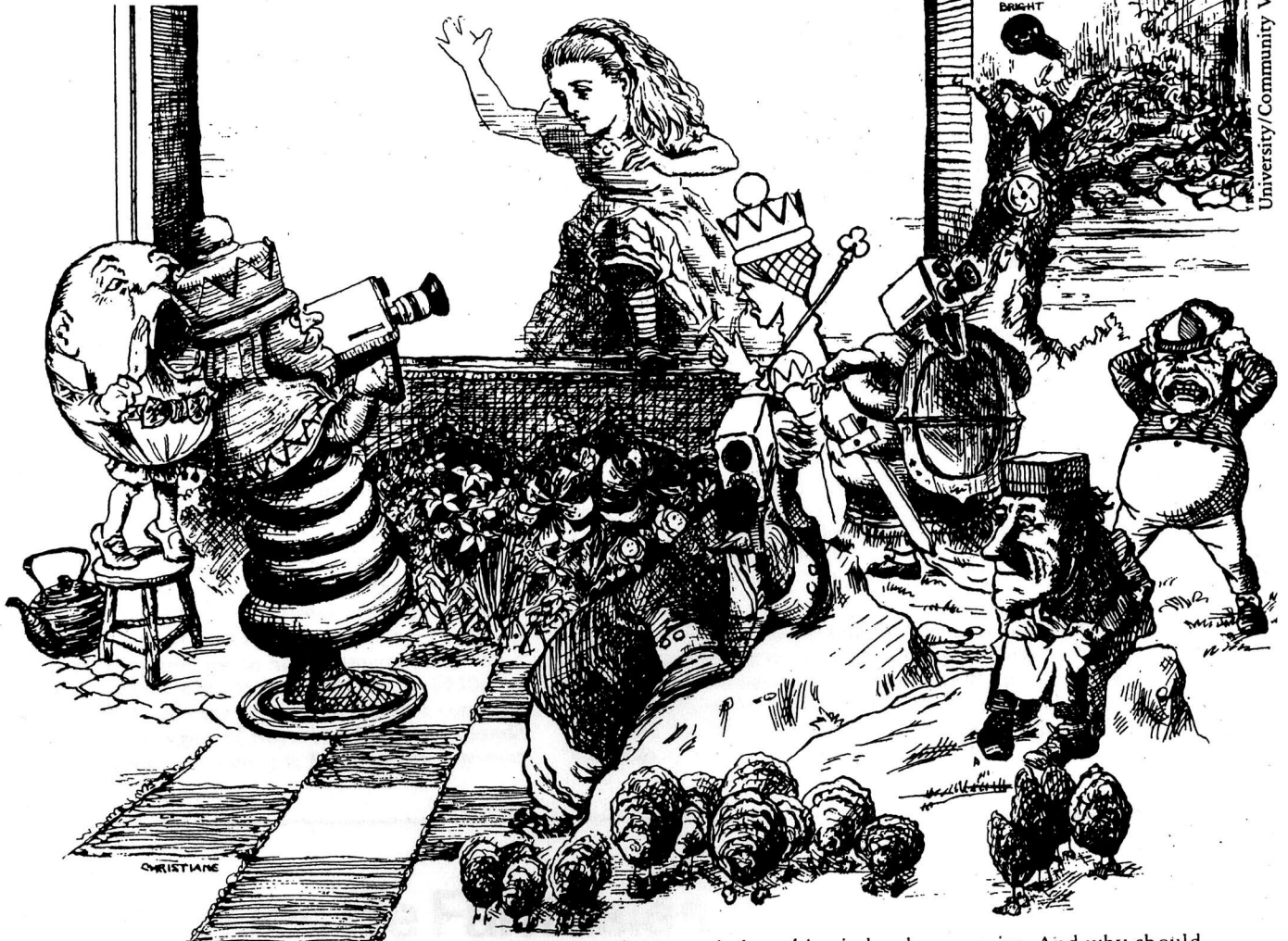


AD-FREE TV



University/Community Video Center, U. of Minnesota

Our resource limits give us an opportunity to improve our quality of life in one more highly noticeable way—the elimination of advertising on public media such as TV, radio and billboards. Endless, repetitive and frequently repugnant commercials on TV and radio and billboard-clogged streets and highways screaming at us to buy, buy, buy aren't necessary and are becoming increasingly hard to justify. Why should we allow the use of public media for an activity that adds considerably to the costs of goods (more than \$4.5 billion per year spent just on TV advertising) without any social return? Why should we encourage advertising when it has clearly been shown that one of its primary results is the development of highly concentrated monopolistic industries with overpowering economic and therefore political power?

Federal Trade Commission economists have estimated that such monopolistic industries cost consumers tens of billions of dollars each year in addition to the costs of advertising. The market power of advertising and the resultant economic power of large producers has resulted in the elimination of much local industry—industry which is frequently more efficient, more sensitive to local needs and conditions, and which

keeps capital working in local economies. And why should we waste the talent that goes into advertising—talent that could be better used communicating more important information?

Claims are made that we now enjoy *free* TV and the public would never be willing to pay for what they now get free. Commercial TV is claimed to be necessary to avoid governmental interference risked by any other system. Assertions are made that commercial TV assures popular programming—that public-financed TV would be elitist and dull. And it is said that ad-free TV would prevent people from getting information they need or want.

Our present TV *isn't* free, however—we pay more than \$5 billion a year in higher product costs to cover advertising expenditures. The actual costs of viewer-financed TV programming is quite moderate. Ad-free TV would cost about \$35 per year per household (less than a daily newspaper costs!) compared to the \$200-\$300 per year the average American family pays for the honor of commercial TV. A 1970 CBS-sponsored survey indicated that half the people in the U.S. would prefer ad-free TV, and at least 30 percent would be willing to pay a small fee for it.

Political interference with broadcasting could hardly be greater with an independent fee-supported system than at present, and such a system would also be free from advertiser pressures that overtly mold the present TV programming. A non-commercial system such as that in the Netherlands, where viewers belong to clubs or parties to whom funds and TV time are allocated on the basis of membership numbers (Lovers of Lawrence Welk or Pacifica's Peaceful People) can ensure democratic use of time and funds, as could other alternatives. Our ban of cigarette commercials on TV hasn't kept people from knowing about cigarettes. European experience also substantiates that ad-free TV doesn't keep people ignorant of commercial products, but rather allows more balanced competition between smaller regional and local producers.

What impact would elimination of advertising have on media such as TV or radio? The first and most obvious benefit is the absence of the continuous din of the commercials themselves—the relief you get watching “uninterrupted specials” or PBS. A second important impact is the strong statement of values made by a decision not to abandon public media to private gain. Such value statements are not to be laughed at—Oregon Governor Tom McCall's order to turn off advertising lighting during the 1973 energy embargo had an impact far beyond the modest energy savings involved. It became a symbol that people were serious and doing all in their power to make things better.

The invisible impact of advertising on media programming and editorial content is appalling. The Winter '76 issue of *Working Papers for a New Society* (\$2.50 from The Cambridge Policy Studies Institute, 123 Mt. Auburn St., Cambridge, MA 02138) documents much of the present impact. It goes into the cancellation of high Nielsen rated shows with strong audiences but which didn't appeal to the most lucrative 18-49-year-old bracket (Gunsmoke, Lawrence Welk and the Watergate Hearings for example). It discusses the history of TV and advertising in the U.S. and Europe—four of the thirteen countries in Europe permit no advertising at all on TV or radio, and others rely primarily on noncommercial stations, such as England's famous BBC. It recounts how, in 1930, CBS only permitted 25 percent of its shows to have commercial sponsors, and the struggle of Raymond Rubicam, founder of the major advertising firm Young & Rubicam, to minimize

advertising on radio. The PBS “Nova Series” rebroadcasts of the many excellent BBC documentaries give an indication also of the increased depth, relevance and general quality of programming that can be attained with ad-free TV.

Further impacts can be anticipated from the release of substantial advertising revenues for other purposes, and in the further development of new kinds of consumer product information, with consumer access and evaluation guides such as the *Whole Earth Catalog* or *Consumer Reports* taking a more important place alongside traditional access such as Sears Roebuck catalogs. Many kinds of products find excellent consumer access even now through routes other than slick and expensive advertising campaigns. Building product manufacturers group together, for example, in the massive multi-volume Sweet's Catalog, which gives architects and builders access to almost every product made for a specific application.

Actions on various levels can make possible this basic beginning to shift away from a consumer-exploitive society. Local communities can ban billboards and advertising on buses and subways. Where cable TV franchises exist, communities can ban advertising on them. Local communities or community groups can intervene in licensing renewal procedures for local radio and TV stations, giving clear indication of community sentiment and presenting licensing options. Similar actions can take place on the state level. Postal subsidies for magazines with display advertisements can be eliminated. Successful action at these levels can do much to make national legislation or FCC regulatory changes to eliminate abuse of public media on the national level possible.

The reasons to free public media from commercial advertising, like the reasons that have led many states to free our roads of billboards, are compelling. The costs of the present system are documented, and better options are available. Get a copy of the *Working Papers* article, and see how long it takes to get things changed!

—TB

*For information on radio and TV license renewal and how to challenge a renewal request, get a copy of *How to Protect Your Rights in Television and Radio* by Ralph Jennings and Pamela Richard, 1974. \$5.95 from United Church of Christ Office of Communications, 289 Park Ave. South, New York, NY 10019.

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