

A Closer Look

By Ernest Kreiling

HOLLYWOOD — Aesthetes and intellectuals, both real and self-styled, are heralding in noble prose the imminent arrival of the cultural millennium via Pay TV.

They display unseemly glee over the pending death of trite and trivial television with its low-brow programs and rampant commercialism. At last, they rejoice, the soul and the mind will be nourished.

But before we garland the Athenian boulevards to welcome the new Periclean Age, let's take stock of Pay TV as it's developed today.

ALTHOUGH the evidence is far from conclusive, several subscription television plans have been started and their progress to date is interesting.

In 1957 a small scale Pay TV plan in Bartlesville, Okla., showing first run movies failed after nine months. In 1960 International Telemeter initiated a pay system in a Toronto suburb, and today has in excess of 6,000 subscribers. The only major success the company has announced recently was the high percentage of tune-ins to a recent Maple Leaf hockey game.

Hartford, Conn., however, is serving as an early proving ground in a larger and more significant test. Licensed last year by the FCC, Channel 18, WHCT, owned by RKO General, started toll television last June. This is a three year experiment which will cost the company over \$1 million, and the outcome of which will have a strong bearing on the future of Pay TV.

RKO GENERAL eventually hopes to have 50,000 subscribers. The original plans were to have 4,000 home viewers signed up by the end of 1962, but actually only 1,800 homes had the necessary decoder attached to their sets to enable them to receive an unscrambled picture from Channel 18. New installations are running at the rate of 50 a week. At this pace it will be next fall before the original 4,000 homes are equipped. RKO contends that this is not important, because they have intentionally controlled the installations. But it could also represent something less than wild enthusiasm on the part of Hartford residents.

Of those who have been able to receive the special toll programs, most families say they spend between \$8 and \$10 a month for viewing. An editor of Broadcasting Magazine recently did a sampling of 30 Hartford Pay TV subscribers and found 27 of them pleased with the service, three displeased. RKO reports that of the original 1,800 families 21 cancelled their subscriptions in the first six months.

THESE FACTS, however, do not have too much meaning in the long run, because the experiment is less than a year old. What is important is the type of programs that are available to Hartford residents for a charge of from 50 cents to \$3.50. The quality and scope of programming will eventually determine the success or failure of Pay TV in America.

During the nine months of the Hartford test recent motion pictures have been the staple diet, but many special programs have also been available.

AMONG THEM have been the Kingston Trio as they performed in a tent show; Hildegard in an appearance at the Persian Room in New York; Betty Comden and Adolph Green in their presentation of A Party; the Bolshoi Ballet; the Bayanihan Philippine Dancers,

Carolos Montoya; and a frequent selection of football, basketball and hockey games.

Other programs shown or scheduled are Gian Carlo Menotti's The Consul; The McGuire Sisters; Billi Dana (Jose Jimenez); and a production of Chekov's A Country Scandal starring Franchot Tone.

RECENT PRESS releases also heralded a local high school basketball game and a series of Sunday evening concerts featuring the Hart College Music faculty.

All special programs are repeated from time to time "for the benefit of new subscribers."

Whether or not these programs represent the onset of a new cultural renaissance or even anything substantially different or better than what is now available I leave to you:

ONE LIMITING factor, of course, is the size of the potential audience in Hartford and the limited dollar power to enable the producers to find and present the top quality programs Pay TV hopefully will bring. Budding Pay TV plans in Denver, Colo., and Santa Monica, Calif., will also face the same problem. As more and more separate systems are started the combined resources might make more ambitious programming possible.

But then comes the eternal question of whether or not there is sufficient creative talent of all types to nourish a full time second television service of consistently high quality. No one knows for sure, but talent shortages plague all entertainment media.

AND FINALLY, what will deter the Pay TV producers from resisting the temptation to appeal to the largest possible audiences, and thereby lower the quality of programs which many intellectuals hope will be so high and selective?

It's doubtful that this will be the year for a major breakthrough for Pay TV. Its emergence as a major device for mass entertainment seems at least a few years off, to say nothing of its future as a cultural channel.

And when Pay TV does come into its own, I doubt that between the desire for a mass audience, the limited supply of creative talent, and the additional cost to viewers that it will suddenly displace commercial television.

BUT AS TIME passes we can expect Pay TV to take a rightful place in the scheme of things, and almost inevitably specialize in major sporting events, first run feature films, and an occasional cultural tidbit.

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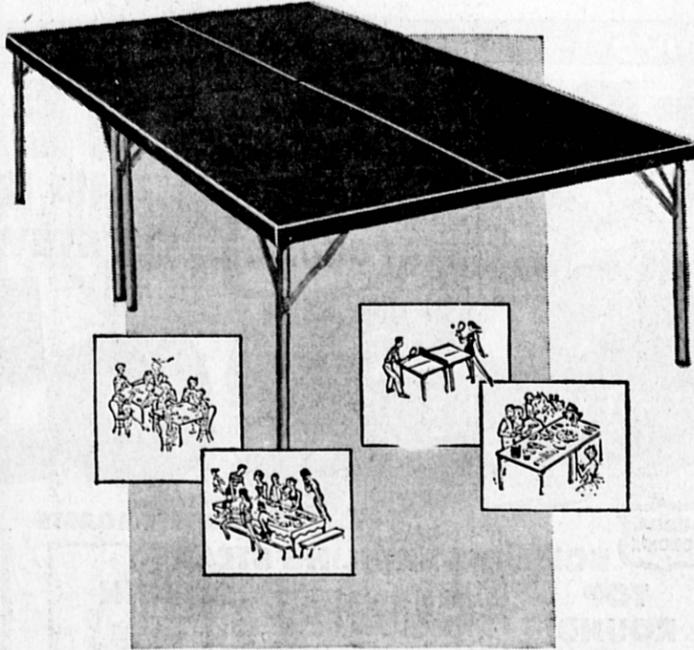


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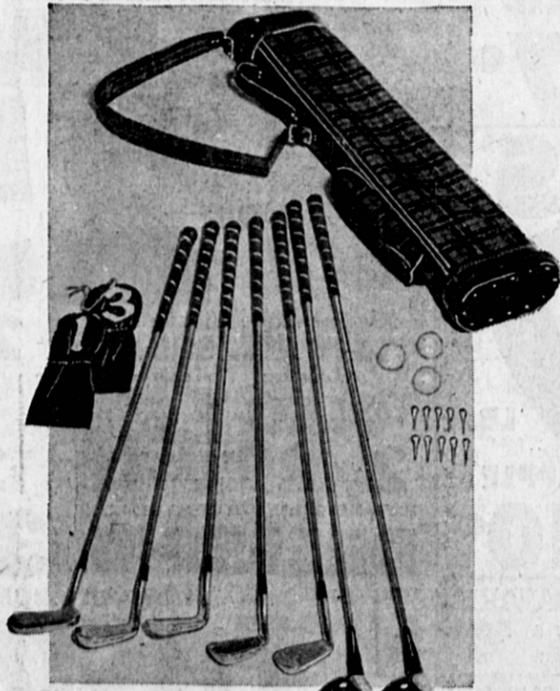


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