

at attaining comprehensive disarmament, but their overriding interest seemed to be in more limited agreements on strategic nuclear weapons. They were eager to hear our opinions on the no-first-use proposals put forth by George Kennan, McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara and Gerard Smith in the Spring issue of *Foreign Affairs*. And they were concerned about the possibility that the United States might not renew the antiballistic missile treaty. If this treaty is permitted to lapse, they said, counterforce, launch-on-warning strategies would be the only alternative for both sides. And if the superpowers adopted these postures, the danger of a nuclear war would be dramatically increased.

The abolitionists in the U.S. delegation expressed their impatience with the cautious attitudes of the Soviet prudentialists. They argued that nuclear armaments have a moral and a legal dimension as well as a strategic one, and they sought to convey to the Russians a sense of the growing popular revulsion in Europe and the United States against the arms race. They also contended that preparing for nuclear war and countenancing a first-strike doctrine should be considered war crimes under the Nuremberg judgment and international law. In other words, nuclear weapons are not merely counters in the diplomatic chess game. According to the abolitionists, scientists, government officials, technicians and others who serve the nuclear war machine should be open to condemnation on moral grounds. Although the Russians agreed that nuclear war was a crime against humanity, they did not support unilateral disarmament.

Reflection upon what was discussed at the conference has persuaded me that future disarmament efforts could have five objectives that would satisfy both the prudentialists and the abolitionists. They are:

§ Renewing the ABM treaty and ending underground tests of nuclear weapons.

§ Ratifying SALT II.

§ Convening the Military Staff Committee of the U.N. Security Council to discuss proposals on such matters as the no-first-use doctrine, nuclear-free zones, reduction of tensions between rival military alliances and military budget freezes.

§ Negotiating a comprehensive disarmament treaty within a set time.

§ Increasing international discussions among academics, scientists, theologians, trade unionists and citizens' groups to explore unofficial initiatives to end the arms race. For example, scientists could be asked to sign a kind of Hippocratic oath that they would not contribute their skills to the nuclear war machine. Another idea would involve organizing ordinary citizens to monitor a nation's compliance with disarmament and arms-control agreements.

One thing is clear: it is necessary for prudentialists and abolitionists to abandon the mutual distaste that has separated them in the past and to work together. Abolitionists—and I include myself among them—must relinquish their moral snobbery and welcome prudentialists like Messrs. Bundy, Kennan, McNamara and Smith into the nuclear disarmament movement—if that is where they truly wish to be. □

■ 'INTERACTIVE' TV

Democracy and The QUBE Tube

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

Will the new television technologies make our society more democratic? A number of observers are saying that they will. These range from Mark Fowler, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, who holds that a deregulated cable marketplace is a better guarantor of "freedom" than any other telecommunications system, to Benjamin R. Barber, a professor of political science at Rutgers University. Barber wrote in *The New York Times* of a "coming second age" of television as a result of the "telecommunications revolution." He cited several innovations that have made television "a potentially powerful ally of democracy" holding "great civic promise." Among these is interactive television, a two-way cable system that enables viewers to respond in their homes to questions flashed on the screen. The prime example is Warner Amex Cable Communications' QUBE in Columbus, Ohio. Systems like QUBE, Barber wrote, "can enhance the quality of communication and reinforce civic exchanges."

But the advocates of interactive television display a misapprehension of the nature of real democracy, which they confuse with the plebiscite system. The distinction is not an idle one. In a plebiscitary system, the views of the majority, in the form of popular initiatives, swamp minority or unpopular views. Plebiscitism is compatible with authoritarian politics carried out under the guise of, or with the connivance of, majority opinion. That opinion can be registered by easily manipulated, ritualistic plebiscites, so there is no need for debate on substantive questions. All that is required is a calculation of opinion.

Being a citizen in a democracy, on the other hand, requires more than merely registering one's opinion. As the political theorist Brian Fay has said, what "is most significant is the involvement of the citizens in the process of determining their own collective identity." A true democratic polity involves a deliberative process, participation with other citizens, a sense of moral responsibility for one's society and the enhancement of individual possibilities through action in, and for, the *res publica*.

The ersatz participation characteristic of interactive television is dramatically at odds with this democratic ideal. The claims of the advocates of "participatory" television are reminiscent of those of the early television enthusiasts who insisted that the medium would be a socializing instru-

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ment, one that would bring families, even nations, together. But that has only happened on rare and dramatic occasions (the assassination and funeral of President Kennedy, for example). Television has not enhanced sociability, strengthened civic culture or, as Barber claims, meant the "overcoming of alienation." Instead, it has produced a deepening social fragmentation.

Watching television is an isolating experience. As Rose Goldsen, a professor of sociology at Cornell University pointed out in "The Television Explosion," a special shown on the Public Broadcasting System on February 14, the interaction that takes place involves a single individual and an impersonal screen. If, Goldsen noted, we add to this the fact that 40 percent of American homes have more than two sets—one in the kitchen, one in the family room, one in each child's bedroom—what emerges is an image of alienation, not one of togetherness and the flowering of civic culture. Television is privatizing: it appeals to us as private consumers, not as public citizens.

A closer look at the QUBE system will clarify my argument. Television sets in each participating home are scanned every six seconds, so that viewers' responses are tallied by computer almost instantly and displayed on their screens. QUBE subscribers get to register their opinions on such local issues as whether or not the school system is well run. There are also plebiscites on national issues. Viewers are asked to respond to such questions as: "What effect do you think Reaganomics will have on the economy? Do you think it will (1) greatly help, (2) somewhat help, (3) make no difference, (4) somewhat hurt, (5) greatly hurt?"

On the surface, this may seem democratic: one gets to make one's opinions known. But the "one" in this formulation is the privatized viewer rather than the public citizen, and he or she gives an instant "opinion" rather than concurring or dissenting from a position hammered out through debate and democratic discourse. A compilation of opinions does not make a civic culture; such a culture demands a deliberative process in which people engage one another as citizens.

Evidence that interactive television enhances privatization may be found in the statements of QUBE consumers interviewed on "The Television Explosion." One QUBE mother reports, with relish, that her young son will not "sit still for me to read a story to him." No matter. She turns on the "children's programming," where they "go through a story, with the animation." The youngster, she says, is "just . . . thrilled." Goldsen contrasts this with old-fashioned storytelling, which involves a verbal and tactile relationship between two people. As many have pointed out, while watching animated figures on a screen, the child is enveloped in silent isolation.

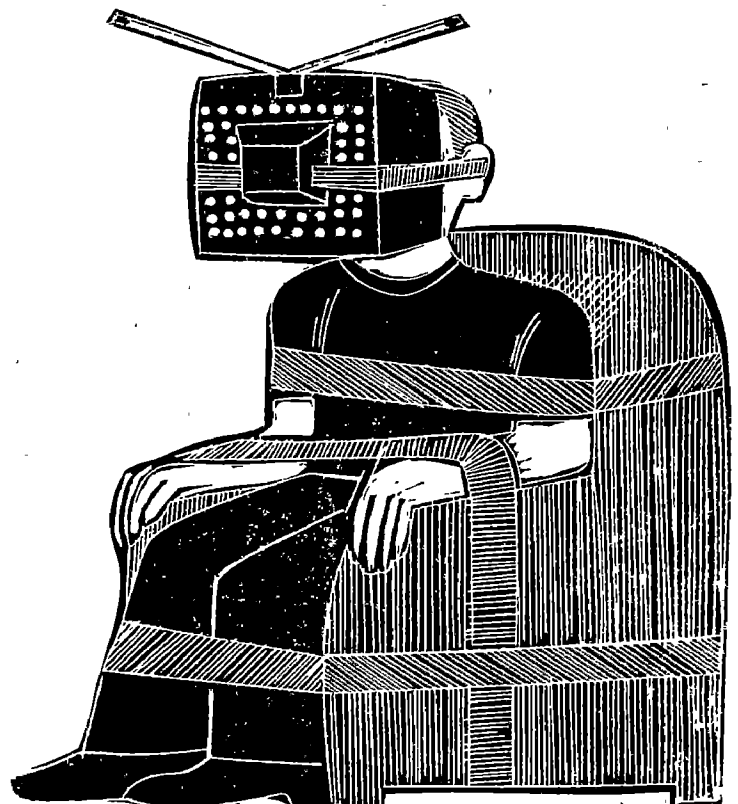
Another example, involving the same QUBE family, is equally unsettling. The father reports, delightedly, that he and his wife "have not gone out to movies for almost two years now because of the QUBE system." He goes on to explain that he finds it more enjoyable to stay home, because he can "go over to the refrigerator and raid it whenever [he] want[s]." Whatever all of this means, it certainly has nothing

to do with promoting civic culture or rousing social conscience. Rather, it may promote an electronic oligarchy capable of manipulating public opinion through plebiscitary forms.

Given the capacities of many two-way systems to scan homes, register opinions and keep records, many observers have expressed apprehension about their potential for invading privacy. "The Television Explosion" reported that QUBE's response to this fear was to take a poll of its subscribers. Seventy percent of them said they were not worried about their privacy being violated, which settled the matter as far as QUBE was concerned. Others might say that such a poll demonstrates how serious public issues and debates on those issues can be manipulated to insure that vested interests (in this case those of the cable owners and managers) are served.

But beyond privacy invasion, interactive systems encourage social atomization and they foster the notion that an electronic transaction is an authentic democratic choice. That so many people see democracy alive and well in electronic beeps, flashes and commands to "register your opinion now" shows how confused we are about the essential nature of choice. To see button-pressing as a choice, as a meaningful act on a par with marching in an antinuclear rally, lobbying against toxic waste dumping or working for a political candidate, indicates our tacit embrace of a crude version of the "preference theory" of economics.

This theory holds that in a free-market society, individual consumer choices result in the greatest benefit to society as a whole at the same time as they meet individual needs. The presumption behind this theory is that every one of us is a "preference maximizer." Aside from being an extraordinarily crude explanation of human motivation, preference



theory lends itself to a blurring of important distinctions. Picking Crunchy Creatures over Funny Flakes for breakfast becomes a choice comparable to supporting or opposing a local school bond issue. Finally, according to preference theory, there is no such thing as a social good—there are only aggregates of private goods. Interactive television contributes to this flattening out of the less and the more important into one indiscriminate blur. The methods of choosing a consumer item or registering an opinion on a military buildup are identical in form and equally devoid of content.

Interactive television embraces a view of human nature and the human condition that is opposed to the view that people are social beings who require certain conditions for the development of their capacities. A democratic civic culture is grounded in the belief that free individuals must be concerned about their society, and that society can and must help to form the civic capacities of its citizens. This means that the democratic citizen can only be formed in a particular kind of civilization. If that civilization is diminished or disappears, the free individual cannot survive. The interactive shell game cons us into believing we are participating when we are really simply performing as the responding “end” of a prefabricated system of external stimuli. The pathos of this belief is that under the banner of democratic choice we may become complicit in eroding a system that makes genuine choice and deliberative democracy possible. At that point we shall have lost the *res publica* and replaced it with a plebiscitary world in which we face our television screens rather than one another. □

New Guidelines

(Continued From Front Cover)

mittee's mission appears to be strikingly similar to that of the committee headed by Representative Hamilton Fish in 1930. The Fish committee served as a standard-bearer in the campaign to revive the F.B.I.'s Red-hunting activities, which Attorney General Harlan F. Stone had banned in 1924.

For its inaugural effort, Denton's subcommittee held a series of hearings last year on terrorism. Then, on June 24 and 25, the subcommittee turned to the 1976 guidelines. A parade of witnesses, led by F.B.I. director William Webster and W. Mark Felt and Edward S. Miller, the former F.B.I. officials who were convicted in 1980 of authorizing break-ins without warrants in the course of an investigation of the Weather Underground (the two were pardoned last year by President Reagan), expressed hostility toward the guidelines. Webster stated that the guidelines worked “reasonably well” but needed to be changed to give the Bureau more flexibility in dealing with “terrorist groups.”

Senator Denton left no doubt as to his views. In his open-

ing statement he named a number of groups that, he asserted, favored violent revolution: the Progressive Labor Party, the Socialist Workers Party, the May 19 Communist Organization and the Weather Underground. He also referred to the National Lawyers Guild as a group seeking “to exploit the law in order to bring about revolutionary change.” Denton's performance displayed a strange mixture of fanaticism and innocence that went beyond mere ignorance; he came across as a ghost of the fundamentalist Americanism of the 1920s, roaming the shadowy byways of contemporary countersubversion. (He was particularly mystified by the phrase “First Amendment activities.”)

Affirming the pen's lead over the sword, Denton warned that “support groups that produce propaganda, disinformation, or ‘legal assistance’ may be even more dangerous than those who actually throw the bombs.” There are echoes of nativist conspiratology in his charge that the Felt-Miller convictions “disclosed the unrelenting hostility of certain groups in our society to the political philosophy which this Administration represents as it seeks to reshape our strategy for countering Soviet efforts at subversion, espionage and terrorism.” Indeed, it was these sinister groups that engineered the convictions in order to profit from “the symbolism represented by a felony conviction” of such distinguished patriots. Denton proudly assured Felt that on the issue of domestic security he was a “right-wing kook.”

The master of the paranoid style, the tiger who makes Denton seem like a pussycat, is committee member John P. East, North Carolina's professorial contribution to the Senate's New Right contingent, the originator of the court-stripping strategy and a last-ditch opponent of the Voting Rights Act. If Denton is the bumbling primitive whose off-the-wall homilies—we could call them jeremiads—are hard to take seriously, East is the fervent ideologue eager for the limelight. (If only the namby-pamby Senate Intelligence Committee would relinquish its jurisdictional priority and leave the stage!) East has long sounded the terrorist alarm; in the course of the June hearings he cited the Hinckley assassination attempt and the killings during the attempted Brink's robbery in Nyack, New York, in support of his charge that the Levi guidelines have left us helpless in the face of a mounting threat to national security. East has really done little more than concoct such a threat and proclaim its immediacy; he certainly hasn't explained how the hawkish surveillance program he espouses would make us more secure. That explanation may be provided by East's legislative aide, Samuel T. Francis, the intelligence point man for the New Right and the author of the internal security section of the Heritage Foundation's report “The Intelligence Community.”

After earning his doctorate from the University of North Carolina with a thesis on the foreign policy of Edward Hyde, the first Earl of Clarendon, Francis became a policy analyst for the Heritage Foundation in 1977. In 1981, the foundation published his second tract, which was entitled “The Soviet Strategy of Terror,” an unintentional parody of the genre. The earlier Heritage report on the intelligence community charges that the United States is under siege by

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