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The fight for $60,000 a half minute

By JEFF GREENFIELD SEPT. 7, 1975

A Sunday evening in mid–May at the CenturyPlaza Hotel in Los Angeles. Two floors below the modern, opulent lobby, in the massive Los Angeles Room, 2,000 people mill about, taking champagne from flowing fountains, munching coquilles St. Jacques, meats, cheeses, salads and thick, rich desserts served out of a hundred chafing dishes by more than 50 waiters from a huge, X–shaped table under a massive chandelier. Enormous dusters of pink and white flowers suspended from the ceiling, under which mill starlets in skimpy gowns, well–tailored men with hair styles as impeccable as their suits. There is the occasional deeply tanned face of a Star—those whose clothes seem to fit without effort, and whose smiles never waver. Hard by these glittering people is another group; their jackets are double–knit, their shoes inevitably bright white, their stares ill–disguised. These are the affiliates the people from the more than 200 local stations from Alexandria, Minn., to Midland, Tex., who are here to witness the most public rite of an American television network—the unveiling of the fall schedule.

For the affiliates, it is two days of endlessly flowing food and drink, presentations punctuated by canned music and live marching bands, speeches with well–worn, quasi–political rhetoric ("We see the past as a steppingstone for the future," proclaimed NBC president Herbert S. Schlosser), and firm proclamations of victory ("We will be No. 1 this season, and will remain No. 1 for a long, long time to come," asserted another executive).

For most of us, television is an enterprise suited to such frivolity. It is our national obsession, the single most pervasive enterprise of our land. But it is also

casual: a pleasant diversion between supper and bedtime, usually tolerable, occasionally amusing, once in a while gripping, moving or offensive, and we make our choices of what we watch with no more effort than a flick of the wrist on the way to the kitchen. But for those on the other end of the signal—for the executives of the three television networks who design the fare which diverts us, the parties and the speeches in Los Angeles are the wrappings of a deadly earnest business, a multibillion dollar sweepstakes affecting the careers of some of the most powerful men in America—if, by power, we mean the capacity to reach the minds of tens of millions.

Jeff Greenfield is an author and a political media consultant who writes frequently about television. grapples with an increasingly threatening future, and we are asked to care whether a MexicanAmerican garage mechanic will prove more appealing than an irreverent group of Army surgeons cavorting through the Korean war; or whether laughing at a loud, brawling Italo–American family wilt be more diverting than weeping through the Depression with the Waltons. Yet those choices count—if for no other reason than their massive financial consequences, which can inflate or depress the value of 30 seconds of broadcast time by tens of thousands of dollars. And when these choices will also tell us what we, as a country, prefer for our diversion—when they tell us, also, what choices we, as consumers, are permitted to make–they are worth a closer look.

For several weeks last spring, I tried to put together the factors that shaped this fall's primetime schedule of the National Broadcasting Company. I spoke with key executives in New York and Los Angeles; I watched the company present its schedule to its affiliated stations in California, and I spoke with writers and producers who had—and who had not—sold their shows to NBC for this fall. Apart from learning something about how television networks decide what we will see, I also learned something about the enormous pressures which force commercial television into its relatively narrow boundaries, and why those boundaries are not likely to widen in the foreseeable future.

The people with whom I talked were friendly, open and considerate. Apart from refusing to let me sit in at the actual scheduling meeting, the people at NBC seemed almost eager to explain their enterprise—one they found enormously exciting and challenging. And yet, much of what they said raised the most serious questions about the nature of network television.

THE BACKGROUND

The 1974–75 season had been a good one for NBC, but not as good as it should have been. The network made lots of money. In 1974, its profits were $48.3-million on $725-million of revenues in the form of advertising time bought on its network and on the five stations it owns and operates in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington and Cleveland. But television, as a legal monopoly, almost always makes money, even in a year of deep recession. ("It's an uneven recession," explained senior sales vice president Mike Weinblatt. "Companies like Colgate and Procter, some food and beer companies, had great years, and even auto companies have to advertise because, if they lose their media place, it costs too much to get it back.")

More important to the network executives was the steady improvement in NBC's rating. A rating —by which television usually means the measurement of the A.C. Nielsen Company—measures the percentage of TV-equipped homes tuning into q show (with an estimated 68.5 million TV-households, each rating point equals about 685,000 homes). A show's survival depends, above all, on the "share"—i.e., the percentage of the actual TV audience watching a show in any given time period. For example, "Sanford and Son," NBC's highest-rated regular show, hit a 31.0 "rating" last January, meaning that 31 per cent of all homes possessing television were watching that show its "share" was 47—meaning nearly half of all sets turned on at 8 P.M. Friday nights were tuned to "Sanford." And its estimated audience was 21,240,000 homes. In network TV, a prime-time show which cannot hit a "30 share" is headed for cancellation. A show with a "40 share" is a solid hit.

NBC's "'Today" and "Tonight" shows dominated the early morning and late evening hours last season; its Saturday morning children's shows and daytime programs had all but pulled even with CBS; and in the crucial prime-time hours (8–11 P.M. on the coasts, 7–10 P.M. in middle America), NBC had scored a 6 per cent gain white CBS had slid a point. (The American Broadcasting Company, perennial weak sister, with 30 fewer affiliates than the other two, had done so poorly that an industry joke claimed that "Patty Hearst was hiding out as the star of an ABC Friday night show.")

NBC had also established three clear hits from its 1974–75 schedule: "Little House on the Prairie," with Michael Landon husbanding a struggling but loving family, "Police Woman," with Angie Dickinson fighting crime in California, and "Chico and the Man," with Freddie Prinze and Jack Albertson in a third-world-

youth–meets–old–cantankerous–butlovable–bigot–in–garage. “Chico” was the single biggest hit of any new show last season, finishing the year as one of the three highest–rated shows.

These facts, however, hid as much as they showed. In the “second season,” the rating period beginning in January, NBC had faltered. All of its new shows had failed, some of them embarrassingly: “The Smothers Brothers,” expected to score big, fizzled out; “Archer,” with Brian Keith portraying Ross Macdonald's detective, was yanked off the air after only four shows; “The Bob Crane Show” was a critical and commercial flop; “Mac Davis” was a weak variety show; “The Law,” a highly realistic portrayal of the criminal–justice system, played only three times and—fairly or not—never found an audience. And “Sunshine,” an attractive, gentle show about refugees from the counterculture, could not compete against CBS's “The Waltons.” In the second season, NBC had finished first in the ratings on only one night—Friday. And what looked like a chance to unseat CBS as the long–time ratings winner went by the boards; CBS won for the 19th straight year.

The margin of difference was nine–tenths of a rating point. Trivial, so it seems.

“Yes, we lost the primetime ratings by about a point,” said business affairs vice president Don Carswell. “That's a spread of about 5 per cent. That spread meant about $17.5–million more to CBS in advertising rates—of which the network retains 85 per cent, because the costs we have are relatively fixed. That's one very good reason why we want to be No. 1.”

“The bigger your audience, the bigger your share of the advertising dollar,” Mike Weinblatt said. “And, like it or not, prime time is the showcase of your network.”

In past years, NBC had tended to play down the ratings race; but, with the accession of Herb Schlosser as company president, a new group of top programing and sales executives had been assembled—most of them in their posts less than a year when the fall schedule was assembled — who were determined not to be a gentlemanly, less profitable second to CBS. It was this group that assembled early in April around a table in the woodpaneled conference room on the sixth floor of NBC headquarters at 30 Rockefeller Plaza in New York to piece together the fall line–up of shows. And it was this group that had as an acknowledged goal the winning of the prime–time ratings race in time to celebrate NBC's 50th anniversary in 1976.

THE PARTICIPANTS

At a television network, programing is done, logically enough, by a programing department, which hears out the hundreds of ideas that studios, producers, writers and busboys offer for consideration. (The last is not said flippantly; satirist Stan Freberg swears that years ago, the room–service waiter at the Beverly Hills Hotel told him, “I guess you won't be seeing me here any more; I just sold my pilot.” “How much do you tip the guy?” wondered Freberg.) They approve the “step” deals that are part of the business: from an outline, to a script, to a pilot, to a place on the network schedule. And it is the programing people who have the major voice in determining the schedule.

Last April, Larry White, 49, who had been the senior programing executive at NBC since 1972, held the job of program vice president. White was known as a “tough, cynical guy who is a very hard sell,” according to one former NBC executive. White, the only program chief of any network to be based in Los Angeles, had helped push NBC into a competitive position with CBS but, at the time of last spring's scheduling meeting, rumors were flying through the television industry (rumors in this business are lighter than air, but this one had more substance) that White was about to be replaced. His rival was Marvin Antonowsky, 46, a marketing and research expert who had been hired away from ABC two years earlier, and who was now vice president for program operations and promotion. Dark–haired, favoring tinted glasses, severely styled suits and a modified Zapata mustache, Antonowsky was a product of a poor New York family; his accent was tinged with the streets and playgrounds of the city. A bachelor, a loner who was a movie and theater fanatic (the walls in his New York office were lined with theatrical posters), Antonowsky described himself as a “very competitive like

“Marvin's very good at promoting stuff,” an ex–executive said, “but I don't think he reads; it's impossible to get him to read a script. He's more interested in the name of something than in anything else.”

“Marvin and Larry are like cheese and chalk,” an NBC insider told me. “And it looks as if Marvin's persuaded Schlosser that he can get NBC into first place in prime time.”

Buttressing the programing department were the senior vice presidents from the financial side of the network, the people who negotiate fees with producers and suppliers of programs; who oversee the sale of time to advertisers; and who supervise costs. While not programers, these men have enough experience at the network, and enough responsibility for selling and paying for the programs, to

participate in the scheduling sessions.

Also playing a major factor was the research department, an autonomous subdivision of the company outside the network structure, headed by William S. Rubens, 45, a chubby, likable vice president for research and corporate planning. This department tests programs from their concepts through their pilots; its judgments on the appeal of prospective shows are of key importance in deciding whether shows are actually scheduled.

Bob Howard, 48, president of the network, and Herb Schlosser, 49, company president and chief operating officer of NBC, also participated in the programing discussions at critical times. These participants—all white, all male, all but one between 45 and 49 years old, all living and working in either the New York or Los Angeles areas, all earning between $40,000 a year (junior vice president) and $250,000 (Julian Goodman, NBC board chairman)— were not acting as judges. They were acting as surrogates for the audience.

"When you watch a pilot, you're not you," Larry White said. "You're putting yourself in the place of the general public."

"You have to separate what you like from what you think the people will like," explained Mike Weinblatt. "If you took a poll of TV executives, you wouldn't reflect the best–rated shows. I don't watch 'The Waltons,' and I wouldn't watch it, but I'd love to have it on my schedule."

But that is only the surface of the question. They were acting, too, as strategists, combatants, with a clear enemy—the other networks, and particularly CBS —and a clear set of problems and possibilities.

THE TASK

In the conference room—Room 610—a small, magnetized board was set up at the end of the table. Resting on the table were magnetized strips with the names of the 34 pilots authorized and paid for by NBC, and other strips with all the current shows with any chance of returning. For three weeks, working from about 9:30 A.M. to P.M. — with occasional, private discussions between and after hours — the executives pieced the schedule together, hour by hour, day by day.

The framework was clear. The weak shows were cleared out with almost no dissension. All of the second season shows were wiped out; none of them had performed well, including "The Law," about which the executives expressed deep disappointment ("That was one I was really hoping would get a 40 share," said Bob Howard). Also canceled was "Lucas Tanner," the David Hartman show about a

sensitive teacher, which had limped through the year, and "Adam–12," the long–running show about patrol cops that had been crippled by the strong CBS Tuesday night comedy hour. "Petrocelli," the Wednesday night show featuring Barry Newman as a Harvard lawyer who sets up shop in the Southwest and has the incredible luck to find innocent murder defendants once a week, was a real question mark.

"We started out with a 30 share for 'Petrocelli' in the first season," said Marvin Antonowsky. "And we moved to a 33 share when "Christie Love" (ABC) and "Manhunter" (CBS) both collapsed. It looked to be gaining acceptance, and the demographics were good — young and urban." Still, "Petrocelli" performed marginally against weak competition, so the decision on whether to cancel or renew was held in abeyance.

Saturday night was locked in; there was no chance to challenge the CBS dominance with comedies from "All in the Family" through "The Jeffersons," "Mary Tyler Moore," "Bob Newhart" and "Carol Burnett"; NBC's lineup of "Emergency" and movies was doing tolerably well with the leftovers, and a challenge simply didn't make economic or programing sense.

Friday night presented the reverse problem; it was the single strongest night of any network. "Sanford and Son" was the second most popular series of any network show. and through "Chico," "Rockford Files" and "Police Woman," NBC had a clear night. So clear, in fact, that the programers were seriously considering moving "Chico and the Man" to another night, and slipping in a new half–hour comedy in the "hammock" between two strong shows.

NBC was also operating on rumor: In years past, CBS had announced its schedule on Washington's Birthday, leaving it to the other networks to counterprogram; this year, NBC was going first, in an act of self–confidence. Rumor had it that CBS would move "The Waltons" to Sunday night at 8 and shift "Cher" to Thursday at 8. If that were true, the NBC brass thought, why not program into Thursday at 8 a warm, family show to pick up the audience abandoned by "The Waltons," who would feel betrayed by the sophisticated, flashy, sexy Cher? Universal–TV had developed a show called "The Family Holvak," with Glenn Ford and Julie Harris playing an impoverished, noble couple in the Depression South, complete with a small boy, a dog and virtuous homilies. It seemed perfect for Thursdays

Perhaps the most contentious decision about existing shows did not really

involve a show at all, but the “NBC World Premiere Movies”—a weekly, 90–minute made–forTV line–up that had (as had every network movie presentation) trailed its series opposition over a season. The movies were expensive—between $700,000 and $1–million, according to motion–picture vice president Stan Robertson —and there were other problems.

“It's much more difficult to make money on a World Premiere movie than on a moderately successful series,” Don Carswell said, “A movie means higher production costs (you can't spread the cost of sets and crew over a year or two) and you can't develop a viewer–habit pat tern. Once you've got them hooked on, say, ‘The Rockford Files,’ they'll come back like Pavlov's dog.”

After a long look at the possibility of fusing World Premiere Movies with a series of network specials, the decision was finally made to cancel that third movie night and fold the World Premiere into a movie night with “theatricals” — movies shown in theaters and bought for T.V. That also made room on the schedule for two new series.

With the weak shows out of the way, and with “Petrocelli” in purgatory, NBC then turned to the business of slotting new shows and returning features into the schedule. It is an enterprise that cannot be understood without a grasp of the rules — official and otherwise — and the stakes of the game.

THE “RULES”

One rule for the coming season was official — the “family hour” voted by the National Association of Broadcasters under the unsubtle prodding of F.C.C. Chairman Richard Wiley and Senator John Pastore, who chairs the Senate subcommittee with legislative power over television. The idea was the brainchild of CBS president Arthur Taylor, who was persuaded that by ruling early prime–time television off–limits to “inappropriate” programing — the term has never been defined — the growing pressure on networks over excessive sex and violence would ease. The rule provided that the hours from 7 to 9 (6 to 8 in the .ventral and mountain zones) would be “family” hours. No one knew what this would do to established shows such as “All in the Family” and “M*AvS*H” which dealt explicitly with once–taboo subjects; but for NBC, which lacked this kind of adult comedy show, the problem was to program its new schedule without slotting “adult” fare

The other rules, really part of network strategy, were understood by every programing executive. You programed for “audience flow,” knowing that the

audience character shifts with the night: very young and very old at 8, moving into middle–aged and young, and from rural to urban as the night goes on. Your 8 P.M. shows are "building blocks," designed to capture and hold an audience for the shows that follow. If, for example, you have two male – oriented adventure shows, you don't interrupt them with a woman's comedy show, because your audience will simply switch the channel and stay switched. When you seek to win a new audience, the best trick is to "counterprogram"—put a comedy against two action shows, a crime show against two comedies, a variety show against two dramas.

But to an outsider, the most startling rule was expressed by Don Carswell. "Remember," he said, "we're not selling the program; we're selling the audience for the program." In any other entertainment medium, an audience is the object. But television networks gather audiences, and then "sell" that audience to advertisers at rates determined by their size, and by their desirability. So when a network programs, it isn't simply looking for a big audience, but for the right kind of audience; because an advertiser wants to know that he is reaching people with money, people with changeable buying habits, people who need the product.

"Demographics are sales." said Mike Weinblatt, and that means that all viewers are not created equal. Older, poorer and rural people are much less important than young–to–middle–aged, urban and suburban middle–class people. "Gunsmoke" was canceled after 20 years not because of the ratings — it was in the top 25, with a reach of nearly 36 million people—but because, as a CBS vice president explained it, "the show tended to appeal to rural audiences and older people. Unfortunately, they're not primarily the ones sell to."

When Antonowsky was asked by a reporter why there were no Westerns on television any more (there were more than 30 fifteen years_ago) he said bluntly, "We're talking about money. Audiences for Westerns are generally quite rural and generally older. You don't want 80 per cent of your audience over 50. You don't have Westerns for the same reason you don't put quiz shows in prime time — they don't appeal to the most economically active viewer."

This Is an ironic twist, since older and more rural and certainly poorer people rely on television for entertainment more than mobile, youthful, affluent viewers. And not everyone is sanguine about it: Frank Price, president of Universal–TV, the biggest TV studio of all, says that "one of these days people over 50 are going to rise up and say, 'Wait a minute, what about us?' " Stan Kallis, executive producer of Columbia Picture Television's "Police Story," said, "We are basically bound, our

hands are tied, by the fact that we're a medicine show. We're here to deliver the audience to the next commercial. The entire night's programing is a lift-off to the highest corporate profits.” But for now, network programers — and especially researchers — are examining pilots and prospective returning shows not just for the numbers they will draw, but for the quality of the audience.

These rules were not abstractions; they were part of an enterprise every step of which is financially consequential. Indeed, nothing struck me in my journey into this medium so much as the enormous sums of money that were at play:

■ A single half-hour pilot would cost the network at least $275,000.

■ A one-hour pilot meant a commitment of about $600,000.

■ Taken together, the 34 pilots cost NBC about $15-million.

■ An unsuccessful one- hour series could cost the network $5-million just to wipe the show off the air, and the loss in reduced advertising costs could amount to another $5-million.

■ Conversely, a big hit could mean millions of dollars more to a network, virtually all of it pure profit. Once the network makes a deal with a producer, that show is the network's for as long as it wants it, subject only to standard, or negotiated, increases in the fee: but the network can increase its ad rates to whatever the traffic will bear—more than $60,000 for a single 30-second commercial in the case of a smash hit like “Sanford and Son.”

These stakes, and the enormous profitability of network television (advertisers spent $2-billion on network TV in 1974; the pretax profits of the networks have jumped more than 30 per cent since 1968, with new records forecast for the coming season), do not mean the financial freedom to break these rules once in a while; they mean the reverse.

“We're in a very competitive commercial business,” said program development v.p. Terry Keegan, and that means something special for television; unlike a publisher, who can add more pages to an ad-rich magazine, or a movie producer, who can finance a small venture from the profits of a blockbuster, network television is limited by the inexorable force of time. NBC cannot create more evening hours; its function is to make as much money as it can in the time available to it. And that means that every segment of prime time —save for the prestigious specials dropped into the weeks when Nielsen isn't measuring the audience—must be devoted to those shows that will reach the widest, most desirable audiences. It is the ultimately ironic rule: The business is so good that it literally cannot

COMEDY TONGHT?

More than any other form, it is comedy that propels a broadcast network into leadership; and more than any other form, it is comedy that has been NBC's recent weakness. The network had pioneered alternatives to weekly one–hour dramas, with rotating 90–minute “long forms” (created by Universal–TV, NBC's chief supplier) such as “Name of the Game,” “Bold Ones” and “Sunday Mystery Movie”; it had proved the potential of the anthology with “Police Story,” but it had been unable to match CBS's comedy blocks, and that, more than any other reason, explained NBC's prime–time sag. (Significantly, Friday, the only night won by NBC through the second season, was sparked by its two unquestionable comedy hits —“Sanford” and “Chico.”) It was comedy that made CBS dominant 10 years ago with rural–slanted shows like “Beverly Hillbillies” and “Green Acres”; it was sophisticated urban comedy—the shows of Norman Lear and Mary Tyler Moore Enterprises, along with “M*A*S*H” and “The Carol Burnett Show”—that kept CBS in first place. “NBC,” one producer said, “is desperately, desperfor comedies.”

For the fall schedule, NBC had commissioned a dozen comedy pilots, and the industry belief was that the network would add as many as four to its schedule. For Eddie Riessien, an executive at Playboy Productions, this was good news. Riessien, a former executive at ABC, was with Playboy's new independent production unit, headed by former CBS executive Sal Ianucci, in its fledgling stage; it was still trying to sell its first program to a network. This fall's candidate was “The Cop and the Kid,” a show about a brusque Irish policeman who gets custody of an incorrigible black kid. Larry White had given the O.K. on the script in April, 1974, and late in 1974 NBC O.K.'d the pilot at a fee of “up to” $285,000 (if it cost more, Playboy would pay the difference; if it cost less, NBC would get the difference back). Charles Durning, who was the mayor in the stage production of “That Championship Season” and the corrupt detective in “The

In another part of Los Angeles, Norman Steinberg was also hoping that NBC was going big for comedy. The 35–year–old ParamountTV executive and co–writer of “Blazing Saddles” was the executive producer of “Adventurizing With the Chopper,” another half–hour pilot.

“It was the product of Jeff Harris and Bernie Kukoff,” Steinberg said. “The idea was to do a black show that was fun, with no message and no soapbox. What developed was a crazy black private eye—a Shaft who was full of bull—a black Inspector Clouseau.” Terry Keegan and John J. McMahon, vice president for

program operations, liked the idea, says Steinberg, but “Larry White was down on the show. He said, ‘Chopper—it's a helicopter show, right?’ ” (“Chopper” is the name taken by the private eye to reflect his karate prowess—he's a blue belt, “which means he did well on the written part”). At the meeting, recalls Steinberg, “when I saw White's reaction, I jumped up and started selling—I felt like a vegetable slicer at Atlantic City.” He persuaded White to O.K. the script, and when the idea went to pilot, Steinberg felt of his chances.

“It's the funniest thing we have,” Schlosser said after seeing the pilot. Then a minute later, “Is it gonna be this crazy every week?” McMahon said, “I laughed louder at ‘Chopper’ than at any other comedy we had.” But Larry White was dubious: “Even in the craziest comedy, people want a semblance of reality, not a cartoon.”

“Chopper” dropped out of consideration early; besides White's objection that it was too much of a cartoon, critical research tests showed that audiences regarded the black lead, with his Shaft–like aspirations, as too threatening for comfort.

“The Cop and the Kid,” however, went into the “comedy finals.” “We showed the rough cut to the network people, who suggested some changes,” Riessien said, “like making the first–act curtain more forceful, but they were very high on it. Then we shipped the corrected print to the network, and here is where the rumor mill starts to go crazy. People tell you, ‘The projectionist who ran it for Larry White says he laughed three times and didn't take any phone calls.’ It's a big plus if the network guy doesn't take phone calls during pilot.

“But our biggest concern was how many half–hours NBC was buying. We tested well, at least in the theaters, but when they tested the show on cable systems, they found that the relationship between the Irish cop and this black street kid was bothering some of the audience. Anyway, like a lot of other producers, we went to New York during the scheduling meetings and listened to the rumor mill at ‘2I,’ which is the worst place in the world to be during the selling weeks. Guys come over to pull pieces of paper out of their pockets and say, ‘Oh, yeah, you're on for Wednesday at 8:30.’ Finally, we knew that we were one of three shows being considered for two spots.”

Riessien was right. A “Sanford and Son” spin–off, “Grady,” was put aside for another season, a Norman Lear pilot, “Hereafter,” about three old vaudevillians who sell their souls to the devil's son for a chance at careers as rock stars, was considered too much of a young people's show. (“If we still had 7:30 to program,”

Antonowsky said, "I'd be a lot more interested in it.") That left "The Cop and the Kid" competing with "The Montefuscos," a loud, brawling show about a loud, brawling Italian family, and "Fay," a Mary Tyler Moore–style comedy starring Lee Grant as a 43–year–old divorcée finding her own individual self after years of subservience. Created by Susan Harris, a comedy writer, and producer Paul Witt, the pilot, directed by Alan Arkin, was a smash, "the funniest half–hour we had," according to several NBC executives.

Says Terry Keegan, "When we first moved 'Chico' to Wednesday at 9, that killed 'The Cop and the Kid' because it was much more of an earlier show; 'Fay' was clearly the better show for 9:30. Then, when it became necessary to move 'Fay' into 8:30, 'The Cop' became semi–alive again, because there was sonic doubt 'Fay' could play at 8:30."

Antonowsky adds: "What eliminated 'The Cop and the Kid' was that it was an 8 o'clock show, and we felt 'The Montefuscos' had better characters, an abundance of them. It was a show more easily sampled."

"Fay's" cocreator, Susan Harris, says, "We were a sure thing Monday, a 70–30 chance Tuesday, a 60–40 chance Wednesday, and Thursday we were off the schedule. We took the pilot and trimmed it to show NBC it could work in the family hour." With such resilience, "Fay" beat out "The Cop and the Kid" for the last comedy berth on the schedule.

Riessien remembers hearing the news about "The Cop": "It was 11 A.M. and I was in Sal Ianucci's office. I was saying, 'For Christ's sake, they're announcing the schedule today and we haven't heard anything. Something's wrong.' Just then the phone rang—it was Larry White calling. Sal said, 'Hi, Larry . . oh . . we didn't make it' I felt like Tom Dewey But NBC had ordered five scripts, and I think we'll be the first comedy to go in in January if they need one."

THE RESEARCH ROLE

The research role is key to the network's decisions. In an enterprise in which a single misstep can doom a show, destroy an entire evening, cost millions of dollars in revenue over the course of a season, decision makers want to know as much as they can, not simply about what a show looks like, but whom it appeals to and why —so that, if the show fails, at least it fails by playing the percentages.

Bill Rubens, head of research, talks about what NBC looks for, what determines the network's notions about its own shows. "The key," he says, "is whether they like people. On 'Joe Forrester,' the interplay between the cop on the

beat and the people he relates to is important. ["People liked the idea of a very nice man in their neighborhood who would make them feel safe" one observer reported.] If you have a very strong story, and the audience doesn't like the characters, you have a lot of trouble. If you have likable characters, that can carry a show with weak scripts." ("The Rockford Files" is my own nomination for the NBC show which best falls into the latter

Research tests everything: whether New York is an attractive setting for a show, whether Cher appeals to older adults (she doesn't), whether concepts for shows are promising.

Most important are the results of program tests, gathered in a six–inch–thick looseleaf folder, consisting of three– or four–page summaries of every pilot, plus a much longer demographic breakdown. The program tests are run in a theater, the Preview House in Los Angeles, where the audience sits in chairs equipped with dials, and turns them higher or lower depending on how interesting the program seems. (The formal name for this Preview House is Audience Study Institute, but some producers call it "Magoo House" because of its use of a 20–year–old "Mr. Magoo" cartoon to establish a benchmark audience response.)

Increasingly, says Rubens, NBC is moving away from theater tests, relying instead on cable systems in cities such as Akron, Ohio; San Francisco, Calif.; Wilmington, Del; Grand Junction, Colo., and other communities. TVGuide–style fliers are mailed out, advising the audience of a prospective new show on the cable channel, and tests are run after the showing.

Looking at this fall's schedule, research found that on the new segment of the "Sunday Mystery Movie," with Tony Curtis playing "McCoy," a lovable con man, viewers were confused by the transition from straight drama to comedy and that when viewers were told it was a comedy, they were much more enthusiastic than when they had to figure the humor out for themselves.

Research is also a leveler —it can take the presumed power of name stars and reduce them to nothing. This year, for example, NBC rejected pilots starring Lorne Greene, Raymond Burr, Red Buttons, Shirley Jones and Patty Duke. Without research. program planners might be attracted by the names, but the tests wipe out those kinds of hunches. Of course, they can also wipe out instinct. particularly in comedy, where it takes time to develop new and unusual characters with comic possibilities (" 'All in the Family' never tested well," said Norman Lear, "and 'Maude' still doesn't test well. She's a very contentious woman.")

THE DRAMAS

The first choices on a schedule are always relatively easy, according to the executives who sat inside the conference rooms for three weeks. “There are always 10 pilots you know will never make it from the minute you see them,” said Don Carswell. “And there are two or three everyone knows will make it.”

For this fall, “Medical Story,” the new anthology developed by Columbia–TV (which developed “Police Story”), was by unanimous consent the best dramatic pilot, with Beau Bridges as an idealistic interne up against mendacity within the medical profession. Says J. J. McMahon, “‘Medical Story’ will make the other doctor shows look as trite as ‘Police Story’ did all the other cop shows.” Despite the realization that an anthology show does not have the viewer–habit–power of a regular series, it went on the schedule virtually without debate.

The same was true of “Ellery Queen,” a mystery starring Jim Hutton as the writer and David Wayne as his detective–father. The show, set in the nineteen–forties because, according to Antonowsky, “if you had a grown man living with his father today, everyone would think he was queer,” was actually suggested to Universal–TV by Antonowsky.

“We'd done an unsuccessful ‘Ellery Queen’ four years ago,” said Universal–TV president Frank Price, “and for two or three years, we'd been working on a whodunit anthology. It was Antonowsky who said to us, ‘The right way to do a whodunit is with regular characters. Why not Ellery Queen?’” Partly perhaps because a key programing executive had suggested the idea in the first place, the show was a shoo–in.

And so was “Joe Forrester,” starring Lloyd Bridges as a cop on the beat—a character first developed on “Police Story.” For programing purposes. “Joe Forrester” was perfect. “Police Story” would move up to 9 P.M., and “Forrester” would follow—a classic case of audience flow. There was, says Larry White, “no debate at all about putting that show on the air.”

“Invisible Man,” starring David McCallum in an updated version of the H. G. Wells story, is curious. It seems to have been designed as a kid–oriented show for the family hour, and the special effects are impressive. But, in all the discussions I had with NBC executives, not a single one mentioned the show—whether out of personal indifference or a sense of futility over its chances against “Rhoda” and “Phyllis.” another Mary Tyler Moore spinoff, with Cloris Leachman, I cannot say. But one Madison Avenue time–buyer thinks “Invisible Man” has a fair chance of

cutting into the anticipated CBS lead.

"I like 'Rhoda,'" the timebuyer said. "But what happens to her in another year? She can't get married again. I think 'Invisible Man' may work." If she is right, it is one of the few expressions of enthusiasm from an outside source greater than that emanating from within the network.

The final dramatic choices came down to:

■ "Petrocelli," the marginal lawyer show.

■ "Doctors' Hospital," starring George Peppard as an older Ben Casey, a possibility buttressed by the presence of a former executive producer and head writer of "Ben Casey" as the key creative talent behind this show. ■ "McNaughton's Daughter," with Susan Clark as an assistant D.A., taking on rich, powerful, guilty defendants with rich, powerful lawyers ("A kind of Watergate quality," says Universal–TV president Price).

■ "Gibbsville," starring John Savage, based on John O'Hara's stories.

In the end, the decision was for "Doctors' Hospital" ("Petrocelli" was renewed because NBC could not find a suitable variety show, marking the first time in the network's history that a variety show was not represented for a single hour on the schedule). It caused a serious breach in the programing ranks.

"I felt we should probably go slow on 'McNaughton's Daughter,' " said Antonowsky. "We ordered three shows on it, and I'll bet it winds up a weekly series. But she's a prosecutor, and a woman. It's a complete reversal of every lawyer show." And, he added at a later interview, "Doctor shows generally work better than lawyer shows."

J. J. McMahon was almost emotional about "McNaughton's Daughter." "That show should be on the air." he said flatly. What about Antonowsky's fear that it might be too soon to present a woman as prosecutor? "Bull." McMahon said. "She made no excuses for being a woman. It was nothing special. You just knew she was right for the job. Every week she's pitted against this larger–thanlife villain and this giant defense lawyer, and this piperack assistant D.A. whips them."

McMahon was unimpressed with "Doctors' Hospital," calling it "trite, cliché full of speech–making." (McMahon's judgment was supported by most of the critics who saw the pilot as a TV movie.) Both "Gibbsville" and "McNaughton's Daughter" are still alive at NBC; if any of the dramatic shows falter, "McNaughton" is likely to be the first replacement.

The uncertainty does not please Frank Price of Universal–TV, which produced

"McNaughton's Daughter." He believes Universal's striking success with NBC — it supplied five of the eight new shows, and will be providing eight and a half of the network's 22 prime–time hours a week — hurt "McNaughton." "I'll bet," he says, "the reason 'McNaughton' didn't make the air was that they felt they'd bought all they could from us. NBC's asked us to do two or three 'McNaughton' shows and when I objected—because they'd done the same thing with 'The Law' and I felt that had crippled the show before it ever had a chance—they said, 'After all we're buying from you, how could you do this to us?'"

THE SWITCH

"It's like a chessboard," network president Bob Howard said in describing the art of prime–time scheduling.—except that NBC was playing without knowing what its opposition would be doing. As it turned out, it was CBS that played the aggressive game, forcing NBC into an embarrassing defensive posture. When NBC announced its schedule on April 22, "we assumed things that didn't happen," according to Antonowsky. "We thought 'The Waltons' would be moving to Sunday at 8, and that 'Cher' would move to Thursday at 8." When both these CBS shows held to their original days, NBC found itself with a potential disaster programing a "Waltons" imitation. "The Family Holvalc," directly opposite the original, and putting opposite "Cher" a mystery, "Ellery Queen," which would attract the same younger, urban audience. Instead of "Ellery's" carrying its demographically desirable audience into the "Sunday Mystery Movie," it risked failure in the competition with Family Holyak" Into the Sunday 8 P.M. slot, hoping to draw strength from its 7 P.M. show, "The Wonderful World of Disney." It put "Ellery Queen" into Thursdays at 9, opposite ABC's "The Streets of San Francisco" and the CBS movies.

But if NBC was surprised by what CBS didn't do, it was shocked at what CBS did do. Taking an aggressive posture, CBS completely wiped out its Friday night schedule and moved almost all of its Tuesday night winners against NBC's strongest night, leaving only "Good Times" as a lead in to an all–new night. "M*A*S*H" went to Friday at 8:30—the comedy slot which NBC's "Chico" was going to vacate for its new entry. "The Montefuscos" — to be followed by "Hawaii Five–O" and "Barnaby Jones." NBC thus faced the prospect of losing its Friday night audience to an established comedy hit, and also losing its 9–11 P.M. leadership. So it shifted "Chico and the Man" back to Friday at 8:30, hoping that "Sanford" would demolish the new CBS comedy, "Big Eddie," and feed its audience

into “Chico,” thus crippling “M*A*S*H” and the Tuesdayto–Friday programs. (The “Chico”–“M*A*S*H” contest, the most interesting of the new season, seems to be leaning to NBC because of outside factors: In addition to McLean Stevenson's departure as Colonel Blake, Wayne Rogers (Trapper John) quit the series in May, announcing he was disappointed in the size of his role. The loss of familiar characters may be as damaging to “M*A*S*H” as thecompetition.)

“Chico's” remaining in the Friday at 8:30 spot led NBC to shift “The Montefuscos” into the Thursday at 8 P.M. spot vacated by “Holvak.” And NBC did not want to sacrifice “Doctors' Hospital” against CBS's Monday night. “All in the Family” had been moved to Monday at 9 to avoid the family hour; by this move, CBS formed a strong new comedy bloc with “Rhoda,” “Phyllis” and “Maude.” So “Doctors' Hospital” moved to Wednesday at 9, while “Fay” went from Wednesday at 9:30 to Thursday at 8:30. But this, in turn, meant that the sexually liberated Fay would have to dwell in the midst of the family hour—and that meant, as Antonowsky said, “There's no question that the show will be slightly different at 8:30 than at 9:30.”

“There are still plenty of comic possibilities,” J.J. McMahon said of the move. “A 43–year–old woman on her own has to learn to cope with a lot of things, like paying the bills and taking care of repairs. But I will go to my grave convinced we made a major mistake in the scheduling of ‘Fay.’ I'm a voice in the wilderness, but I think we could have moved ‘Chico’ and gotten away with it.”

Then why wasn't it done? “Fear and insecurity.”

CBS's move of “All in the Family” and “Maude” to Monday at new times, coupled with ABC's Monday Night Football, meant that NBC could do nothing but move its one–hour dramas out of that slot and sacrifice it with a movie night. That left “The Invisible Man” to compete with “Rhoda” and “Phyllis” on CBS, and “Barbary Coast,” a contemporary Western, on ABC. It was NBC's hope that “Invisible Man” would attract the teen–agers and male action–oriented viewers turned off by the “women's comedies.”

THE SWITCH—

The tenure of network programing executives is not always secure, but this year is unique. As the 1975 fall sea son begins, not a single network's schedule is being overseen by the programing executive who shaped it.

At ABC, Martin Starger resigned as president of ABC Entertainment (the equivalent to programing vice president at the other networks) in the wake of a

disastrous primetime season. Starger, who went into independent production, left with an ABC contract guaranteeing his shows a place on the schedule for the next two years.

Fred Silverman, 37–year–old programing vice president at CBS, the "boy wonder" who had taken the job at 32 and helped develop the new string of Norman Lear and Mary Tyler Moore comedies, quit to replace Starger at ABC. Industry sources said Silverman had won a contract for three years at $250.000 a year, stock worth up to $1–million, a $750,000 life–insurance policy, and cars, drivers and apartments in New York and Los Angeles. His reputation is measured by the fact that, within a week of the announcement of his move, ABC's stock increased by a total of $85–million. At CBS, Silverman was succeeded by 50–year–old Lee Currlin, a sales vice president.

And at NBC, Marvin Antonowsky was given the programing vice presidency shortly after Mike Weinblatt was promoted to executive vice president of the network, with over–all programing responsibility. Larry White had been offered a vice presidency but chose to leave NBC, with two years left in his contract, for a producing role with Columbia Pictures Television. Terry Keegan, a junior programing vice president, also left NBC. for a more lucrative job at Paramount–TV. Three weeks before White quit, he had told me in his Los Angeles office, "I do this job because I like it. I've been a programer, a producer. I've even survived as a freelance." After his resignation, he reaffirmed his view that the feud between him and Antonowsky had no effect on the schedule. "There really was a consensus," he said. ■

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