

A Producer's View of Quality

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In a technological world in which information is stored on magnetic disks, it is refreshing to be asked to deliver a "paper." A "paper" is a term as comforting as a fireside, as quaint as a quill pen and India ink.

My "paper" is titled "A Producer's View of Quality," a title chosen for me, and one which has intrigued me in the few minutes of a busy season which I've had time to think of it. As a producer and director, I could save you a lot of time by saying simply, "Yeah, I think quality is a good thing--gimme some of it and I'll use it!"

You see, as a producer I've been spoiled because in 32 years of television, I've been given quality by you people every day of the year. Quality always meant the best you could do, and you delivered.

Now, although I had a background in university math and physics, when I became a director I was dependent on you engineers to give me picture and sound--"You take care of the line-up charts and I'll line up the dancers and musicians." And it's worked, a happy collaboration. And that's how we're going to achieve quality in the 80's and 90's, through happy collaborations.

When I address the subject of quality, which hat do I wear? Does a producer of a ballet want

a different kind of quality than the producer of a football game, or is quality an elusive kind of Holy Grail that we all are seeking--something almost indefinable, a quest that may never be realized, but that will absorb us and our children's children forever.

Because I'm sure my children's children will be watching television in the 21st century, what will it be? Video, or film, or Pizzascope, some totally unheard of and wonderful system that your descendents will discuss the merits of in this very room, with the same kind of charts and diagrams you entertained me with this morning. Now here's where, as a non-technical producer, I feel intimidated. So I have brought a chart which we will call Fig. 1. It's an organizational chart of the sort used in dispelling the mysteries of modern corporations. This should make everything clear.

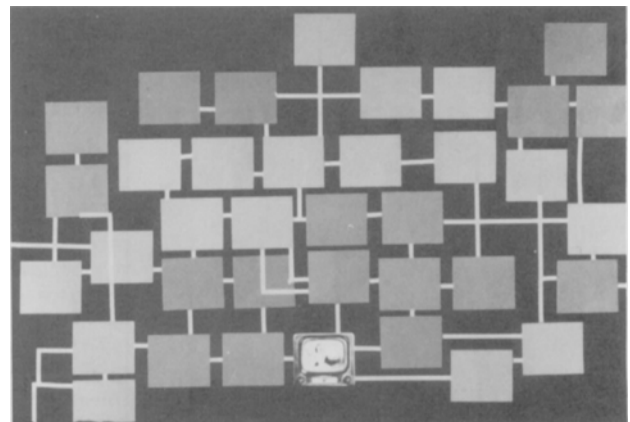


Fig. 1

Now this typical chart has a head honcho and underneath a bunch of vice honchos, and here are some executive supervisors, and here are some supervisory executives, and away down here is a producer, and here, away down here would be a television program.

I knew this chart was upside down.

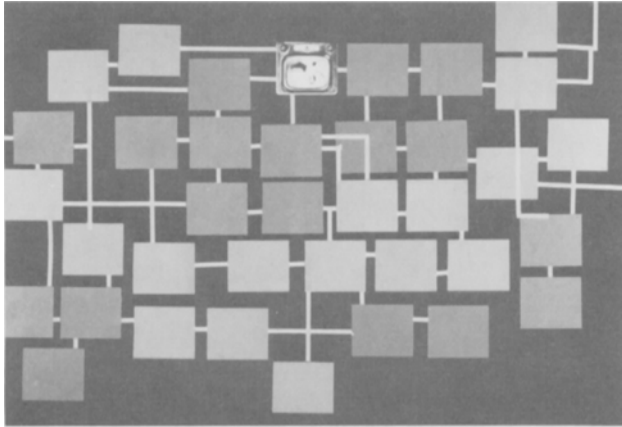


Fig. 2

Now this is more like it. The head of this organizational chart is the television set--it's why we're all here. Millions of people, mostly only one or two at a time, sit in front of this set waiting to be astonished, delighted, informed, moved, or entertained.

Here is the set. What's going to be on it? Well, what

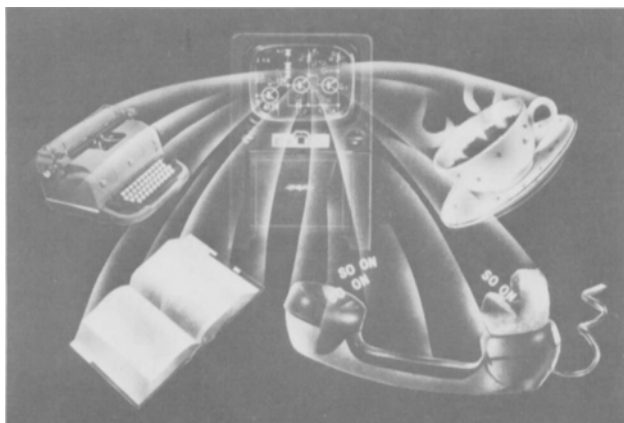


Fig. 3

it had better have is ideas. So right next to the set we put writers, and nourishing them in turn we need newspapers, magazines, so let's put in a library, and over here let's have a coffee shop where people can meet and generate more ideas, and so on (Fig.3).

Our chart is much different when you put the program first.

I don't know what this picture is (Fig. 4), but you have to admit the image quality is terrific. Maybe these are the inventors of quadraphonic.



Fig. 4

Now when you come to talk about image quality, perhaps you could use the same sort of chart--a TV set with a screen, maybe as big as a house, and as flat as a pancake, but a picture of a quality better than we have ever seen.

You will have achieved splendid definition, a full range of color, and now comes the question -- What is going to nourish this instrument of quality? What do we put on our organizational chart next to the screen? Well, sound. There have been many marginal movies that have seemed ever so much more engrossing when viewed in a big cinema with Dolby and stereo surround. A mere picture of a fern can evoke a whole forest if the atmospheric sound track is right. But, when screens get

flattened for a wall installation, what happens to the speakers? There must be development in new ways of emitting sound from small sources. If Paverotti can thrill an opera house from a larynx this big, there is hope for miniaturizing speakers. (Perhaps I should have used a smaller tenor to make my point.)

I directed a feature film with the Canadian magician Doug Henning, called "The Magic Show," and all the way through we were dealing with illusion. In most of our entertainment television we are dealing with illusion--we work on the mind of the viewer to make him feel emotion and wonder. With large image television we need new thrusts in lighting techniques, sophisticated and quick ways to put beauty on the screen. There are some real artists in video lighting, but there need to be more. I believe we must support training programs that acknowledge lighting as an art as well as a technical skill, to be able to support our forthcoming "Image of Quality." I think it's in your interest also to see better training programs for the directors of the future so they won't regard cameras as screwed down to the floor, but will devise elegant movement to give a three-dimensional effect to your already superb picture.

The studio floor! If you had a knob on your set which could increase the vitality of the performers on your wonderful new screen, would you use it? Of course you would. Well, an important part of the well-being, even survival, of dancers on television is the floor. They can't be bouncy on concrete. The performers' unions these days demand wooden floors to put spring in the step of singers and dancers, and so they should.

But now, as a director, I find my heavy camera mounts can't do the kind of elegant moves they used to--on a wooden floor they wallow unevenly, and the crane, once a poetic tool in the camerawork, must be curtailed in its usefulness. Mundane though it may be, new floor structures with resilience need to be researched along with lightweight camera mounts, and I assure you, it will show up as quality on your screen.

Image size is very important to me as a producer. As director of the aforementioned feature, "The Magic Show," I edited the 35 millimeter film on a Steenbeck with a screen the size of a TV set. Then we would screen portions of the show in a theater. Because of screen size, the dynamics were so different that I had to re-edit looser shots to maintain the mystery of the magic. It's very important to know the screen size of the major audience you are aiming for, and I hope the acceptance of large screen will be universal and swift when it is introduced.

There is another area you must not stay out of as technicians. You must be very concerned with where this image of quality is placed. You may have to become interior decorators or architects, for if there is a way to defeat your quest, Mr. Average Viewer will do it. He will place his set by a window, and he'll turn up the brightness knob so there are no blacks in the picture, so don't give him a brightness knob! Real estate futurists are predicting the shrinkage of our living space in the next decade, so while your screen is getting bigger, albeit thinner, the space is getting smaller. I plead with you to be concerned about the ambiance, more than

what we look at, how we look at it.

Let me say something else about our viewing future. The superb craftsmanship which gave us the Sony Walkman has alienated some of us from each other--wearing earphones, we live in an isolated world unto ourselves. Those of you in film will corroborate--there's nothing like enjoying a movie with a good audience. Our perceptions increase and our enjoyment is transmitted in unexplainable ways. Please, as you develop Superscreen, don't give us a 3-D system with glasses or sound with earphones. Let us have family viewing where we can comment, laugh, or watch in silent communion a work of quality.

Storytelling, which is our main use of the new screen, is often the art of not telling too much. We receive information from the screen and interpret it. If that information is too literal, we can't participate imaginatively. No amount of computer enhancement can really sharpen a soft image, but you can always diffuse a sharp one. Give us an incredibly brilliant and detailed picture, but then give us controls to modify the image. Let us, if we choose, have a screen full of purest black with one red dot in the middle, but let that black be black, as black as in a modern motion picture screening room. Give us controls to produce by computer what we now have to do physically.

Suppose I have two cameras in the field, one film and one video. The scene comes through the lens, impacts the film, and chemistry and physics renders the image onto celluloid. Filters are employed and a work print is made, exposed to a TV camera in a telecine chain, and ends as an electronic image on my TV set. The video camera

shoots the same scene, but there is no chemistry; it's electronics all the way. There is no denying the final image quality of these alternatives on the same monitor is very different. It's a question of taste which is better. Film people will argue only film has "such a patina," and video folk may say their image is "today" and "real" But I'm just a producer. I like them both for their individuality.

Give me controls so that a computer will take the image coming through the lens and render it "as if" it had gone through a chemical and physical process. Let me have on your new screen "film quality" or "tape quality"--whichever will express the mood I want to convey.

When I direct in tape, I love tape.

When I direct film, it is the only medium in the world. But being vain, as a director I crave immortality, and so far only film seems to have prestige and long life associated with it. If I create an epic on tape, can I be sure drop-out and print-through will not diminish my work of art? Give me permanence along with those other goodies I've asked for.

And one last thing. When I create the show of my dreams on the screen of my dreams I know the viewer is extremely unlikely to watch it in real time. He will play it at his own sweet pleasure over whatever VCRs will have become by then. Don't let down those standards, or we're all lost. Convince the industry and the public of our quest for, and the rewards of, quality.

When I saw my first television set 35 years ago, it was a furniture salesman who was

responsible for the brightness cannot be content merely to being turned up. He was an build a bigger and better expert on mahogany, but not on mousetrap, but to make sure we electronics. I'm afraid that know it's coming. Be activists! furniture salesman is still with us, misleading we viewers into
It took decades for AM listeners to discover the joys of FM. Surely, in this sophisticated age, we can shorten that time and turn our addicts of the "boob tube" into connoisseurs of an image of what quality is. I think we have to all tell our story. The producer's role is changing--we now have to be co-production experts and public relations wizards merely to survive. And I think you members of the SMPTE quality.



Norman Campbell is a television producer and director for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Toronto. He has directed productions for the major networks in the U.S.A. and in Great Britain. In 1979, he was awarded the Order of Canada, and his productions have won many awards including two Emmys. He is the composer of the musical "Anne of Green Gables," which has played in London, Tokyo, and for twenty years, in the Charlottetown Festival in Canada.