

This is research?

THE critics of television will have to fall back, regroup and find a whole new line of attack if Milton Caniff, who frequently has been found among them, is correct in the flight of reasoning he soared off into a few days ago.

The creator of the comic strip, "Steve Canyon," said that "a person who watches tv does so mainly to be entertained . . . to be tickled, to be thrilled, to be mystified, to be distracted from his daily problems . . . but when a man (or a woman) reads a newspaper, entertainment is incidental—he wants to learn, to study . . . to be challenged to think."

If this be true, then the critics are talking nonsense when they complain that television is programmed too much with diverting fare, too little with meaty substance to feed men's minds. Their complaint should be that there is any meat at all on the menu. For what Mr. Caniff seems to be saying is that people aren't going to look at "challenging" programs anyway.

Then why all the fuss?

We don't agree with this chatter for a moment, any more than any reasonably observant man can believe that television offers nothing more stimulating than stark diversion. We have seen the *Steve Canyon* program and must agree that it does not exceed Mr. Caniff's notion of public interest. But with all respect to Mr. Caniff, there is more to television than *Steve Canyon*, and viewers have demonstrated they can take—and broadcasters have shown they can deliver—headier stuff.

Mr. Caniff's observations were written out to help newsmen covering his appearance before the Advertising Research Foundation's annual conference. He didn't follow them very closely. But he didn't disavow them, either, although he did observe that it was not his purpose to knock television. No matter how good his intention, however, in knocking the television audience he indirectly belittled the medium while overplaying the role of the newspaper.

His views do serve to dramatize what broadcasters have been saying all along—that entertainment is a vital function of television. But it is not the whole function, and Mr. Caniff is just as far off base in suggesting that, in comparison, the newspaper is the thinking man's medium, wherein he reaches "his daily intellectual millennium." If newspapers were all that weighty, they'd have no place for the cartoon strip that has made Mr. Caniff rich—and thereby enabled him to get an audience when he pontificates.

The short view

IN THE past decade the number of am radio stations in operation has risen by 67%, the number reporting an annual loss by 74%.

In the year 1948, 1,824 stations were operating. Of that number 581 lost money. In 1958, as reported in last week's issue of this publication 3,066 stations operated throughout the year. Of that number 1,013 suffered losses.

These are the cold measurements of a competitive situation that is getting hotter by the minute. Heat is generated by friction, and there is much friction in radio today.

Talk to any radio broadcaster from any community bigger than a crossroads and you will hear stories of bitter competition for audience and business.

In its most extreme forms the competition for audience degenerates into wild promotions and wilder programming. The objective is to be first in the ratings—never mind by how small a fraction or by how few listeners it represents. Be first in the ratings, the battle cry goes, and then you will get the business.

The urge to be first was responsible for two situations

which have come to national attention recently.

In Los Angeles one station offered listeners \$10,000 for finding a certain disc jockey. Another Los Angeles station found him in Buffalo.

In Denver one station has accused another of allowing smutty broadcasts to go on the air. True or false, the accusation—and the circumstances giving rise to it—will do nothing to enhance the image of radio.

We have a feeling that unless the urge to be first is repressed, or at least combined with other urges of more lasting value, it will be the whole of radio that will get the business in the long run—and not the kind of business that stations can bill.

The more complaints one broadcaster makes against another, the more reason one broadcaster gives another to complain, the stronger will become the argument for artificial limitation of competition.

It is an argument that has often been heard, and sometimes from unexpected sources. At the Storz Station disc jockey convention last spring, Gordon McLendon, one of the most successful competitors in radio, publicly spoke out for legislation to permit no more stations in a market than the government decided the economy could support. Other operators have expressed the same thoughts privately.

However undesirable the by-products of free competition in radio (limited only by the availability of frequencies under proper engineering standards), they are less undesirable than government economic control would be. Let the government restrict the number of stations by its evaluation of the economic potential of a market, and the government will also restrict the amount of money any of those stations can make and will impose other conditions for doing business.

If there are more radio stations licensed than the U.S. economy can support, the rigors of free competition will eliminate some of them. Those stations which adapt themselves to a condition of intense competition, which invent new services that meet public needs, will not only survive but flourish. Strong management and sound planning can build a radio system which will expand as the nation expands.

But there is a dismal future for that type of radio management which thinks that the terminal point of advance planning is the date of the next rating report.



Drawn for BROADCASTING by Sid Hix

"How does that soap commercial go? . . . 'For the first time in your life, be really clean!'"