

SOCIETY

They needed neither roads nor (at most rivers) bridges.

Islam accommodated the Fertile Crescent's "caravan world." In settled areas where grazing on land owned by others was considered theft, it was made an act of religious merit for people to subsidize "caravanserais" where camel drivers could tarry up to three days and get free shelter, food, and fodder. Asia Minor alone had 1,100 such "truck stops." One merchant's notes for a 79-day trip in 1581-82 showed his transport costs to be no more than three percent of the sale price of his goods; his expenses for customs and "protection" were higher.

Still vital even after 1300, when cargo transport by watercraft began to improve, caravans brought trade and Islam to remote areas—Arabia's "empty quarter," sub-Saharan Africa. Even so, the camel's limited capacity helped doom the Muslim heartland to slower economic growth than Europe or China enjoyed. Later, when the increased volume of trade between Europe and Asia required the movement of goods in bulk, the beast became obsolete as a mode of transport.

Since World War II, notes McNeill, aircraft and motor vehicles have "displace[d] camels even from their original homeland in Arabia."

Clouding Students' Minds

"Television and the Schools—But Not What You Think" by Jacques Barzun, in *Basic Education Issues, Answers, and Facts* (Fall 1987), 725 15th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

The conventional wisdom among teachers is that television, with its fast-paced, image-packed shows, erodes children's attention spans—their ability to concentrate or to follow arguments in the classroom. But Barzun, emeritus professor at Columbia, argues that the reverse is true: In effect, TV merely echoes the fragmented curriculum in U.S. schools. There, "nearly everything done" over the past 50 years "has tended toward the discontinuous, the incoherent, the jiggly."

Educators, Barzun says, forget that many current classroom subjects cannot be *taught*. Teachable disciplines (such as history or mathematics) have at their core a "scheme of facts and rules" for students to master. But teachers of social studies take "real" subjects like economics or anthropology and pick from each a few bits and pieces without continuity or direction, thus distracting students from concentrated learning.

Moreover, too many educators favor "problem-solving" over analysis; they burden the schedule with such "non-subjects" as driver education and "family living." These are courses that focus on the students themselves, not the world around them, again retarding learning.

Barzun endorses the post-1960s "Back to Basics" movement, which calls for the return of the three R's and other traditional curricula. At present, he laments, "the school world is taking up another fad," courses in critical thinking. Supposed to enhance analytical abilities, this is yet another nonteachable topic. "Thinking" *per se* cannot be learned; students grasp it only as a consequence of studying difficult ideas. "Thinking is like piano-playing," Barzun contends. "It is shown, not taught."

SOCIETY

He calls on educators to heed philosopher William James (1842–1910). In *Talks To Teachers* (1899), James wrote that schoolwork must be “hard and unnatural” if students are to learn. He argued that the goal of a teacher was to find how to prod his pupils to “let loose the effort” to study. If teachers choose to *teach*, instead of entertain, they may be surprised by their students’ “miraculous” ability to listen—and to learn.

PRESS & TELEVISION

Sunday Sermonette

“Securing the Middle Ground: Reporter Formulas in *60 Minutes*” by Richard Campbell, in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* (Dec. 1987), Speech Communication Association, 5105 Backlick Rd., Annandale, Va. 22003.

Now 20 years old, *60 Minutes* is the longest-running and most popular prime-time news program in U.S. television history. Why? Creator Don Hewitt’s prophecy that a documentary series that packaged reality “as well as Hollywood packages fiction” could not fail has been richly fulfilled.

Campbell, assistant professor of communications at the University of Michigan, analyzed 154 segments of the CBS series aired between 1968 and 1983. He concludes that Hewitt’s winning formula employs old-fashioned storytelling to dramatize a “mythology for middle America” that celebrates traditional virtues: fairness, simplicity, honesty, individualism.

The *60 Minutes* reporters play one of three archetypal roles:

- *Detective*. In investigative pieces, the reporter introduces a “crime” (political corruption, murder), then reconstructs the story, confronts witnesses, and unravels the mystery. Villains tend to be anonymous institutions (the government, big companies, unions); their facelessness may be underlined by their executives’ refusal to be interviewed. When villains are questioned, they are shown at close range. Their heads fill the screen and “sweat, facial twitches, and tears” stand out. Medium-range shots and trenchcoats mark the reporters as “individual loners” who always triumph.

- *Analyst*. In profiles (of politicians, actors, intellectuals), reporters again act as viewers’ surrogates, often posing “tough” questions. Example: Mike Wallace asks the Shah of Iran to comment on the CIA’s assessment of him as a “brilliant but dangerous megalomaniac.”

- *Tourist*. In segments that portray interesting places (Kuwait, rural America) and seek out “authentic” life and tradition-minded folk, reporters chastise villains (bureaucracy, modernity) by evoking myths from a lost, heroic age. (“This is one of those *Our Town* kind of stories,” intones Morley Safer, beginning a piece about a New Jersey village.)

Campbell finds that *60 Minutes*’ producers approach their audience (“Kiwanians, Rotarians, I understand them,” says Hewitt) with more sophistication than they display with their subjects. These get two-dimensional treatment at best. The series survives because it offers its Sunday evening audience “a center to go back to (or start out from) each week.”