

EDWARD JAY WHETMORE

AMERICAN ELECTRIC

INTRODUCTION TO
TELECOMMUNICATIONS
AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA



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*INTRODUCTION TO TELECOMMUNICATIONS
AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA*

Edward Jay Whetmore

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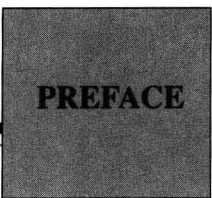
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PREFACE

My uncle, Bill Armstrong, is a retired longshoreman who lives in Oregon and always has a great story. One of my favorites involves a less-than-worldly co-worker who always seemed impatient to finish loading or unloading each ship. When my uncle reminded him that “Rome wasn’t built in a day,” the droll worker replied with the utmost sincerity: “I wouldn’t know, I wasn’t on that job!”

Writing a book by yourself is a little like trying to build Rome in a day. This book is the product of ten years’ worth of gathering and organizing materials. In fact the initial concept first appeared in outline form in 1980 and survived many changes while passing through numerous hands before finally arriving as a complete manuscript at McGraw Hill.

It seems that every author in every preface complains about the difficulty of covering such a broad subject area in one book. Perhaps this is because it is so true. As a result we’ve had to be very selective about which particular aspects of the field are emphasized.

American Electric focuses extensively on programming, an area that is often given short shrift in other texts. In the last analysis, it is the hit tunes and successful TV shows that are best remembered and provide the most useful examples of the impact of the American Electric on producers and consumers alike.

We’ve worked hard to make sure *American Electric* will be one of the most “user friendly” texts you’ve ever read. Special Sneak Preview sections at the beginning of each chapter highlight the most important aspects of the material and also serve as a handy exam study guide. The Problems and Probes questions at the end of each chapter are designed to help you consider how and why mass media work the way they do. In addition they challenge you to go beyond rote learning and devise your own alternatives.

The References and Resources sections are conveniently organized to direct you to additional material on many of the relevant issues raised in the text. Key terms are listed at the end of each chapter while the glossary defines them in highly readable prose. Boxed material adds a

special depth, often focusing on the innovative contributions of historic figures and documents.

All of these special sections are the brainchild of Alan Kielwasser, who deserves special recognition for his excellent work. Several years ago I resigned my full-time teaching position at the University of San Francisco and moved to southern California after selling my first feature film script. Subsequent script commitments left little time for this project and it was Alan who came aboard, writing and/or rewriting Chapters 7, 8, and 12 and substantial portions of Chapters 11, and 13 as well. Special thanks also to Brete Harrison at Cole Publishing and Hilary Jackson at McGraw Hill.

You may find *American Electric* quite different from other texts. It is a very personal book, because I believe that the nature of radio and television is actually quite intimate. The critics who feel electronic media are turning us all into electric clones ignore the fact that we each experience every song and each TV character in a different and highly subjective way. The information we all share via the American Electric *can be* exhilarating and enlightening for those who have developed the proper context. If I were forced to single out a central goal for this text, it would be to provide you with a start toward becoming a more articulate consumer of electronic information.

All of us sincerely hope you enjoy your tour of the American Electric. If you'd like to provide some feedback, we'd enjoy hearing from you. By the time you read this, we will be thinking about a second edition, and your comments will be invaluable in our efforts to make *American Electric* an even better experience for students in the years to come.

Edward Jay Whetmore

DEDICATION

For my wife, Rachelle, one of Fox Broadcasting's most able executives. Her enthusiasm for the media continues to be a source of inspiration and joy for me each day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edward Jay Whetmore (Ph.D., University of Oregon) writes and lives in southern California where his feature film scripts have been sold to Warner Brothers and LTL Entertainment. Edd and his wife, Rachelle, currently own and operate Green Light Entertainment, an independent film production company. He occasionally teaches screenwriting at California State University, Fullerton, and works as a script consultant.

Whetmore is the author of *Mediamerica* and *The Magic Medium: An Introduction to Radio in America* as well as numerous articles that have appeared in publications as diverse as *Emmy* magazine, the *Journal of American Culture*, and *Soap Opera Digest*.

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CONTENTS

Preface.....	iii
--------------	-----

Chapter 1 – *Inside the American Electric* 1

Sneak Preview	1
You Say You Want a Revolution?	1
The Space-Time Continuum	2
Media vs. Real Life	3
The Medium as Medium	4
Form, Content, and Consequence	5
Escaping or Coping?	6
Past, Present, and Future	7
Key Terms	9
Problems and Probes	10
References and Resources	10

Part I Yesterday and Today: History and Programming 13

Chapter 2 – *Radio: The Magic Medium* 15

Sneak Preview	15
The Black Box	17
The Audion Tube	20
Let's Get Physical	21
Radio Waves	23
AM and FM Channels	25
The "Unsinkable" Titanic	26
The Radio Music Box	29
"This is KDKA, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania"	30
And Now, a Word from Our Sponsors	31
The Networks Form	32
The Networks "Reform"	33
Programming in the Golden Age	36
Amos 'n Andy	36
Say it with Soap	38
Here's the News	40
The Night that Panicked America	43
Searching for Alternatives	45
Radio after TV: The Big Change	47
Rock and Roll and Radio	48
The Old Payola Roll Blues	50
"In the Air Everywhere"—Radio on the Move	51
Goin' Underground	53

Radio for Everyone	54
The New Networks	55
Key Terms	56
Problems and Probes	56
References and Resources	57

Chapter 3 – *Life in the Fast Lane:*

Radio Today 59

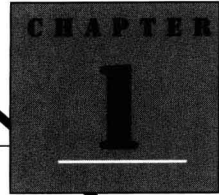
Sneak Preview	59
Radio Today	60
The Cone Effect:	
Understanding Mediated Reality	61
Background Versus Foreground	
Radio Programming	64
Contemporary Hit Radio:	
The Jukebox Lives On	67
Album Oriented Rock: "Hipper Than Thou"	69
Adult Contemporary: Life in the Middle Lane	71
Beautiful Music: Life in the Slow Lane	72
Country and Western:	
The All-American Sound	74
The African-American Audience:	
Soul, Rap, and Rhythm and Blues	75
Jazz and New Age Formats	77
Going for Baroque: Classical Radio	78
All-News, All the Time	79
Here Comes the Son: Religious Programming ..	80
Welcome to the Fast Lane	81
Radio and the New Technologies	82
Key Terms	85
Problems and Probes	86

References and Resources	87	Key Terms	155
		Problems and Probes.....	155
		References and Resources	156
Chapter 4 –		Chapter 6 – <i>Beyond Prime Time:</i>	
<i>Television, The Amazing Picture Machine</i>	91	<i>Special Audience Programming</i>	159
Sneak Preview	91	Sneak Preview	159
Come Up to the Lab.....	93	Beyond Prime Time.....	161
The Boy Genius.....	95	Soap Operas: The Continuing Saga	161
Moving Right Along	97	Game Shows:	
Live! From Our Studios In New York.....	100	“May I Have Your Answer Please?”	166
Those Golden Years	102	Movie as TV: TV as Movie	169
The Image of your Choice.....	102	The Miniseries.....	171
McCarthy and the Media.....	104	“Some Good News and Some Bad News”	172
The \$64,000 Answer	106	Local News Trends.....	175
The Great Debates.....	109	Person-to-Person: The Talk Shows.....	180
A Vast Wasteland.....	111	The Early Morning Audience.....	183
The National Mourning	112	The Thrill of Victory: Sports Programming	184
The Living Room War	113	“Come Saturday Morning”:	
One Small Step for Man	115	Children’s Programming	186
Some Giant Steps for Nixon.....	115	Bringing it All Back Home.....	191
The Un-making of the President.....	116	Key Terms.....	191
The Bold Ones: Controversy in Prime Time.....	117	Problems and Probes.....	191
Live and in Color.....	119	References and Resources	192
The Iran-Contra Affair and			
the Great Communicator.....	119		
Outfoxing the Networks?.....	120	Chapter 7 – <i>The Alternatives:</i>	
Television and the National Destiny	121	<i>From Noncommercial to</i>	
Key Terms	121	<i>Nonbroadcast Telecommunications</i>	197
Problems and Probes.....	121	Sneak Preview	197
References and Resources	122	Noncommercial and Educational Radio.....	199
		Public Radio Networks.....	202
Chapter 5 – <i>The Continuing Stories:</i>		One of These Things is Not Like the Others:	
<i>The Six Genres of Prime Time</i>	125	Educational Television.....	204
Sneak Preview	125	Big Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?.....	205
The Continuing Stories	127	Carnegie II: The Sequel	208
Variety: TV’s Spice of Life.....	127	From Big Bird to the Big Bang:	
From Comedy to Dramedy:		Contemporary PBS Programming	209
Exploiting the “Situation”	130	Neo-Media: Nonbroadcast,	
Situation Dramedy	132	Nonmass Telecommunications	216
Count the Clues: Police-Detective Stories	135	Videoconferencing	216
Tall in the Saddle: The TV Western	139	Industrial Strength TV:	
Lights, Camera, Action/Adventure.....	143	Nonbroadcast Corporate Video	217
Early Drama: TV’s Golden Years	147	Key Terms.....	221
Contemporary Dramatic Series:		Problems and Probes.....	221
Tune in Again Next Week	148	References and Resources	222
Prime Time: A Look Ahead	154		

Chapter 8 – Global Alternatives:		Red Lion: The Mouse that Roared.....	298
<i>International Telecommunications</i>	225	Up in Smoke:	
Sneak Preview	225	Cigarettes and the Fairness Doctrine	301
The Tribe is Gathering:		The Strange Case of WHDH.....	304
Global Telecommunications Systems	226	The Great Drug Lyric Bust	306
Four Theories	228	The Seven Dirty Words	309
Ownership, Control, and Financing of		Summary Judgment.....	314
World Broadcasting Systems	229	Key Terms.....	314
What Goes Around:		Problems and Probes.....	314
Exporting and Importing Programs	231	References and Resources	315
Mixed Media: Touring the Global Village.....	235		
Hard Times in the Global Village.....	241	Chapter 11 – The Electric Fireplace:	
Who Are They?		<i>Understanding Mediated Reality</i>	317
Ethnocentrism and Stereotyping	245	Sneak Preview	317
What are the Alternatives? A Final Note	246	The Electric Fireplace	319
Key Terms.....	248	The Least Objectionable Programming	
Problems and Probes.....	248	(LOP) Theory	324
References and Resources	249	Prime Time: Direction or Reflection?.....	326
		The Cone Effect:	
Part II Regulation and Social Impact	253	Understanding TV's Mediated Reality	328
		The Telecommunications Triad:	
Chapter 9 – Good Guys and Bad Guys:		Studying Mediated Reality.....	330
<i>The Regulation of Radio and Television</i>	255	What's Happening:	
Sneak Preview	255	Types of Mass Communication Effects.....	330
To Regulate or Not to Regulate	257	Asking Research Questions	
Laissez Faire	259	about Electronic Media	334
The Radio Act of 1927	261	Background vs. Foreground TV Programming.....	336
The Communications Act of 1934	261	31 Flavors: Instant Gratification.....	338
Laying Down the Law.....	267	Key Terms.....	345
Editorializing: The Voyage of the Mayflower	267	Problems and Probes.....	345
Fair is Fairness	269	References and Resources	346
Section 315	270		
Say this Picket Fence is Your Teeth.....	274	Chapter 12 – Ethics Electric: Morality and	
Advertising and Community Service	275	<i>Responsibility in Telecommunications</i>	351
The Media Barons?.....	276	Sneak Preview	351
New Legislation: The Way Out?.....	282	Knowing What's Good	353
Deregulation in the 1970s and 1980s.....	284	Who's Responsible for This?	354
Key Terms.....	287	Asking Ethical Questions	356
Problems and Probes.....	287	And Now the . . . News?	358
References and Resources	288	Self-Regulation I: The Censors	364
		Self-Regulation II: Codes of Ethics.....	367
Chapter 10 – Six Crises:		The Sound and the Fury:	
<i>Conflict in American Broadcasting</i>	293	Kids, Radio, and Pop Music	371
Sneak Preview	293	Emerging Concerns in Media Ethics.....	372
Immovable Object Meets Irresistible Force	294	The Show and Tell Machines:	
Dr. Brinkley, I Presume	295	1984 and Beyond.....	376

The Same, Except Different:		Room at the Top: The General Manager.....	436
Media Effects and Media Ethics.....	379	Non-Broadcasting Broadcasting Positions.....	436
Key Terms.....	380	"Call Us": The Future of Employment	
Problems and Probes.....	381	in the American Electric	438
References and Resources	382	Key Terms.....	440
		Problems and Probes.....	441
		References and Resources	441
Part III The Business of			
the American Electric	387		
Chapter 13 – "We're in the Money":		Part IV Today and Tomorrow:	
The Business of Electronic Media	389	New Technologies and Beyond	443
Sneak Preview	389		
The Business of Electronic Media.....	391	Chapter 15 – The American Electric	
The Networks:		School of New Technologies	445
Plugging into the Money Machine	394	Sneak Preview	445
The Local Station.....	397	New Tech and the New You	448
The Folks Out There: Audience Research.....	399	You Say You Want a Revolution?	451
Buying Time:		The Basics:	
An Offer Advertisers Can't Refuse.....	405	Building Blocks for the Revolution	452
The Commercial: Another Mediated Reality.....	412	Cable TV	456
Broadcast Economics I: The Consumer Society		Fiber Optics.....	462
and the Bottom Line	417	Satellite Communication.....	462
Key Terms.....	417	DBS: Direct Broadcast Satellites	465
Problems and Probes.....	418	Commercial Applications.....	466
References and Resources	419	Personal Computers	468
		Two-Way TV.....	472
Chapter 14 – "Don't Call Us":		Home Shopping.....	472
Employment in the American Electric	421	Electronic Mail/Videotex/Teletext.....	474
Sneak Preview	421	Home Video and Audio Systems:	
"Don't Call Us . . ."	423	The Consumer Takes Control	475
The Tip of the Iceberg.....	424	Laser Discs.....	476
Meet the DJ.....	424	Contemporary Telephone Technologies.....	480
Television: The Big Picture	427	Beyond the Economic Context	481
"Such a Deal": Broadcast Sales	429	Key Terms.....	481
Engineering: Security in a Stormy Sea.....	431	Problems and Probes.....	482
Support Staff: The Unseen Army.....	432	References and Resources	483
Minorities in the Broadcast Media:		Glossary	487
An Overview.....	432	Index	514

INSIDE THE AMERICAN ELECTRIC



Ours is a brand new world of “allatonceness.” Time has ceased . . . space has vanished.

—MARSHALL MCLUHAN

SNEAK PREVIEW

This chapter is your invitation to “come inside the American electric” and poke around. The American electric are electronic *telecommunications* media that are transforming your life even as you read this “sneak preview.” These technologies permeate our society, impacting politics, economics, religion, behavior, law, art, and more. In Chapter One, you will be introduced to the structure of this book and become more acquainted with some broad concepts that define *American Electric's* approach to the study of *broadcasting and electronic media*.

You'll find sneak previews at the beginning of each chapter. They're included to give you a quick overview of the material presented. They also function as chapter summaries that will assist you in organizing, studying, and synthesizing the information presented. However, since this chapter is really a sneak preview of the entire book, we will let it speak for itself!

YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION?

You turn on the TV. A rocket explodes to the sounds of a thunderous guitar. Out of a capsule pops an astronaut in a white suit. He plants a flag in some distant soil as chameleon neon colors shimmer and glow. On the flag are three letters: MTV. A familiar voice exclaims, “MTV, music television in stereo!” You are now one of millions across the country tuned into the collective experience known as *MTV*.

The space-age motif is appropriate enough, given the fact that MTV was made possible by satellite technology. It is a television channel, but it reminds you of radio, too. In fact, MTV is a microcosm of three phenomena we'll explore together in this book: radio, television, and other new electronic media such as computers, popular music, cable, and home video systems.

Understanding the American electric is important because they are transforming our lives in ways we are only beginning to comprehend. Each day, you are a participant in what is arguably the first significant shift in information use patterns in more than 500 years, a genuine revolution if there ever was one.

Yet this is more than a mere political upheaval in some distant land. Instead, it is a global communications revolution pioneered and promulgated right here in America. Welcome to the revolution known as the American electric!

THE SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM

Media observer Marshall McLuhan once said that due primarily to the impact of electronic media "time has ceased and space has vanished." This points to one interesting consequence of the American electric. When we sit down to watch a television show there is a curious "suspension of time": one moment it is 8:00 p.m. and the next time we look up it might be 8:30 or 9:00. All media fill real time with mediated reality.

Mediated reality is "real life" (or a fictionalized form of real life) that has passed through a medium and reached an audience. You might know it by other names: programming, or content. Mediated reality does not observe the real life space-time continuum. For example, an hour-long TV show may cover several weeks of mediated time. A miniseries can take viewers through many years in a few short hours.

There is nothing new in this reshaping of reality by film and broadcast media. Print media has been doing it for hundreds of years. But the ability to use technology to create audio and video images allows us to alter time and space in ways that were impossible just a few decades ago.

Television and radio allow us to take complete control of our audio-visual environment. These communications media can transport us to where we have never been and allow us to witness things we have never seen. The possibilities are both exciting and infinite and they can be frightening. Ultimately we come back to the question of use. How we utilize the American electric now and in the generations to come will help determine what's to become of our civilization.



FIGURE 1-1

Ronald Zamora at his trial in 1977.

MEDIA VS. REAL LIFE

There are many ways of describing what electronic media are, but it may be easier to describe what they *are not*. First, they are not real life or everyday events and interactions that make up your normal life. Sometimes we say, “Oh, this show is unbelievable. Those events could never happen in real life.” This may be true. The function of electronic media is not to mirror real life; rather, it is to provide an alternative to real life, although there are some important similarities between the two. Generally, radio and television are more simplistic, intense, violent, sensual, romantic, and orderly than real life. The story of how this came to be, and why it is so, is what *American Electric* is all about.

It can be very dangerous for us to confuse mediated reality and non-mediated reality. Consider for a moment the celebrated case of Ronald Albert Zamora. Born in the slums of New York City, Ronnie eventually moved to Miami. Ronnie’s strict father would often confine the 15-year-old to the house as punishment for his adolescent misdeeds. Ronnie once told him, “OK, if you won’t let me go where I want to go and do what I want to do, I’m gonna stick my head in that TV set and learn all I can. Then some day I’ll show you.” Ronnie found another world on TV. His favorite programs were action-adventure police detective shows of the ’70s, like *Hawaii Five-0* and *Kojak*. *Kojak* became his hero and Ronnie often pretended that he committed the violent acts he saw on TV.

Then one day Ronnie and a friend were short of cash. They broke into the nearby home of an elderly woman, who was away at the time. There they found several hundred dollars in cash and a revolver she

kept on hand for protection. Unexpectedly, she returned and Ronnie begged her not to call police. When she insisted, he pointed the gun at her and shot her in the stomach. Moments later she was dead.

Ronnie's lawyer came up with a rather unorthodox defense, claiming that young Zamora had been "narcotized" by the effects of too much TV violence. At the critical moment, he contended, Ronnie "could not differentiate between right and wrong" (the legal definition of insanity) because he could not distinguish between what a real gun would do and the sanitized shooting he had seen so often on TV. Hence, he argued, Ronnie was insane, suffering from "television intoxication" when he pulled the trigger.

Though one psychiatrist agreed, others did not. The jury found Zamora guilty. The judge sentenced him to life in prison. Zamora may or may not have been a victim of television. Nevertheless, the ability to distinguish between what we see on TV or hear on the radio and what constitutes real life remains critical to any understanding of the American electric.

THE MEDIUM AS MEDIUM

How do different media forms work? What are their relative effects on the mass audience? It might seem quite simple to say that a book is not TV or that a film is not radio, but it's surprising how often we compare or analyze one medium *in terms of the other*.

Can you think of a single TV critic who doesn't continually compare television to film or live theatre? The critical terms themselves (plot, story line, character motivation, conflict, resolution) are borrowed from earlier storytelling forms. TV does not often do well when evaluated in book or stage terms. It can't, because TV is not theatre or a book; it is TV. As a consequence, many critics seem to find commercial TV worthless. Oddly, these same critics seldom explain why they have dedicated their careers to writing about such a "worthless" medium.

Each medium is best suited to carrying certain kinds of information. It might be difficult to learn linear algebra from television; a book would be better suited to the task. But information on movements of army troops during World War II might be presented more effectively in a series of TV programs than in a book. For example, Alistair Cooke's *America* was a compelling history of the United States presented on television. The program succeeded in reaching millions of people who hadn't read a history book in years.

The point is that we need to examine the kind of information each medium carries effectively, not just the kind of information we wish it carried. Once we have faced that reality, the functions of the American electric become much clearer.

This is not to say that we should abandon all hopes of improving the aesthetic level of electronic media content. The American electric

are ours to do with as we will. Certainly, a convincing case can be made that we have wasted a great deal of the potential of radio and television. At first glance much of what we find there may seem silly, boring, and irrelevant. Yet as long as we evaluate the American electric as if they were American literature, we are destined to remain in the dark. To say that one medium or another is *best* is to make a qualitative judgment that is both unnecessary and restrictive.

FORM, CONTENT, AND CONSEQUENCE

How do we replace the traditional literary perspective with some new and less restrictive way of examining the American electric? One way is to examine the three components of radio and television that are also common to other mass media. These are form, content, and consequence.

Form involves how information is communicated and how it reaches us. The radio form, for example, involves listening, while the TV form requires both viewing and listening. Radio information is traditionally received in environments different from TV. When we listen to radio, we are often in our cars or at home, engaged in another activity. The radio form of communicating is perfectly suited to this environment.

With the exception of MTV and other more casual TV formats, our more participatory activities are usually suspended while we give the “electric fireplace” our undivided attention. Quiet and intimate, living rooms or bedrooms are perfectly suited to the TV form, which is why TV sets are usually found there. Form refers to the *medium*, or *channel*, through which mediated reality is disseminated to the mass audience. Form may also be more specifically used to refer to styles of content, or *genres*, as you will see in later chapters.

Content is simply defined as what is communicated. Normally we think that content is the most important aspect of a medium. Books as diverse as the *Holy Bible* and *Tom Sawyer* could have similar form. They could be set in matching type faces with illustrations done by the same artist, but obviously their content would remain radically different. A recent abbreviated version of the *Bible* featured modern pictures and easy to read type. Though it was similar to the old version it became an instant best seller. Form can make a difference even if content remains similar.

One of the curious trends in recent years is an increasing emphasis on form and a decreasing emphasis on content. Some critics say politicians are packaged like a box of soap. It is not what candidates stand for, but how they appear on TV that matters: Dozens of brands of aspirin are on the market, and the only difference appears to be in their packaging and promotion.

Traditionally our society has placed a higher value on *what* is said rather than *how* it is said. Now form and content are becoming more equally weighted. In some instances, form may be even more important than content in determining the consequences of mass communication.

Consequence is another name for effect. When form and content come together to bring us the latest Michael Jackson album or an episode of *L.A. Law*, we can begin to examine the consequences. Some would contend that the only real consequence of such things is the entertainment of the mass audience. Yet it is possible to ask other questions. Will the differences between *L.A. Law* and real life be detected by the audience? Is the popular NBC show altering our ideas about what lawyers do each day? How is this different from what we thought before? These are all questions involving consequence, and the consequences of the American electric are of critical importance.

After all, what good is a knowledge of historical or technical information about the electronic media unless we can use that knowledge to help us shape the kind of media system we want for our future? In each chapter of *American Electric* you will discover a unique series of "Perspectives" and other inserts that provide the depth and detail necessary to a fuller understanding of the form, content, and consequence of the electronic mass media. Without considering consequence, there is no point in studying any medium.

To understand consequence we look to the *mass audience*. Electronic media are more than the tools of a few engineers or media corporation presidents; they are links between the lives of each and every one of us. For we are all, in varying ways, members of the mass audience. Some of us are couch potatoes, ardent and ever viewing fans of television. Some of us watch only this or that TV show; others are soap fans and Trekkies. Some members of the mass audience find little value in television, but delight in a daily dose of radio and pop music. Of course, most of us fall into a variety of these groups. We are united by a uniquely shared experience with mediated reality and through the technologies that make such a reality possible. The best way to examine the consequences of these phenomena is to investigate why they have become so much a part of us. What do we get from them? What do they ask in return?

ESCAPING OR COPING?

Electronic media are often chastised for being escapist in nature. Critics contend that radio, and especially television, are used to "escape" from real life problems and, hence, impede our ability to solve these problems. In addition, critics are alarmed because we seem to spend more time listening to and watching the American electric and less time talking with one other. In other words, we are moving toward