

In the matter of Dick and Tommy Smothers

By Louise Sweeney

New York

"The whole problem," said the earnest young man in the rust plaid jacket, "is censorship in all its (gulp) ramifications. It's a deprivation—that's a heavy word, I'm not used to it, I usually play the dumb one—a deprivation of our constitutional right of free speech."

The familiar, fumbling voice was the same but the message was different. Comedian Tommy Smothers had the floor at a joint press conference he and his brother Dick had called to present their views over their firing by the Columbia Broadcasting System. And the subject, they said, was censorship. The network had unexpectedly canceled the "Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour" over a "breach of contract." But the brothers, smarting over a two-year battle on program censorship which they believe climaxed in the firing, saw it differently.

Relevance

"Our concern . . . is that in America it is necessary for unpopular opinions and divergent views to be shown on television," said Tommy Smothers. "The network [CBS] president and chairman of the board have both repeatedly stated that the airwaves belong to the people. We believe it, too. . . . But youth and the black people and liberals are not really represented on TV. . . . Young viewers find TV irrelevant. [As this page went to press, fans of the Smothers brothers were reported to be picketing the CBS building in New York, with placards asking for the return of their show.]

"If there are any problems in the country today, television has ignored them. 'Julia' [a situation comedy with a black star] is their answer to the racial question. . . .

"It's to the advantage of the present two-party system not to put the liberal point of view on TV. That's why the problems of the young and blacks are never reflected.

"It keeps building up those phony pictures. And it has influence. It's a threat to Senator Kennedy and every leader with a liberal, progressive point of view. . . .

"The only time TV was in step with America was during the '50's when it was just as bland as the movies and music, artistically nothing symbols of that era. But a whole revolution has taken place in the streets since then," said Tommy Smothers, and added that TV has largely ignored it.

"TV never touches us," he said, "never reaches us where we live."

Controversy

Those remarks were made during a marathon press conference held this week in a rosewood-paneled room at the Four Seasons restaurant. As if to illustrate what they were saying, the brothers screened the controversial program which the network had refused to air last Sunday in canceling the contract it had picked up two weeks ago.

Robert D. Wood, president of the CBS television network, alleged that the Smothers brothers had committed a breach of contract by having failed to submit that program in time for a network and affiliate screening the previous Wednesday, and that the brothers had "consistently failed" to deliver tapes in time for review.

The cancellation notification said that CBS believed the program would not be acceptable under the network's standards because it contained a monologue that "in our opinion would be considered to be irreverent and offensive . . . and unacceptable even if this were not the week of the Eisenhower funeral and even if Sunday were not Easter Sunday."

The Smothers brothers allege that their program had been seen by network reviewers in Hollywood on Wednesday, that the monologue in question had been deleted by the brothers, and that there was therefore no breach of their contract.

There had been talk of the brothers suing CBS over its cancellation, but at this week's press conference Tommy Smothers said: "We will not file suit. It's important that we stay on TV, and we definitely intend to come back. A breach of contract suit could tie us up for years . . ." and keep them from performing on any other network.

Last Sunday night's canceled program—which was ironically aired with a favorable reaction on the Canadian television network—was shown in its entirety to the press corps. It looked like some media campfire sing, with a crowd of reporters sitting on the floor watching two TV monitors.

Satire

What we saw convinced at least this critic that CBS's decision had been unpardonable censorship. There was no reason why adult viewers should have been deprived of seeing the program.

The monologue in question, a "sermonette" by satirist David Solomon, dealt with the Biblical figures Solomon and Jonah. It poked gentle fun at the popularizing of religion and was, with one double-entendre exception, inoffensive. "We believe Christ [Jesus] had a sense of humor," Tommy Smothers commented.

The show included another, funnier Steinberg sketch, a spoof on Schopenhauer, Descartes, and philosophy in general, as well as a delightful takeoff on that flowering chestnut, "Sweethearts," with Tommy Smothers and black singer Nancy Wilson in the Nelson Eddy-Jeanette MacDonald roles. It said more about race relations than a decade of "Julia."

A high level of wit, entertainment and relevance marked the show, one of the best the Smothers brothers have ever produced. It also included a "Flying Fickle Finger of Fate Award," given by guest comedian Dan Rowan, of NBC's "Laugh-In," to Sen. John O. Pastore (D) of Rhode Island. The "Finger" skit kidded Senator Pastore for his remarks on TV décolletage during recent hearings on TV programming.

There is speculation that it may have been this irreverence in broadcasting which concerned CBS even more than the Steinberg sermonette. The networks are tradi-



Associated Press Wirephoto

"The whole problem . . .

is censorship," said Tommy Smothers (left) in a press conference with brother Dick to present their views on what CBS called a breach of contract.

tionally fearful of ruffling government feathers, and they're especially sensitive now in the wake of the recent TV hearings.

Restrictions

Tommy Smothers points out that CBS began to talk about cancellation of contract immediately after he and his brother returned from talks in Washington with two Federal Communications Commissioners and several congressmen and senators. That happened, he says, the day after he was quoted in Daily Variety as saying that he and his brother Dick were encouraged by what they were told in Washington — that there is a place for topical humor in entertainment programming—and that the FCC has no desire to regulate program content.

There is a certain paradox in the fact that both the Smothers brothers and CBS presi-

dent Frank Stanton, agree that there should be industry self-regulation by network affiliates rather than under the National Association of Broadcasters Code, as Senator Pastore originally suggested and to which both NBC and ABC have agreed.

"There should be a restrictive area in TV," says Tommy Smothers, referring to affiliate screenings on acceptability. "But now it's heavy-handed, out to offend no one. I suggest more liberal censorship. . . . TV is out of step with the other media, light years behind. There's a reason for people calling it the 'boob tube' and 'idiot box.'"

"We stand out in TV because nothing is being said," he continued. "Nothing refers to reality. We'd be moderate in any other medium, but TV makes us look like revolutionary anarchists in comparison." There is no questioning the fact that the Smothers brothers' mixture of topical satire and entertainment, along with their outspoken comments on censorship and their recent Washington trip have made them, as one network executive said, "a finger in the CBS eye."

Static

Now that CBS has blinked out the finger, there is the question of where the Smothers brothers can find another outlet. As Robert Montgomery points out in his book, "Open Letter from a Television Viewer," there is an oligarchy in network TV today. There are only two other alternatives open to the brothers—NBC and ABC, neither of which at this writing appears eager to take on the pair which has given a sister network so much static.

The brothers have had an offer from the Canadian television network and as a last resort, they say, would even consider syndication in this country. They can't believe some channel won't open up. As Tommy Smothers says, quoting a letter he received from President Lyndon Johnson last fall, "Once we lose our sense of humor, this country's in bad shape."