasingly throughout the 1970's. The UNESCO quote is as follows:

Joyce Nelson is a freelance writer and broadcaster in Toronto, and is presently working on a series about television for CBC Ideas.

> About one-third of the foreign sales of the major American exporters go to Latin America. The Far East and East Asia take another third, and the rest is mainly distributed to Western Europe. Africa and Middle Eastern countries take 10 per cent to twenty per cent of the exports by various companies. *If the calculations are based on dollars, Canada is the most important area for American exports* (19 per cent of total income), Australia is second (18 per cent), followed by Japan (17 per cent) and the United Kingdom (12 per cent). These four countries account for two-thirds of the total dollar income from foreign distribution. (emphasis mine)
>
> –Kaarle Nordenstreng and Tapio Varis,
> *Television Traffic: A One-Way Street?*
> UNESCO, 1974.

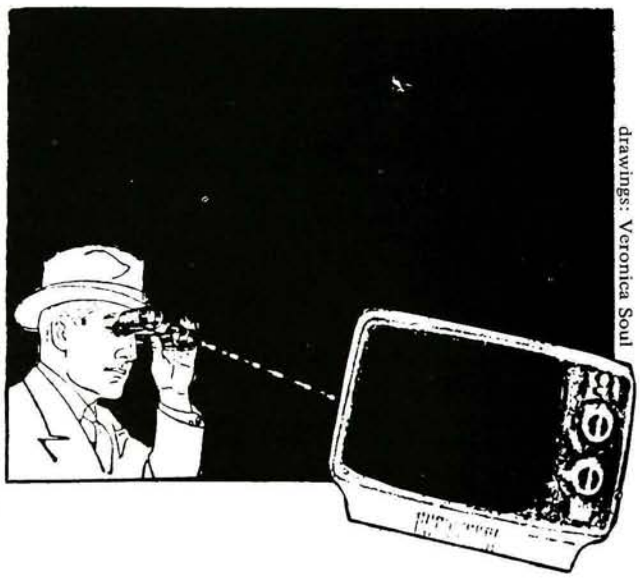


We get some indication of comparative pricing and Canada's climb in the Seventies to the number-one foreign market from the table on this page compiled from *Variety* figures of 1976 through 1978. The table shows the average price-range paid by the seven major importing countries for U.S. TV shows. The price given is for each half-hour of programming.



Aside from Australia, the population base for the other five major importing countries ranges from at least twice that of Canada, to almost five times its size (Japan). If we were to compare the prices Canada pays with those paid by countries similar in population size, we would find incredible differences: Yugoslavia, for instance, pays $175-250 per half-hour; Columbia pays $300-500 per half-hour. But the pricing has little to do with the size of the population. The fluxuations and dissimilarities are the result of bargaining and a country's posture viz-a-vis the U.S. exporters.

Some national television organizations are, in Tunstall's words, "typically strong buyers looking for bargains among competing sellers." There was a time when Canada could effectively set its own buyer's price when dealing with the U.S. exporters, but that situation has changed radically during the Seventies. While preparing the CBC-FM *Ideas* series, "Television: A Surrogate World," I spoke with Michael Horowtiz, who is in charge of foreign sales and syndication for Columbia Motion Pictures and Television. He described quite clearly, from the vantage point of the U.S. exporters, some of the changes in Canada during recent years.



drawings: Veronica Soul

> When we started selling programs in Canada, it was what can best be described as a buyers' market. You had the CBC, which played a reasonable number of American programming, and we sold a lot of shows to CBC, and CTV was programming in Canada. This represented a two-network situation, along with a Canadian content regulation which limited the amount of American programming on Canadian television. These two buyers competed for the output of three American networks, so that when you combined the Canadian content requirement with the over-abundance of American programming available, there was a buyers' market. CBC would say to us, "Look, this is what we're gonna pay and this is what we've decided is fair." And I have had many arguments with CBC executives, saying "It's not really fair, but that's what you'll pay! It's not really fair." But the price was basically established by Canadian broadcasters. *Then we had a marvellous thing happen for American production and distribution companies.* The Global Network came on the air (1974). CHCH in Hamilton took a

much more aggressive position in acquiring programming. CFTO joined the race for programming, and CITY-TV joined in. And you had a change in the law concerning the tax status of advertising on American stations. That pumped a whole lot more money into the Canadian marketplace and, suddenly, what had been a buyers' market became a sellers' market. And, very strangely, the "fair price" has escalated markedly. So I guess the determination of the price is essentially, anywhere in the world, a supply and demand situation. Where the supply exceeds the demand, the prices are very depressed. Where the supply does not exceed the demand, the prices are very high. Certainly the best American customer today, the easiest customer, the best payer, is Canada. (emphasis mine)

Blake Kirby wrote essentially the same thing in 1975 for *The Globe and Mail* (Aug. 21) when he explained that "with six stations in Toronto buying U.S. shows, there is a seller's market and each is outbidding the others. Global has caused this. (President Allan) Slaight admits 'Global is costing everybody money.' " The situation had obviously become worse by 1978, but Global shifted the blame to CTV. In *The Globe and Mail* for May 26, 1978, Kirby quotes a remark by Global-TV's program director, Bill Stewart:

> Stewart said that CTV was so desperate to get U.S. shows that it had doubled the going price to $20,000 an hour. Five years ago, the price was only about $2,500 an hour. "The pricing went absolutely crazy down there," he said, meaning in Hollywood. He said that CHCH, normally an active buyer of the U.S. shows, had renewed ten of its existing ones but was unwilling to pay the $20,000-an-hour price and did not buy a single new one. . . . Except for the "Dick Clark Variety Show," which is live and went to CFTO, he said every other show on the market went to CTV or the CBC, which has already announced its six purchases. That leaves eleven for CTV.

To illustrate just how completely bizarre the importing situtation has become, the Council of Canadian Filmmakers has found a perfect example in the case of the "Mary Tyler Moore Show," which they cite in their brief to the CRTC regarding the 1978 CBC license-renewal hearings:

> One concrete example of the current bidding war among Canadian buyers is "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." Its price has gone from $2,000 for the reruns in 1977/78, to over $25,000 for the re-reruns in 1978/79 according to an unimpeachable source. The CBC has had to raise its bid for this top-rated half-hour sitcom by over 1,250 per cent in 5 years. Assuming 26 episodes, "Mary" will cost CBC over $650,000 this year, or about 10-15 per cent of the English Services Division's program procurement budget.

Obviously, that is how Canada got to be the top foreign market for U.S. television. And if that is what happened with "Mary Tyler Moore", one shudders to think about what may have happened with the pricing of other imports. In their study for the Ontario Royal Commission headed by Judy LaMarsh, Professor Hugh Edmunds and Dr. John Strick analyzed the weekly prime-time schedule for two networks, CBC and CTV, during the winter of 1975. The weekly costs of imports were revealed as follows:

CBC

Mary Tyler Moore	$2,000
Cannon	4,000
Black Beauty	2,000
Happy Days	2,000
Carol Burnett	4,000
Chico & The Man	2,000
All In The Family	2,000
MASH	2,000
Rhoda	2,000
Man About The House/Gallery	2,000
Maude	2,000
The Waltons	4,000
	$30,000

7 1/2 hours U.S. (prime-time only)

CTV

$6 Million Dollar Man	4,000
Streets of San Francisco	4,000
Ironside	4,000
Tuesday Night Movie	6,000
Marcus Welby	4,000
Harry-O	4,000
That's My Mama	2,000
Kung Fu	4,000
Nakia	4,000
The Rookies	4,000
Adam – 12	2,000
Friday Mystery Movie	8,000
Emergency	4,000
Academy Performance	12,500
Born Free	4,000
Kojak	4,000
Medical Centre	4,000
	$78,000

20 1/2 hours U.S. (prime-time only)

That was in 1975, before the bidding went completely berserk. Canadian broadcasters were and are willing to pay such outrageous prices because those prices are lower than the costs of mounting comparable indigenous productions. It takes a commitment to the Canadian industry and culture to put out $60,000 to make one episode of a series like "King of Kensington," when for a few thousand per week one can get a U.S. sitcom and watch the advertising revenues tally up.

It is in this sense that William H. Read can imply (see *American's Mass Media Merchants*, John Hopkins University Press, 1976) that the U.S. TV exporters are actually being quite generous to the rest of the world, especially the Third World. As an example, he cites the program "Bonanza," produced at a cost of $250,000 per program and made available to at least 35 countries for less than $100 per program. Given the enormous expenses involved in television production, that certainly seems to be a bargain. What's more, Read warns that any attempts to redress the imbalance of TV program-flow around the world, any tampering with that fact of 150,000 U.S. TV-hours going out around the world annually, could mean the destruction of the freedom of information. The UNESCO researchers put it a little differently:

> The "free flow" of TV material between nations means in actual fact that only those countries with considerable economic resources have . . .the freedom to produce, while those with scarce resources have the "freedom" to choose whether or not to take advantage of the material made available to them.

How those countries with "scarce economic resources" came to have television-systems in the first place is a story which, to my knowledge, has not yet been fully written, although one can piece together a history of sorts from sources like Tunstall's *The Media Are American*, Alan Wells's *Picture-Tube Imperialism* (Orbis Books, 1972), and Andrew Horowitz's work for Columbia University's *The Network Project's Notebooks.* The global pattern which Alan Wells perceived is a familiar one of investment in hardware preceding questions of overall broadcasting pruposes, methods and ideology.

> Overseas enterprise by the television industry began ironically with RCA's sale of a transmitter to the Soviet government in 1939, and has been growing steadily ever since. The sales by equipment manufacturers were soon followed by the spread of U.S. broadcasting methods, and the direct involvement of private broadcasting corporations in the operation of foreign programming. Commercial television of American origin has not always been unanimously welcomed by people overseas, who may resent what some of them regard as a form of cultural imperialism, but in the words of a vice-president of Time-Life Broadcast, "The various underdeveloped countries are having to permit it because they can't afford a TV system otherwise."

The information turned up by Andrew Horowitz in the mid-Seventies is more specific. He found that the late Fifties and early Sixties were busy and profitable times for the U.S. networks in terms of foreign activities. CBS signed a contract with the Italian Broadcasting Corporation (RAI) in 1961 to provide "help" with program production, news, public affairs and sales; shortly thereafter, CBS went on to construct Israel's nationwide TV system. NBC got involved with the TV networks of Portugal, Peru, Sweden, and Yugoslavia; built stations in Egypt, Argentina, Hong Kong and Italy; designed the networks of Kenya, Sierra Leone, the Sudan, Uganda, Nigeria and Saudi Arabia; and then, in 1966, built (with U.S. government support) the national TV system for South Vietnam.

ABC didn't do too badly during those years either, buying up stock in the TV systems of Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines; program production companies in Mexico, Great Britain and West Germany were also assisted by ABC expertise. According to Horowtiz:

> In 1960, ABC built Ecuador's first TV station, and later assisted both in the creation of the Philippine Republic Broadcasting System and in the formation of the Arab Middle East Television Network, comprised of stations in Syria, Lebanon, Kuwait, Iraq and Jordan. . . . Throughout the Sixties, ABC added stations and advertisers to its Worldivision network. By the end of the decade, the network comprised 68 stations operating in 27 countries.

Not surprisingly, by 1976 there were only five countries in the world which did not broadcast any U.S. TV programs-Mainland China, North Korea, North Vietnam, Albania, and Mongolia.

Although the FCC in 1971 required the U.S. networks to divest themselves of their foreign holdings, including some cable interests in Canada, the move was about a decade too late. By then just about everybody around the World know that "good television" meant "Bonanza" and "Peyton Place," which could be so easily and inexpensively procured in comparison to local production. Also, by 1971 the U.S. networks had long been out of in-house production, particularly of prime-time series, and had come to rely almost totally on outside producers. The arrangement between the commercial networks and the program-producers is actually an important link to understanding how U.S. program-distribution around the world functions as part of the overall system.

In the U.S. the program-producers may be either studio conglomerates like Universal, Paramount, MGM, Warner Brothers, or independent companies like MTM, Lee Richards' Company, or Norman Lear's enterprise. A program-producer does not actually "sell" a show to a network; rather, he rents it to them for a license fee that covers two showings of the program. Usually, this license fee paid by the network will cover only fifty or seventy-five per cent of the costs of making the program. For example, in a one-hour action-adventure series like "Kojak" or "Baretta," each episode will cost the producing company about $400,000 to make. If the series runs to 22 episodes, it will cost the producing company about $400,000 to make. If the series runs to 22 episodes, it will cost the producing company about $8,000,000. The network, however, would license the series for, at most, 75 per cent of the costs, or $6,000,000, meanwhile selling ad-time on each episode at a rate which could bring in nearly double what it paid to license the series. This arrangement between a network and a producing company is called "deficit financing." Les Brown, author and TV critic for the *New York Times*, explained in a personal interview:

> The companies that produce the programs . . . create a program at a certain risk, quite a large risk. The network pays a certain amount, but creates a deficit financing situation in which it costs the producer of the program more than he gets from the network, which licenses it for two plays. If the program is a success, the company that produces the show, which owns the show, would seem to be making money, but in fact loses money for a long time until the show has run its course because of this deficit financing arrangement.

If a show becomes a hit according to the Nielsen ratings, it is the network which profits from the success, without having to pay out any more money to the producing company. In fact, that company would seem to be loosing a few million dollars on the deal, but as Brown explained:

> The money comes from the overseas sales that the companies make . . . and from its resale in syndication after it has played on the networks. Then they get large amounts of money back year after year after year by selling it in rerun form. The idea is to have a program on for three to five years to build up enough of a library of programs so that they can sell them very effectively in syndication afterwards.

The producing companies play a waiting game until the series can become a re-rerun outside of domestic prime-time. The best description I've found of how domestic syndication works in the U.S. is in an article by Peter Schuyten for *Fortune Magazine* (November, 1976):

> Once a program has been aired twice by the network that ordered it, the producer is free to license the show for syndication to individual stations. A local station is generally not interested in picking up a syndicated series until about a hundred episodes, or some five seasons' worth, are "in the can." The station usually wants to air five episodes a week, following a practice known in the trade as "stripping" (as in "to strip in Marcus Welby, M.D. at 4:00 p.m. every weekday afternoon"). At that rate, the stations run off a five-year series in less than five months. But they have the right to run each episode six times, or enough for more than two years of strip programming.

Obviously, the dreary and repetitious character of daytime and late-night commercial U.S. television is the result of strip programming by the local stations, for whom this programming practice is more economically advantageous than producing their own local shows for non-network time slots.

For the producing company, the first year of domestic syndication could adequately cover the losses incurred through the deficit financing arrangement. As Schuyten explains:

> A popular one-hour series being syndicated for stripping for the first time will sell for more than $20,000 an episode in New York City, the nation's number-one market. But the price will drop to about $3,000 after the top twenty markets, and very small markets will get if for a few hundred dollars. The cumulative sale per episode can total $140,000 to $180,000, or $14 million to $18 million for a 100-program package.

Foreign sales of the series provide clear profit, especially when you have a city like Toronto whose bidding wars bring the price up to rival that paid by the number-one domestic market, New York City.

What we have, then, is a situation in which foreign sales are built as a necessity into the economic structure of the U.S. TV industry. It is clearly to the advantage of that industry if other countries must rely on U.S. product to fill the bulk of their broadcast schedules. As the UNESCO researchers found, there really is no "free flow" of programs and information in world-wide television. It is pretty much a one-way street, and the director of the traffic turns out to be an organization called the Motion Picture Exporters Association of America, or the MPEAA.

It is hard to find out much about this organization, though Andrew Horowitz has provided some excellent background material on the MPEAA in his 1975 article, "The Global Bonanza of American TV" reprinted in *Media Culture* (Delta, 1978). In 1960 the MPEAA was established by ten multinational entertainment conglomerates: Allied Artists, Avco-Embassy, Four-Star Entertainment, MCA, MGM, Paramount, Screen Gems, 20th Century-Fox, United Artists, and Warner Brothers. They vested the MPEAA with the authority to represent them in any dealings with foreign governments and entrepreneurs regarding the sale of U.S. TV programs. According to Horowitz,

> The MPEAA operates as a single bargaining unit with foreign customers. Such activity would be prohibited in the United States on anti-trust grounds. It flourishes abroad, however, under the protection of the Webb-Pomerene Act of 1918. The act permits businesses overseas to function as monopolies, with a single sales agent empowered to set prices and arrange contracts. . . . The MPEAA's function, scope, and methods are not unlike those of the Department of State. One of its quasi-governmental duties includes lobbying against foreign legislation that would hinder the impact of its members' programs.

The power of the MPEAA can be illustrated by two recent events.

Most countries, in order to promote and protect at least some glimmer of their own indigenous TV industry, set a quota on the amount of foreign programming which can be bought and televised. France, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Australia, and Japan follow this practice, as does Canada with a limit of forty percent foreign product. One of the most stringent quotas had been Great Britain's – only 14 per cent of televised programming can be from foreign sources. In 1978, Britain's regulatory agency for broadcasting, the Independent Broadcasting Authority, had planned to trim that quota even further, to 12 per cent – thereby freeing more broadcast time for home-grown programs and further fostering employment within its own TV industry. *Variety* of July 12, 1978, reported that the MPEAA fought that plan tenaciously and "hinted at retaliatory action" of the quota was lowered. As a result, the new plan from the IBA "instead of lowering the quota, is expected to raise it to 15 1/2 per cent." In Spain last year, broadcasters balked at the latest price increases proposed for U.S. reruns. After a boycott threat by the MPEAA, Spain accepted a price mark-up of 100 per cent. *Variety* of June 21, 1978, called that move "part of a larger effort to land higher prices for U.S. films and TV shows in various countries in Europe and the Middle East."

I doubt if the *Esquire* writer who concluded that folks around the world must simply "love our junk" has heard of the MPEAA, but he may have heard of Robert Sarnoff. He was Chairman of the Board of NBC back in 1962, when all three networks were scurrying around the world installing hardware, building stations and advising on programming. In October of that year, Sarnoff addressed the European Broadcasting Union which had gathered in New York. He told them:

> We are on the point of winning a gift that history has seldom yielded and never on such a scale. For centuries men have dreamed of a universal language to bridge the linquistic gap between nations . . . .Man will find his true universal language in television, which combines the incomparable eloquence of the moving image, instantly transmitted, with the flexibility of ready adaptation to all tongues. It speaks to all nations and, in a world where millions are still illiterate and semi-literate, it speaks as clearly to all people. Through this eloquent and pervasive universal language, let us strive to see, in the words inscribed over the portals of the BBC, that "Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation."

Just a few months earlier, though, *Saturday Review* had run a little item that could be called the sub-text for Sarnoff's speech:

> American television, having saturated time and priced itself to the top in the U.S., is on the way to conquering the Western Atlantic nations and Africa. Tomorrow, no doubt, the world.
>
> (SR, July 14, 1962)

That Sarnoff speech should have a familiar ring to it, if one remembers the early Sixties like "the wired nation" and "the global village" – concepts which completely ignored the economic underpinnings of television as an industry and played directly into the hands of the U.S. TV interest. It is probably as a direct result that Canada has the most advanced technology in the world for delivering U.S. programs to Canadian viewers. If anybody gobbled up Sarnoff-style rhetoric, Canada did.

But the tide may be turning. *Cinema Canada* no. 46 reported that "the percentage of Canadians who believe the Canadian way of life is being too influenced by American television grew from 49 per cent in 1970 to 59 per cent in 1975." It is becoming increasingly obvious to more and more Canadians that, as the Council of Canadian Filmmakers put it to the Robarts-Pepin Task Force, "we create ever-proliferating lines of communication running north and south, and wonder why our lines of identity fail to run east and west." The situation must be pretty desperate when a member of the CRTC (Jean-Louis Gagnon) can ask the President of the CBC in all seriousness, "Do you really believe, Mr. Johnson, that the average citizen in this country wants to be a Canadian?" (*The Toronto Star*, Oct. 4, 1978).

In *The Media Are American*, Jeremy Tunstall has looked at communications from a global perspective and perceived that "a non-American way out of the media box is difficult to discover because it is an American-built box. The only way out is to construct a new box, and this – with the possible exception of the Chinese – no nation seems keen to do." Even China may no longer be that keen, if we take note of *Variety*'s perspective on recent events, wherein Carter's decision to normalize relations with China is considered to be "the starting gun to awaken the 'sleeping giant' to U.S. and foreign entertainment" as "an important new market." (Dec. 20, 1978) After 25 years, it should be starkly obvious to everybody that the only "true universal language" of interest to the U.S. TV industry is, of course, money. And Canada, interestingly enough, with its dubious honor as the top foreign market in the world for U.S. programming, could actually begin to play an effective leadership role in altering the imperialistic measures that now characterize television on a global level. Clearly, a great deal of economic and political clout accompanies the position of being number one. By being "the easiest, best-paying customer" in the world, we're simply holding up, dutifully, a few sides of that American-built media box. If Canadian networks could present a united front in program purchase, commit themselves financially to an indigenous TV industry, and side with other countries besides the U.S. in program exchange, they might ~~just~~ more than weaken the structure that now exists. (And by the way, CBC President Al Johnson, to his credit, answered the CRTC question with a "yes.")