

A Cinema Canada interview with Norman Horowitz

The mirage of cultural sovereignty

Living in the U.S. electronic shadow

by Connie Tadros

During the Banff Television Festival last June, Norman Horowitz participated in a panel entitled Wendy Wacko Goes to Market: Can She Make it Internationally? Wacko presented a projected television series as a test case and people in the room – the CBC, the NFB, representatives from the U.S. and abroad – responded to it with offers and counter-offers as Wacko tried to put a production deal together. The panel then commented on the project and on the deal which resulted.

In this context, Cinema Canada spoke

Cinema Canada: There is a very interesting quality when Americans speak to Canadian panels. Canadians are so hopeful, young, enthusiastic, and the Americans sound like such cynics about us ever being able to do business except in the most exceptional circumstances.

Norman Horowitz: I think that what most people don't understand including most Americans is what the American market actually is. There is essentially in America a desire for money and power that affects everything that happens. There is money, power and ego at stake in American television. And I think that while I've certainly experienced a considerable Canadian ego, moderate amounts of money and moderate amounts of power, the situation doesn't exist nearly to the same extent that the system exists in the United States.

I just met my friend, Murray Cherkover, someone I've been doing busi-

ness with and I've known as a friend for 23, 24, 25, years... He's been head of CTV ever since I've known him. There hasn't been a head of an American broadcasting organization for more than 12 minutes because they come and go. Mail is addressed to American executives to "occupant" because no one is there for any appreciable amount of time, so they must absorb that amount of money, and that amount of ego satisfaction while they are there. It's like the brass ring... They have it, they know they are going to lose it and they have to grab as much as possible and try to exercise as much power as they can. They must try and take as much power as possible with them after they leave the network or after they leave the job of studio head.

We don't have an attitude of protecting our culture in the United States, so that's not an issue. We don't have government involvement in American television other than the minimal involve-

ment of the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) which is not at any level of the same texture as the CRTC. It's just totally different. My observation is that the American FCC understands television probably as well as the CRTC does. I mean, I haven't been to a hearing in 15 years. When I used to listen in on the regulatory process, either in America or Canada, the regulators didn't even understand the business that they were regulating. If saying this makes me more enemies here in Canada, it's a similar situation in the United States...

But again, the American business is motivated by power, money and ego. And there are production companies that have huge overheads. The overhead at Paramount is huge, at MGM, Universal, MTM... All of the studios have huge overheads. Even independent companies, Viacom or Telepictures or Lion or Embassy, have huge overheads for salaried producers, writers, casting. The actual physical plan involves tens of millions of dollars for each of these companies. The networks have huge amounts of money, again, at stake.

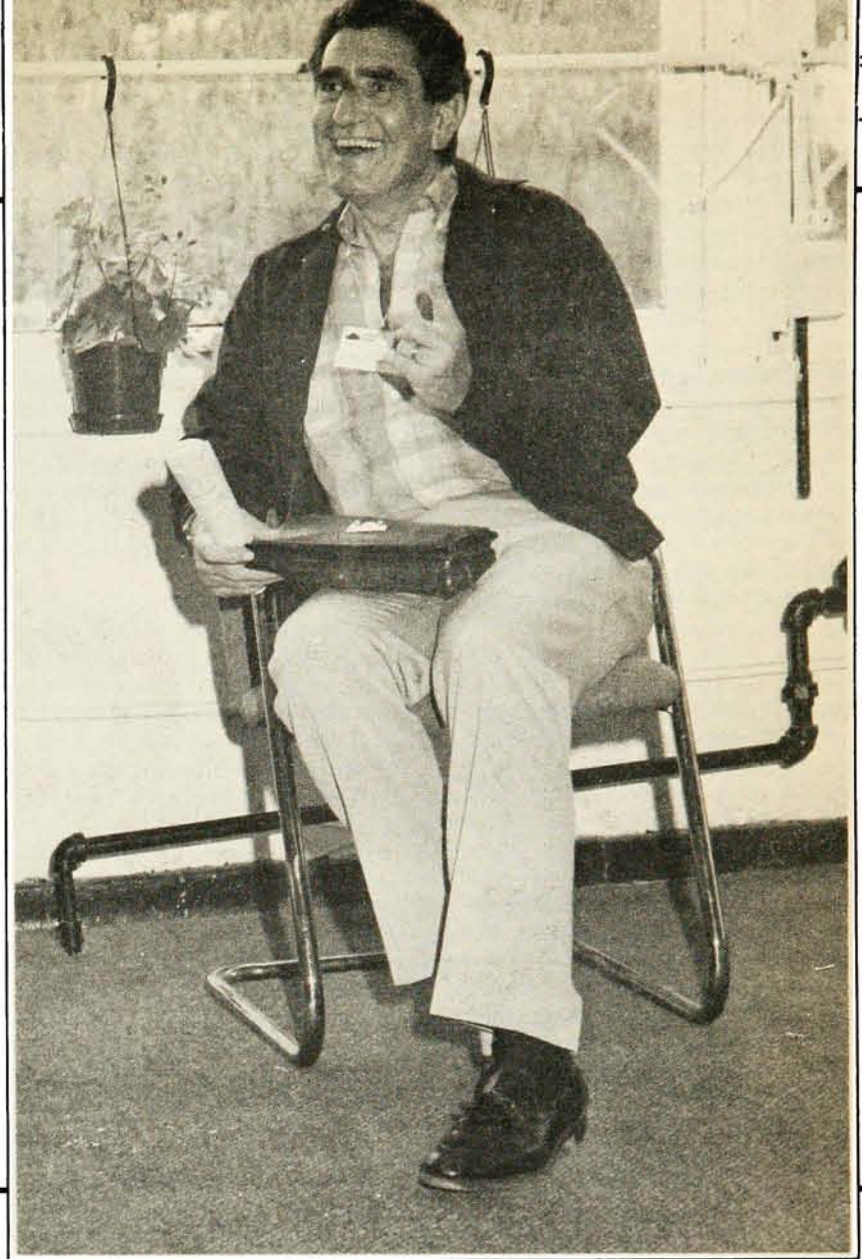


photo: Paul Lake

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Suffice it to say that they are in a life-and-death struggle in order to attract an audience, and that attracting that audience allows these particular people, who work at these particular companies for huge amounts of money, to retain their incumbency. "Retaining the incumbency" is the number-one item in American broadcasting, in American productions. Who wants to lose a \$500,000-a-year job? How many network presidents are here? How many heads of studios are there? So that that really leads to such basic issues... Again, the exercise of power comes from that amount of money, and from that ability

to order programming, co-produce programming, hire your friends and, if you want to go deeper into politics, it let's you exercise your own personal opinion. Any way, there is such a multiplicity of things going on as to be absolutely overwhelming.

What we don't have is we don't have any government financing institution there to encourage American production: "We'll give you 12%, 19, 42..." and I believe that – and this is an Ugly American speaking – that in the long run it harms the process rather than assists the process.

Cinema Canada: The government incentive?

Norman Horowitz: Yes, the government incentive... People get upset when I say this but the government ultimately interferes with the process. If you let the "entrepreneurialness" of free competing commercial interest, evil as it may be, and let the marketplace, you know, come into play... If what you want is co-production, if what you want is American involvement, well then, you are going to have to risk American domination. You *have* to risk it. You actually have to risk it. The expectations that you can put together stuff that you want "Canadian", reflective of your culture, reflective of the Canadian idiom and that you can get people to invest in that programming, is almost a contradiction. Now I'd get lynched if I said that, but, I mean, that's the reaction. As a sovereign nation, you are absolutely entitled to do what you want in programming. But you can't have it both ways, and it's unlikely that you are going to have it both ways..

Cinema Canada: Talk to me about

that. I never hear any discussions about the actual quality of programming when Americans talk about why their programs get to the networks...

Norman Horowitz: That's why! Strike the word, strike the word "quality" – very subjective – strike the word quality. America is not interested in quality television, whatever that is... Now, quality television to an American is not what the critics and the people who comment on television in *The Globe and Mail* will talk about. If the US networks paid attention to that – and they do pay a certain amount – they love to stroke their egos... We did it with *Hill Street Blues* here at NBC, and we were proud of it...

Cinema Canada: But is it not true that, in fact, there are a lot of people with sets turned off? Do American executives agree that what they might produce would cause these people to tune back in?

Norman Horowitz: Can I tell you something about the difficulty of this interview? It's like discussing religion between a Moslem fundamentalist and a Jew or a Catholic, or somebody who is from some other planet! We don't come from a common base of understanding. See, you come from Oz with a question like that. You really do.

Cinema Canada: To the question of whether television executives think about that?

Norman Horowitz: No, because that is a do-you-still-beat-your-wife kind of question. What is flawed is not my ability to answer; it's the question that's flawed. Now I just made another enemy. Let me tell you why the question is flawed...

We got our first television set when I was 14 years old in 1946 right after the Second World War and I remember it was an RCA 10-inch and I remember the technician putting an antenna on the roof, connecting the wires, plugging it in and putting it on. And there was the test pattern. And at 14, I sat there and I stared at the test pattern because I could not conceive that a picture was being sent from one place, even though it was a test pattern, an early test pattern, not even as interesting as colour bars today, just a black and white head of an Indian, with circles and lines. And I sat there and watched it... The intervening 30 years or 40 years have led me to be a recipient. My eyes, my mind, my intellect, and my very being has been inundated by billions of messages that have come out... I remember again my first programming impression was wrestling. I went out of my mind! I jumped up and down. I yelled, I called my mother, I called up my father, I called up my friends. They all came up. We would watch wrestling and there would be 30 people in my living room to watch wrestling, fascinated by wrestling and they would stay on to watch the test pattern. And what we've had is an intervening 40 years that have seen that medium grow to heights of greatness never perceived by the mind of man 40 years ago.

All of the detractors of television don't know what they are talking about because they are looking at it from totally jaundiced, totally perverse points of view asking, why isn't it "better"? Did

you happen to see the Joan Woodward film on Alzheimer's disease? A brilliant film, approximately 29% of the audience that was available for television that night watched it. A very large audience for something like that. I think it got a rating of 17. It got a rating of 17% of the households in the United States, 17% of 83 million homes watched marvelous television. *The Raoul Wallenberg Story*, a four-hour multi-million dollar project produced by Paramount... Marvelous television, watched by a lot of people. Again a relatively small fraction of the American television audience.

When people talk about television being turned off, they are not talking about a 500-year history of television and then, suddenly, after 500 years where 75% of the public watched television every night, 40% of the public is now watching it after 500 years. You are talking about people who now have pay-TV, sports, now have cable, who now have other entertainment available to them, a greater amount of disposable income...

Cinema Canada: But I think what you are also talking about is the position of the person with TV now becoming the programmer because he can decide what to see and when to see it...

Norman Horowitz: Absolutely. So that all your questions about the sets being turned off says is that there is more to life than news, weather, sport, and *I Love Lucy*. People are not disenchanted by television. The next thing people are going to say: let's throw another Christian to the lions, people's television isn't interesting.

In answer to your question, however it is that you've phrased it, I think television in the United States, while flawed, and I agree it's flawed in certain ways, I am not pleased with the process... but the process is what we were left with by our government, by our regulatory process. I would have rather seen it otherwise but that's what we got, and there ain't any way to put the yolk and the whites back in the eggs. The eggs are scrambled.

I've also felt that way for many years about Canadian television. Canada has been unhappily living in the electronic shadow of the United States and, you know what? You can't shut it off. The Brits can sit there and cavalierly say that American television is not right for their audience. Well, they can shut it off. You can't.

Cinema Canada: Well, interestingly, when I talked to Leslie Woodhead who just did that 13-hour series *Television for Granada*, and asked him if was there anything he saw that changed the way he programmed or produced, he said what he come away with is the distinctive impression of how marvelous American TV is...

Norman Horowitz: Oh it is! I want to tell you something. Every time I have somebody tell me how great British television is...

Cinema Canada: Okay, let me ask you another question. Another "do you beat your wife" kind of question... Is there a process by which American television could be less parochial? When you get outside a few places – New York or LA – there is an ex-

tremely parochial atmosphere. Nobody speaks another language, nobody cares... and American TV often reflects this parochial image, not much interested in the rest of the world...

Norman Horowitz: Absolutely.

Cinema Canada: ... and no *Jewel in the Crown* played anywhere but PBS. Here it played on network television and not only were the ratings amazing but there were letters to the editors, telling the CBC to please take its ads out of *The Jewel* because they were ruining it. And I don't think that the Canadian audience who was watching *Jewel in the Crown* on the CBC was really much different from an American audience. How do you get past the sort of one-dimensional image of American life, or do you, or can you?

Norman Horowitz: As far as programming?

Cinema Canada: Yes. Why is the American public so little receptive to images other than their own, or is it the network executives who think that the public is not interested?

Norman Horowitz: You are right. It is a "do-you-still-beat-your-wife" kind of question...

Cinema Canada: But it's a serious question...

Norman Horowitz: Let me tell you why it's a bad question, and then I'll answer the question. And I'll rephrase it myself, and I want you to answer that question... The words "success" and "failure" have to be looked at from a different perspective again. I don't mean to pick on the Brits or the BBC. The BBC does what it chooses to do, ITV does what it chooses to do. There is not that immediate measurement, there is no incumbency factor we talked about. There has been an orderly transition in programming in Canada. I mean I knew Doug Nikon, Nixon left and was replaced by, I forgot, but I have known seven heads of programming at the CBC in 25 years. Six, or whatever it is but, again it's a friendly, orderly transition. People aren't thrown out.

In America, if there is 60% of the television homes at a given prime-time hour watching television and, let's say, 50% of it is watching network television, woe to the executive who gets less than one third of that 50% of the available audience. If they got 50% of the audience watching television, then a rating of 17 is an acceptable rating. Because I'm not so good with numbers, let's say 20% of the public, 20% of the American public means approximately 20% of 80-odd million homes, so let's say 16 million homes: 16 million homes with an average viewership of two per home is 32 million people who have chosen to watch that program. That is now defined as a successful programming: 32 million people watching. I would suggest to you that if half that number of people were watching, 16 million, it would also be a successful program. Woe be it if the programmer who programs only reaches the 16 million people. He's fired. So while *Jewel in the Crown* could have done a respectable job on American television – let's assume it would have gotten 8 share, 16 million people – the guy who programmed it would have gotten fired.

You must realize that we are talking

about hotly competitive people, programming for the largest possible audience. But it's not exactly as it would appear to be. I've just given you one of the reasons why they won't play *Jewel in the Crown* on commercial television: because it would not attract the kind of numbers that they feel they need. The second reason is, and this is very unfortunate, that our system has generated the "it's-got-to-be-invented-here" syndrome...

The trouble is that the network spends tens of millions of dollars in the program development process. I don't even know what the hell the figure is – huge amounts of money. They have programming staffs. The larger the staff, the more the power, the larger the expenditures, the more the power, the more they can hire their friends...

Cinema Canada: But what you are actually saying is that if the American system is so unregulated by the government, it just might be because the people who are controlling it are so heavily regulating it.

Norman Horowitz: They are so heavily regulating regarding their own personal, vested interest and the shareholders of the company they work for. That enters into it, but you see what happens? You are going this way, and you are in this time, and in this place, and the reality is in another time and in another place so that your questions, have to do – do you understand what I'm saying? – with your frame of reference, your questions are reasonable, but in their true frame of reference...

Cinema Canada: So that in the Canadian frame of reference it's difficult to talk about American TV?

Norman Horowitz: Yes, from your frame of reference, absolutely. When you are talking about people watching television. Absolutely. Your frame of reference is, 'look at all the people who listen to *Jewel in the Crown*.' You are absolutely right. But it's in the wrong frame of reference as far as America is concerned.

Cinema Canada: Well, my frame of reference is that of being very bored by American TV, and we have more TV than you have...

Norman Horowitz: Are you married?

Cinema Canada: I'm married, two kids.

Norman Horowitz: Have you ever been bored with your husband? Don't answer that. But boredom is not just... People want to look at boredom and say, 'you are right, I spoke to 50 of my friends and they are bored with their husbands.' Well, you know, that's not necessarily what matters. There are other considerations... So that when you bring that up, you understand what I'm talking about? You are speaking a different framework and your framework, everything you said is reasonable, but in the real framework I'm speaking about, what you say is...

Cinema Canada: Why does the American framework become the real framework?

Norman Horowitz: Because it's the framework of America, not of your mind. I'm not saying that the American framework should be transported

to Canada. What is real in America is what is real in America. You want to weigh however... Look at *Jewel in the Crown*. Not for America.

Cinema Canada: *But you are really saying that in no niche in American network broadcasting and probably not in syndication for anything else. Is there really a place for risky programming. Is that fair?*

Norman Horowitz: No, that's unfair.

Cinema Canada: *I'm having trouble having a fair interview with you...*

Norman Horowitz: God, yes, because again, your questions are from a different time-frame, a different... I mean they are reasonable in your context but...

Cinema Canada: *But you said you would rephrase that other question and find me an answer...*

Norman Horowitz: Yes, which one?

Cinema Canada: *About parochialism... in American TV programs.*

Norman Horowitz: There is 17 ways that I would like to answer and I choose one of the 17... I will take things out of context...

Norman Lear will go into a network and discuss a project that will be a situation comedy that takes place in the Banff Springs Hotel – the history of it, how the characters had come, the people who have been here for 40, 50, 60 years. You'll have the mountains and stuff that we can do in skiing, the manager is a skier and he's got a mistress who lives on one of the next mountains but tells his wife he's skiing. Now the network executive who's listening to this is 32-years old, he hopes that after he gets thrown out of the network that Norman Lear is going to hire him. Now, that's not in *your* reality. Your reality doesn't talk about Norman Lear hiring that network executive, that does not happen to go into the fact that this kid's sister was a trainee with Lear and he's hoping maybe to get something with Norman after he is thrown out of the network, *before* he gets thrown out of the networks... and he is also in awe of Norman Lear's track record and Norman Lear says: "I think I can get Bill Cosby, Bill Cosby will be the bellman, he'll be the only black bellman in a white society that has a bunch of Asians and a lot of humour," and the guy will say: "Norman, you are incredible."

... "And I have a 70-page treatment of how each of the episodes will fall, I've done two years of episodes." "Terrific. We'll give you \$50,000 to write a first screen play, and I love it and we'll sign an agreement and they'll love it." Now I'm going to go fade out and fade in.

One of the people from downstairs (from the Canadian panel) develops an idea about the Banff Springs Hotel and how the manager has an affair with some woman he goes cross-country skiing with... etc... They throw him out! He has no power, he has no leverage, no record! They don't care about him, he's not going to be a future employer... All of those dynamics. He's not anything, he hasn't had lunch with the executive 17 times, he hasn't played golf with him, he's not his friend, he's not going to be able to live at the Tower, he's not going to deliver the writer that they want...

Now, somebody says I have \$50 million, I'm going to go produce 50 hours

of that show. Right here, I'm going to invest my own money and we'll take it to that same guy. The same guy is going to look at it and say: I've seen all 50 episodes and they are incredible, they have been paid for, the price is right, I can buy it at a right price... What is that going to do for me and my career? I'm looking to buy something from Norman Lear because he's going to hire me. If my boss allows me to buy the program, he's going to get killed because his management – the CBS, the NBC or ABC – will say: hey, wait a minute! What the hell are you guys doing playing \$50 million a year in development? Here are these people out there all over the world who are willing to develop programs! You got *this* marvelous program from half of what you paid for this other program and you are going to tell me that you want \$50 million next year for development?... Their ego goes down. Their earning ability goes down. Their relationships go down. So what you're talking about is a huge, complicated, dynamic flow of things and reasons, and you want to quantify it and talk about what's happened downstairs at the panel?... Chauvinism...

Nothing has to do with what you think it has to do with. That's right... I just had a small discussion with one of your Canadian network executives whom I've been arguing with for years. It has nothing to do with talent, it's nothing to do with ability. It has to do with circumstance. It actually has to do with circumstance...

If you had a company, Maple Leaf Productions, financed at \$30 million capitalized. It takes five talented Canadians, people who are talented in comedy, in drama, in children's program. They come to L.A., they rent space and a glitzy office. They hire a very high-level p.r. company, they work with some of the existing Canadian writers and directors based in Hollywood. Now this production company now starts a lengthy process of getting to know the network people, lunches, dinners, parties, establishing relationships and knowing we have all this money. Now, there are problems to overcome because Edmonton is far from L.A. or New York, the seats of network power, but in that process, there would be a possibility of things happening, based on the fact that they are playing the game the way the game is being played.

Cinema Canada: *But Wendy Wacko is not about to do that.*

Norman Horowitz: But Wendy Wacko is not about ready to go, and when Wendy Wacko says there's been "interest", I would tell you something. If I call every distribution company that I know, every single one in the United States, and I said to them: "There is a fully-financed \$2.5 million feature film. It's a pilot for a series made in Canada right now, are you interested?" "Well, of course, I'm interested." That's like asking a man who hasn't been home for six months if he'd like to see a woman... Asking an American company whether they would be interested, that's not what counts. Nobody is going to go and invest money in Wendy Wacko's film – and I admire her. She's terrific, but it's a very tough thing. Years ago, before things got different, the Canadian production that could have worked and still could with the right ingredients,

was taped programming with lesser aspirations. Nobody is looking to Canada for a \$2.5 million feature and, you know what? Nobody is looking to America either. If it's not ordered by the networks, and if somebody went out and made a picture for \$2.5 million, you know what American network could buy it? None. You know what interest it would have in syndication? None. You know what interest it would have in home video unless it had certain ingredients, and certain promotional aspects? None. It's not its "Canadianness." It's got no connections, it's nothing to connect to.

I'm a distributor. I've been an executive. The most expensive deal I ever made... I did a deal on the telephone with Aaron Spelling when I was at Columbia. Aaron Spelling was going to produce a pilot for ABC called: *Hart to Hart*, and I said to him, what's it about? He said it's the *Thin Man*. I said fine, who's in it? Robert Wagner and Stephanie Powers. *Thin Man*, ABC, Aaron Spelling; I said what do you want for the pilot? He said \$800,000. That meant I could buy the world outside of the two ABC runs for \$800,000. I made the deal for \$600,000, so that I got a Stephanie Powers, Robert Wagner movie pilot for \$600,000. If it went to series I guaranteed them for domestic and foreign a combined \$150,000/hr; if it went to 100 hours, \$15 million – on the telephone. This was on the telephone. This was Aaron Spelling. I knew what he was going to deliver, I knew it was a network show, I knew what they wanted, it had Stephanie Powers and Bob Wagner, I knew what it was about. I spent a lot of money.

I made a deal where I guaranteed approximately \$600,000 of my own money to buy a television movie called: *Obsessed with a Married Woman*. I knew who produced it. I even read the screen play. I knew it had Jane Seymour and Tim Matheson, I knew that it was about sex and, other than violence, there isn't anything more sellable than sex. And again, that's what that business is. And I'm an independent. I don't have \$600,000. Actually it was \$540,000, including domestic residuals. So if I could buy a \$2.5 million production done by Ed Feldman with Jane Seymour and Tim Matheson, acceptable to the American broadcasting companies, why in heaven's name am I going to buy Wendy Wacko's film for syndication? Why? I got the whole world: pay, home video, everything, no that's another element that's not looked at. What are you competing with? You don't exist as an island. Listen, I could talk about this for four years, but... I'm going to slow down...

Cinema Canada: *It doesn't surprise you, I don't imagine, when you hear that the view as you give it is exceedingly cynical as heard by Canadians.*

Norman Horowitz: I came six years ago and I said the same thing. Cynicism is a negative approach to something that is arguable. Something that is arguable. I mean my wife gets crazy with me when I... I was asked by an NBC television reporter a couple weeks ago what I thought of the possibility of a fourth network in the United States. I said: a "fourth network" is a word that's banded about that is going to have the same time as other expressions that are

banded around, "nuclear disarmament," and "world hunger." My wife says: it's terrible for you to say that!... It's not a cynical attitude, it's a professional attitude. This is what it is that is...

There is a reflection of reality in what I said six years ago. It's not cynical. It's when you address yourself to reality. I'm not saying "stop." There are other ways to go about it, but not the way you want to do it. If you want to create a reality to fit your mind set, if Wendy Wacko wants to or has to create a reality in accordance with her own mind set...

Let me tell you something. I was associated with the *Pierre Berton Show*, *Under Attack*, *People Conflict*, *Magistrate's Court*, *Trouble with Tracy*, and about 10 other Canadian projects. And I produced them here in order to sell them in the United States. And they were addressing reality in the way those things were done.

Cinema Canada: *What you are really saying is that coming from a different place, Canadians can almost not address themselves to the question of how to get to the American marketplace except to almost literally move to Los Angeles, learn how that game is played and play it like an American. Is that the only way?*

Norman Horowitz: Play it like an American? Play it like in the marketplace. Can I tell you a dirty joke? Farmer buys a rooster. He tells the rooster, "Look: I paid a lot of money for you, I want you to take it easy. I expect you to be working here on my farms for many, many years and please don't over excite yourself." And the rooster can speak and he said: "Believe me, no problem..." Like the farmer, the producer says, "Please, please, I've invested so much money I can't afford another rooster." After two weeks, the sun comes up and the rooster crows, and he's out in the barnyard from sunrise to sunset and farmer's beside himself. He speaks to the rooster at night several times and the rooster says: "Don't worry." Farmer goes to town, comes back one day. The sun is high in the sky, blazing heat radiating and he sees over the barnyard vultures circling lower and lower in the barnyard. And he goes and sure enough, he drives up to the barnyard and the rooster is dead. He runs over to the rooster and stands over the body and says: "I told you and I warned you, and I don't know what to do now that you are dead." And a wing comes up and the rooster says: "Piss off." And vultures are coming lower and lower and the farmer says: "I thought you were dead!" So the rooster says: "No, but if you want to fuck a vulture, you have to play their game."

It's not right? Wrong! I sell in England, I play their game. I have gotten co-productions in Australia, I did co-productions in 1962 in Germany... and again, for that vested interested in finding a way to do programming for less. So if you want to have that vulture you have to play its game whether it's reasonable or unreasonable, popular or not popular... In order to do that, you have to play their game. And the programming again, it's going to be, unfortunately, that programming is going to be the kind of programming that you talked about people wanting to shut off...