

"real thinking," he says. "So news is made up of statements rather than arguments." In place of genuine debate, the news offers just a clash of opinions. "As a result, we forget how to carry on a debate, and fall back on polls." A "flippant relativism," in which truth is lost to view, is encouraged by the "evenhandedness" of the news, he contends. "The idea that all 'viewpoints' are somehow equal is the reason that we

do so badly in arguing our great social issues." Yet at the same time, the news media—in the absence of any agreed upon *scale* of values—may arbitrarily make some particular value or cause, such as helping the homeless, supremely important. But only for the moment. Tomorrow's news is almost sure to bring some newer and more urgent concern.

The "news," at bottom, is anything that sells newspapers. In the past, however, Sommerville says, editors "took a more high-handed approach and gave the public what they thought grown-up, serious-minded people would want to know about." Today's newspeople have wised up. They know "that deep down, we don't care if our daily news is entirely authentic so long as it is entertaining—like pro wrestling." The *National Enquirer*, he believes, shows where even the most respectable newspapers are headed.

Are Americans who have ceased distracting themselves with the "news" devoting their attention instead to more substantive subjects, such as philosophy, history, or religion? Sommerville is doubtful. "[T]he damage our spirits have sustained through news addiction makes it unlikely. But the first step back to health is still to Just Say No."

Booboisie Media

Novelist and wit Gore Vidal, writing in the *Nation* (Aug. 26–Sept. 2, 1991), not only finds much to admire in journalist H. L. Mencken (1880–1956), but thinks he had a keen understanding of the mass audience.

Mencken's ideal popular paper for that vast public that "gets all its news by listening" (today one would change "listening" to "staring"—at television) would be "printed throughout, as First Readers are printed, in words of one syllable. It should avoid every idea that is beyond the understanding of a boy of 10" on the ground that "all ideas are beyond them. They can grasp only events." But they will heed only those events that are presented as drama in "the form of combat, and it must be a very simple combat, with one side clearly right and the other clearly wrong. They can no more imagine neutrality than they can imagine the fourth dimension." Thus Mencken anticipates not only the television news program but the television political campaign, with its combative 30-second commercials and soundbites. Movies were already showing the way, and Mencken acknowledged the wisdom of the early movie magnates, whose simple-minded screened agons had made them rich

Today, Mencken's boisterous style and deadpan hyperboles are very difficult even for "educated" Americans to deal with, and are Sanskrit to the generality. Although every American has a sense of humor—it is his birthright and encoded somewhere in the Constitution—few Americans have ever been able to cope with wit or irony, and even the simplest jokes often cause unease, especially today when every phrase must be examined for covert sexism, racism, ageism.

The TV Teacher

"As the Third World Turns" by Erik Hagerman, in *World Watch* (Sept.–Oct. 1991), 1776 Mass. Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

A famous Shakespeare scholar, upon being told that he was expected to teach a graduate seminar every Wednesday evening, stared at his young department chairman

in disbelief and said, "Sir, surely there's been some mistake? Wednesday night is *Dynasty* night."

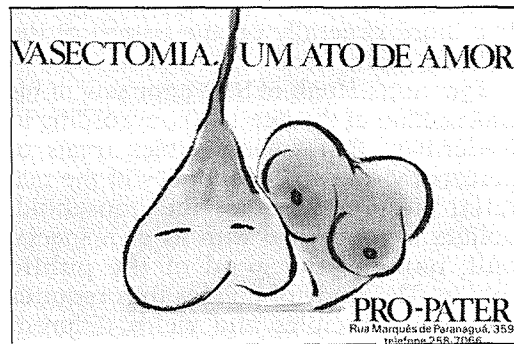
The story may be apocryphal, but no

matter: The point is that soap operas are notoriously addictive. In the Third World, a growing number of family-planning advocates are counting on just that.

In the last decade, the number of television receivers in Third World homes has doubled (to 350 million, or one for every 12 people), turning television into a major force. The idea of using TV drama to promote family planning was born in 1977, when Miguel Sabido, a producer at a commercial Mexican network, created a soap opera that dramatized the need for birth control. "Accompáñame" ("Come Along With Me"), according to the network's follow-up survey, "was one of the chief reasons for a 32-percent increase in visits to Mexican family-planning clinics in 1978," writes Hagerman, a researcher at a Washington-based environmental think tank, the Worldwatch Institute.

Sabido's idea found its way to Nigeria, where the birth control message was integrated into a popular TV show. Visits to family-planning clinics rose by 47 percent, and almost two-thirds of the new clients credited the program as the catalyst for their visits.

Other countries have since begun to use television to promote family planning and other social causes, including several Latin



Vasectomies increased in Brazil after a pro-vasectomy TV spot featuring animated "male" and "female" hearts was aired in 1989.

American countries, Kenya, Turkey, and India. In the Philippines, to encourage sexual responsibility among young people, a U.S.-Philippine coalition of population-control groups organized a campaign around music videos.

Many of these early efforts have been made by government-sponsored or government-owned networks, and Hagerman worries that advertisers will corrupt any future attempt to broaden them. That governments may be tempted to use TV for less politically correct propaganda appears not to bother him at all.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

When Politics Became a Science

"Aristotelianism and the Origins of 'Political Science' in the Twelfth Century" by Cary J. Nederman, in *Journal of the History of Ideas* (Apr.-June 1991), Univ. of Rochester, Rochester, N.Y. 14627.

Scholars regard the rediscovery of Aristotle's *Politics* in the mid-13th century as the spark that ignited an intellectual revolution. Medieval political thought gave way to modern forms, eventually including Machiavellian amorality, as the realm of politics was defined for the first time as a branch of knowledge separate from theology, law, and other fields. In a curious way, says Nederman, of the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, Aristotle's influence was even greater than scholars have

commonly supposed.

Although thinkers in the 12th century did not enjoy direct access to Aristotle's text, Nederman says, they did read works such as Boethius's *Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge* and Cassiodorus's *Institutes* that propounded the Aristotelian scheme of classification of the sciences and the place of political inquiry within it. Many 12th-century thinkers, he says, not only recognized "that politics was a separate and distinct subject matter for inquiry but