

TV's Quiet Revolution: Censors Giving In

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Once-Taboo Topics Are Common in Today's Fare

By ROBERT E. DALLOS

Jack and Jill went up the hill
Ostensibly for water
Now Jack is proud to show the crowd
His wife and baby daughter.
Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In

Los Angeles is known as the
swingingest city in the world.
There was a headline in the paper
today about a wife-swapping scandal
in the valley. They had to close
down the entire high school.
Johnny Carson on
the Tonight Show

Little boy walking down the street,
crying his eyes out. Old man walks
up to him and asks him why he's
crying. Little boy says: "I'm crying
cause I can't do what the big boys do."
Old man sits down with little
boy, starts crying too.
Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour



Johnny Carson with Judy Brown, a model on whose back he wrote a check to see if it would be cashed. Some of his nightly quips are "blipped" from tape before air time.

Industry Says Shift Reflects a More Liberal Society

kidding on radio of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his family and of President Harry S. Truman.

But in recent months, the jokes about the President and the Administration have become quite cruel, he said.

"The current liberalization extends beyond humor," Mr. Watson observed. "It has developed from true satire to the sighting of opposition to the Administration's position. True satire makes foolishness without making fun of an individual. We are tending now to make fun of an individual—Mr. Johnson."

Mr. Tankersley, C.B.S.'s head of program practices, said: "We are greatly concerned about this recent disrespect to and about the President. We have given a great deal of thought to it. But if we err, we are on the side of freedom. We are creating new courses. At least until it's clearly abused."

Perhaps the greatest amount of permissiveness shows up on the talk programs. Mr. Susskind has a weekly 40-station syndicated program, seen locally on WNEW-TV, which has given a platform to everything from homosexuals ("Homosexuality, sickness or perversion?") and unmarried couples who live together to persons who expound sexual exercises ("Sexercises-for sex cripples").

On the nightly program of his WNEW-TV colleague, Alan Burke, a bearded provocateur who elicits candor from his guests, subjects have ranged from "sexual life in suburbia today" and "four-letter words" to the problems of obtaining an abortion. Recently Mr. Burke played host to a nun turned go-go dancer at a discothèque and a transvestite.

But though long-standing barriers have come down considerably, there are still some taboos. N.B.C. recently censored a skit from the Rowan and Martin program in which a girl asks a young man if "the Queen Mary has barnacles on her bottom." The answer: "I don't know, you'll have to ask King George."

And Johnny Carson's ad lib quips on the "Tonight" show keep N.B.C.'s censors on the jump. The program, which is taped only a few hours before it is televised, always has a censor in attendance. Occasionally Mr. Carson's lines are "blipped."

Recently, for example, Criswell, a self-styled clairvoyant, predicted that before long there would be a federally sponsored semen bank to which all American males would be required to contribute.

When Bob Newhart, a guest, jestingly got up and said he had heard enough and was leaving, Mr. Carson asked him if he intended to "make a night deposit."

The few words were edited out. But the next morning N.B.C. received letters charging censorship.

wouldn't have dared a year earlier."

C.B.S.'s Mr. Tankersley believes the pace has accelerated this season more than ever.

He notes that his network has twice this season shown "The Apartment," a film in which Jack Lemmon's bachelor apartment is used for a series of assignations.

The film, he says, was purchased by C.B.S. three years ago. Had it been shown then instead of during the current season "we would have edited out much more than we did when we finally showed it. We would have taken out all of the explicit sex business," he says.

More Franker Films

Motion pictures like "The Apartment" and "Never on Sunday," which N.B.C. showed in an almost uncut version recently ("we would never have considered it five years ago") are an overriding factor in TV's uninhibitedness toward matters relating to sex.

"Feature-length films dealing with the lives of prostitutes and extramarital relationships or that are quite explicit in the bedroom carry with them a sort of built-in rationale for broadcasters," Mr. Kasmire says. "Since they are not produced for TV but have been in wide circulation, they have already stood the test of acceptability with the public, which can make a choice whether to watch it on TV or not."

Thus there is no public clamor when, in addition to such movies, TV producers inject sex into some of their own programming.

TV specials in recent months have been the source of considerable frankness. "Dear Friends," on C.B.S., a melodrama about four couples who found misery in marriage, was rather blunt in its treatment of adultery. During a scuffle that takes place between two affluent Manhattan families, the audience learns that one of the wives has been sleeping with her husband's friend.

The changing economics of the industry has also helped break down many of the medium's former attitudes. Until a few years ago, single sponsorship of an entire program was the norm. But high production costs have resulted in participation sponsorship by groups of advertisers, none of whom have a say in program production and can influence content as once was the case.

"Pressure from advertisers has practically disappeared," one network spokesman who declined to be identified commented. "By the same token, they are off the hook. Today, when a customer writes to a sponsor and complains about instances of bad taste in a program, he can answer by saying that he had nothing to do with the production."

When Milton Berle recently did a skit on the American Broadcasting Company's "Hollywood Palace" entitled "And a Messenger Was Sent," the network received several hundred letters complaining to a reference to "the prince of teach." The writers felt this was an attack on President Johnson.

Keyed to Irreverence

"This piece evolved not out of any lack of respect," Nicholas Vanoff, the program's executive producers answered critics in a form letter, "but indeed reveals just the opposite among people who revere our country and possess the inherent humor so vital to us as a nation. We cannot express too strongly our dismay at having offended you. We hold our God-given gift of laughter very dear and regret having used yours poorly through misinterpretation."

Of the regular weekly network series, two of the newer ones, "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour" on C.B.S. and

"Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In" on N.B.C. have been franker, industry observers say, than any other television show. And, although it was always possible that the occasional suggestive crack might have passed network censors, these two shows — presented in prime evening hours — are keyed to irreverence and "blue" material.

Network officials agree that neither program would have been considered a few seasons ago, possibly even last year.

On Monday nights this season, millions of viewers have tuned to Rowan and Martin to see how "far" they will go.

One of the most popular regular routines on the program is a satirical news show. Here are some recent examples:

News item: Curators of the London Art Museum announced today they are still awaiting further development on the long-overdue bust of Twiggy. When contacted in London, Twiggy said, "Me, too."

The planned parenthood society today announced some of the wonderful things they won't be doing next year.

Woman to Priest: Do you think there will ever be a union of clergymen? Priest: Why not, we're all white-collar workers.

My daughter says that now that the Supreme Court has outlawed prayers in school, the convent's just not the same.

It is much the same on the Smothers Brothers program, which recently had a skit in which a man's zipper was open in a restaurant. His woman companion across the table tried to tell him about it in a subtle way but he didn't take the hint. She finally blurted it out and in zipping his fly, he got the table cloth caught, dragging it across the restaurant.

With the increased amount of dissent in this country over national issues, jokes about President Johnson and the Government have also become more frequent, outspoken and biting. By the time Mr. Johnson announced that he was not a candidate for re-election they had reached the stage of cruelty.

Carl Watson, director of broadcast standards at N.B.C., whose office has to pass on all questionable material, noted recently that there was much

These lines from recent television programs would not have passed the censors a few years back. Today such risqué material is common fare, illustrating the growing permissiveness of the medium.

Satirical gibes at the Johnson Administration and its Vietnam policy have been more pointed — indeed more cruel — than any in television history prior to the President's withdrawal as a candidate for re-election.

Every day, viewers hear a barrage of double-entendre gags, view hip swaying, undulating girls and listen to attacks on the American Establishment. Dramas and soap operas often deal graphically with such once-taboo subjects as illegitimacy, adultery and premarital relations. Talk shows now openly discuss homosexuality, free love, suicide, suburban sex life and the problems of transvestites.

To be sure, not all taboos are going by the board. Some material still is outlawed. Some films, though they have been boxoffice successes, continue to be out of bounds. "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" and "A Man and a Woman" are two such films. And movies that are bought are often cut. Advertising pressures remain but they appear to be diminishing. Indeed, commercials for some products are becoming increasingly sexy.

Network officials and independent broadcasters, assessing in recent interviews TV's trend toward permissiveness, generally agree that the movement primarily is a reflection of the changing moral values of American society. They have also encouraged the publicity the trend has nurtured.

"If TV is more permissive, it is because the audience — indeed the whole society is going along," Robert D. Kasmire, vice president for corporate information of the National Broadcasting Company, says. "Girls are wearing miniskirts, universities and colleges are more permissive. It is the whole attitude toward sex. We try to keep up with social changes."

"We are doing today what we would not have done in the past," he added. "The philosophy here used to be: 'Boys, don't do anything that will get you into trouble.' We once had a hypersensitivity toward audience complaint."

"When we got a letter of protest, we calculated it represented the feelings of thousands of viewers. Now we consider a complaint as the viewpoint of a single person. There are always some people who see a phallic symbol in the test pattern."

'World Is a Madhouse'

William H. Tankersley, vice president of program practices of the Columbia Broadcasting System, points to a stack of protest letters on his desk and says:

"As you can see from this mail, we no longer shut our eyes or shut off the facts. The world is a madhouse. TV gives some voice to what is going on in the world."

Another reason for the frankness, some network officials contend, is the daily television news program film of the Vietnam war.

"Sure TV is getting more adult and open about touchy subjects," says Daniel Melnick, who with David Susskind puts on many discussion programs about subjects once considered out of the question. "But which is more frank: a blue joke, a suggestive movie or TV films of Marines fighting the Vietcong? It's hard to become emotionally involved with a risqué joke when you watch a South Vietnamese general shoot a defenseless Vietcong in the head."

It is difficult to determine when the trend began.

"The process is subtle and it is indiscernible as it occurs," says Mr. Kasmire. "You actually can't see it if you compare this season with the last season. But if you stand back and compare the current season with three seasons ago, it stands out."

"No one ever sat down here at N.B.C. and said, 'Golly, this year we've got to be more permissive.' It's a natural process. Each year we do things we