

# From TV drama to the news media, the prime-time programming of Western decline

by Conrad Black



Last Monday I had a most enjoyable dinner with two men that have been friends since we all met at high school in Toronto in 1960. We have met intermittently ever since those days and it is always very agreeable. This time, we were advised in advance by the now foreign participant in these reunions (he divides his time between Los Angeles and Shanghai), that he wished to discuss how we can make our seventies the best decade of our lives. After pleasantries, he started out by saying he had had a spontaneous moment of decision about six

months ago when he came home in Los Angeles, and, alone in the house as his wife and young children live in Shanghai, plunked himself down in front of his television set. After two hours of watching a reality program about creditors repossessing cars and houses from the debt-ridden, he suddenly stood up as if propelled from his chair by a secret force, strode to the television set, and ripped the cable box and television wires out of their sockets, and picked up a book and started reading. He has not watched television since, and although he has never been one of these people in the habit of self-improvement efforts, he has been pursuing an ambitious program of reading weighty books.

I told him it reminded me slightly of Robert Maynard Hutchins' program of great books, which he championed so fervently at the University of Chicago, he banned football at that university in the thirties to encourage undergraduates to immerse themselves in the writings of great authors and philosophers. (The program was not judged a success.) Our friend is less fervent but he did make the point that he now considered 95 per cent of television unwatchable, and deeply regretted that he had squandered years of his life in the mindless wasteland of television-watching. The other triumvir at the dinner, who has spent most of his career as a distinguished television news reader and commentator, said that almost the only television he could endure apart from the odd news program was Turner Classic Movies. Of course they are both right. From time to time I have gone all the way through the available channels, about a thousand of them, and apart from old movies, some of these elaborate special series like Homeland and Breaking Bad, a few documentaries, and some music on straight sound channels, it is the most unutterable rubbish imaginable, with an average of program quality inferior to what we had with an antenna on the roof and six channels at the time the three of us had first met.

This process of dumbing down has afflicted education very

severely also. We are all scandalized at how ignorant of almost everything most secondary school graduates and many holders of undergraduate degrees are. As increasing mountains of public money have been poured into education, the quality of it has deteriorated. This is one of the ironies of capital; when almost any human product or activity is commoditized and concentrated, the results, in government programs and even in the lives of apparent beneficiaries, is often negative. President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs promised to eradicate poverty, but they destroyed the African-American family instead, by replacing the bread-winner with the state and incentivizing procreation outside any family structure. It was one of the celebrated ironies of the Seventies that the allegedly wealthiest man in the world, Howard Hughes, died of malnutrition.

Television provides a good barometer for what has happened: great spectacles, nature and scientific documentaries, and elaborate serial dramas have improved beyond what could have been foreseen, but quality of news and comment, and commonplace programming, has eroded abysmally from the days of the serious American network newscasts and the Honeymooners (Jackie Gleason), Phil Silvers' portrayal of Sgt. Bilko on the Phil Silver Show, and even Father Knows Best (Robert Young). On the other hand, it has at least become seriously international. We can sit in our homes and get the television of many countries if we pay for enough cable, or are aggressive enough on the Internet or with dishes.

And I had another reminder of how television has evolved but some attitudes have sluggishly persisted this week, when, for the first time, I appeared on Russian television. It was a 30-minute live to tape interview, no editing. The interviewer was polite, but insistent still on propagandistic questions that smacked of the defensive, bristling discourse of the few Russian spokespeople who were adequately competent in English and steeped in the fraudulence of the Soviet Communist line to

be let loose on Western television during the Cold War. She kept questioning me about the political atmosphere in the United States under the new administration.

I laboriously explained that this is politics; the new president was running against the entire leadership of the country and that battle was still going on; his opponents had had no argument based on their own virtue but plenty of ammunition to fire at the challenger and he returned the fire. It was acrimonious, but, I said, trying to avoid condescension, that happened in democracies. The interviewer, a disenthralled, heavily accented voice, speaking from Moscow while I faced a camera with no monitor and a blank wall behind me, didn't claim to know anything about democracy, but kept harping on divisions in America and purported to believe that there could be a revolution in that country.

I tried different ways to explain to her that not one American in a hundred wanted the overthrow of the government. It was hopeless. The discord was deafening, she said, and it is a country where everyone has firearms. In vain did I point out that practically all Americans believed in their Constitution, which had served the country and enjoyed its fidelity for 228 years, that there had never been any attempt to overthrow the government; even when the Southern states attempted to secede, they didn't try to disturb the government of the Union.

She wasn't having it; mobs could storm the Capitol and the White House any night. I reminded her that the security of the main federal buildings was in the hands of the first division of the U.S. Marines, which would have no difficulty dispersing the entire adult civilian population of metropolitan Washington armed with their guns if there were any need for it. Then she played her ace: Egypt appeared to be stable until suddenly its long-serving leader was sent packing. I gamely replied that Egypt had stagnated for nearly 2,000 years after the Ptolemies and when it crumbled out of the Ottoman Empire,

had a corrupt monarchy followed by a series of undemocratically selected generals who had no idea how to generate economic growth, and that if she were confusing the political science of Egypt with the U.S.A., we might as well talk about goldfish.

Polls show that 75 per cent of Americans mistrust the media and are right to do so; but it was slightly reassuring to note that we still have some distance to descend in media truthfulness and professionalism to achieve the norms of post-totalitarian Russia. But it is also dissatisfying to reflect that when my friends and I were in high school, Western media was more responsible than it is now, and Russian media and Russian media perspectives more slanted and fictionalized, and that the Russians are at least as open to dissenting opinion than most of the West. In that sense, they are gaining on us.

While waiting for the Russian interview to begin, I noted on the green room television that Le Monde is providing an app to screen out "fake news from normally reliable sources." It could have a wide application.

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