



What Have We Learned from the TV Scandals?

A hard-hitting author pulls no punches in appraising the real meaning of the rigged television quiz shows

BY PHILIP WYLIE



Charles Van Doren, Henry Bloomgarten, Patty Duke, and Herbert Stempel all won huge cash prizes and nationwide reputations on TV quiz programs which turned out to be rigged. Disc jockey Alan Freed lost his job during payola scandal.

A COUPLE of years ago I was invited to be a contestant on one of the TV quiz programs. I demurred on the ground I was busy writing. I added that I didn't have a photographic memory or the encyclopedia type of mind. I have to check my facts. I said I'd be no good on a quiz show—probably flunking out on the first question.

Then I got a shock. My long-distance caller laughed. "You needn't worry about that, Mr. Wylie. We'll give you answers to enough questions to guarantee you'll make a bundle."

For a minute, I had no answer. Then I said a few words which are not fit for print—and hung up.

Curiously enough, that offer to help me cheat on a network quiz spectacle did not lead me to suspect that fraud was widespread on such shows.

In common with millions, I thought they were on the level. When the TV scandal broke wide open in the past few months, I was disappointed but not surprised to learn otherwise and to find that a good many people were persuaded to defraud a vast and trusting public for big money.

But I was not prepared for the public reaction to proof of cheating, bribery, and blackmail that the Congressional committee brought out in its investigation of the quiz shows and, more recently, payola and other abuses.

I was not prepared for the appalling evidence that about half of us are as corrupt as the corrupt idols. About half of us do not know right from wrong; or we believe that wrong is right—when the stake is high enough or the temptation powerful enough, or when the wrongdoer has every expectation of getting away with his perfidy.

We all know that a certain number of men and women have attained riches—even public esteem—by unethical and criminal means. But we have kept on thinking that the average American—that most Americans—remained as fiercely honest as Abraham Lincoln. Now we can no longer keep on thinking that. The public reaction to the brazen cheating on TV quiz shows makes the extent of our acceptance of dishonesty so evident that no citizen should be allowed to miss its dreadful meaning.

It was focused on Charles Van Doren—so he may well be used here for reference. Setting himself up as the very symbol of the scholar, the educated man, the egghead—Van Doren violated the first principle of all true scholars and truly educated people: honesty. Then, when his grim secret came under grand-jury inquiry, he doubled his unworthiness by committing perjury. Only when other witnesses before the Congressional committee made it impossible to go on lying did he tell the truth.

HOW DID the American public react to that awful record? Charles, some said, was being persecuted. Some said he atoned by the mere fact of his forced confession. Others felt that since "everybody was doing it," Van Doren was not really guilty at all. Many stated that the quiz shows were only "entertainment" and, consequently, the fact that they were rigged meant nothing.

Students at Columbia University, where young Van Doren had taught, protested his dismissal and held a rally to demand his reinstatement. Students in another university hung in effigy, not Charles, but the Congressman who had headed the investi-

gation. And the commonest response of the Americans—without-morals went like this: "I'd do the same thing Van Doren did if I had the chance! So would you! If you deny it, you're a liar yourself."

That view means something especially frightening. It means that all who hold it believe there are no honest Americans, none with ethical standards, and that all of us are at least potential cheats, crooks, liars, swindlers, or worse.

It is not the perfidy of the few but this acceptance of it by the many that is the important result of the TV exposures.

If even a large minority of us are so deeply corrupt in heart, a few predictions about our future can be made with certainty.

Scholarship will decline—for scholarship without absolute integrity is mere pretense and quackery. Science will suffer—for the practice and the progress of science depend on the absolute and constant integrity of scientists in their many fields. Crime will keep on increasing—and so will delinquency. Why? So many of us don't know right from wrong that in millions of American homes the moral and ethical upbringing of youngsters is literally not possible. Business and politics will continue to be more and more corrupt—for a nation so thickly peopled with actual or potential crooks will not see, recognize, or follow honest leadership in any area.

IF AMERICA is to survive, grow, remain meaningful—or even free—this trend of moral decay has to be not just stopped but reversed.

I believe, however, that multitudes of us—if not most—still have enough old-fashioned honesty to refuse to play for keeps by cheating. Here's some heartening evidence, at any rate. A Freehold, N. J., history teacher, disturbed by the fact that his current-events class defended the rigging of TV quiz shows, decided to try an experiment. Suddenly announcing a quiz, he seated three students at the front of the room where he supplied them with all the answers. "When the others found out what I had done," Mr. Willet said, "there were outraged cries of 'unfair.' I pointed out that what I had done was not against the law. It took a few minutes for them to get the point, but when I said, 'Now let's talk about the quiz-show rigging,' the discussion was much more morally valid."

If the TV scandals have shaken our complacency and roused us from our moral lethargy, then TV and Charles Van Doren have ironically made a great contribution to the national welfare.

COVER:

With all due respect to the reverence of small boys, the one in Pete Hawley's painting is in a predicament: he's sneaked his kitten into church, and now he has to pray that she'll keep silent through the services.

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