

# WATCHING THE ADS. GO BY . . .

AMERICAN newspapers have reported that sponsored television will soon be introduced into the United Kingdom. This item was news-worthy here in the United States for two reasons. First, it emphasised that English commercials would differ greatly from the American variety, and secondly, there seemed to be an implication that the British had adopted a sort of "Anything-the-Yanks-can-do-we-can-do-better" attitude.

As it is reasonable to suppose that when television reaches New Zealand we shall follow the British policy rather than the American, it would be wise, perhaps, for us to examine American television advertising, so that we may benefit from aspects which are good and discard those which are bad.

It must be remembered that in the United States commercials are the life blood of television. Listeners pay no licence fees and the whole enormous industry is a privately operated venture in which there is extreme competition and rivalry. Without commercials there would be no television, and the fact that Americans are prepared to accept them as the price they pay for entertainment is demonstrated by some remarkable statistics. The total number of television receivers in the United States is about 26,000,000. These are distributed among 56 per cent of the nation's homes. Some 450,000 sets are sold by authorised dealers each month, which means that each working day 2250 new receivers are turned on for the first time. Many of these are going into homes which already have at least one receiver. The television manufacturing industry is busily campaigning to introduce a second set into American households, and the day may not be far away when the idea of "TV in every room" will be accepted by the American people.

Despite their understanding that commercials are a necessary part of television, American viewers do complain about them, and frequently with some effect. Personal objections about commercials may be sent to the Television Code Review Board in Washington, D.C. Among other changes, this organisation has lifted frock necklines of women announcers and discouraged the dressing of performers as doctors or dentists who laud the attributes of vita-

min pills, cigarettes, deodorants and toothpaste. One other matter to which the TCRB could give its urgent attention is the practice of some television stations which increase the sound volume of the broadcast when the commercial is on the air. This is an annoying and unnecessary habit not confined to television alone, but found also in radio broadcasts in the United States—and elsewhere.

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A TELEVISION commercial may be considered from two points of view. You may regard it as a radio commercial to which a picture has been added,

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or as an animated newspaper advertisement supplemented by sound. While such distinctions are probably seldom considered by the ordinary video-fan they are of considerable importance to advertising agencies and producers, and even more so to the sponsor, who sometimes pays over 1000 dollars per minute for production costs alone.

However you look at it, the purpose of the television commercial, like any other type of advertising, is to sell something; and in the course of an evening the tele-viewer can see sales messages ranging from lively cartoons to personal appearances by Hollywood stars. As often as not the former have the greater appeal. The elfin and whimsical solicitation of a fairy tale character somehow seems to have greater sincerity than the glib performance of a highly-paid actor. It is difficult to appreciate the reasoning behind the supposition that a movie star is better qualified than, say, a baker, to judge the taste, texture and nutritional value of a loaf of bread. Sometimes it would seem that the only special requirement to be a television expert is fame in a field of endeavour which is entirely unrelated to the product being advertised. For example, baseball stars are considered ideal demonstrators of safety razors and an ex-champion boxer (who speaks poorly) extols the perfections of a brand of beer.

In the advertising of many products most of the message must, of course, be carried by the persuasive spoken word; with appliances or mechanical products, however, it is a different story and it is in this field that the most effective commercials are seen. The latest attractions and modifications in refrigerators, floor-polishers, washing machines, automobiles and even television sets, too, can be easily and competently demonstrated with photographic clarity. In the case of a programme originating in, say, New York, but carried throughout the nation on a live simultaneous hook-up, it is possible for as many as 20,000,000 people at the one time to watch the commercial. So wide is the coverage of these commercials that the names and personalities of appliance demonstrators on such nationwide links have become as well known as those of the stars who carry the non-commercial section of the telecast.

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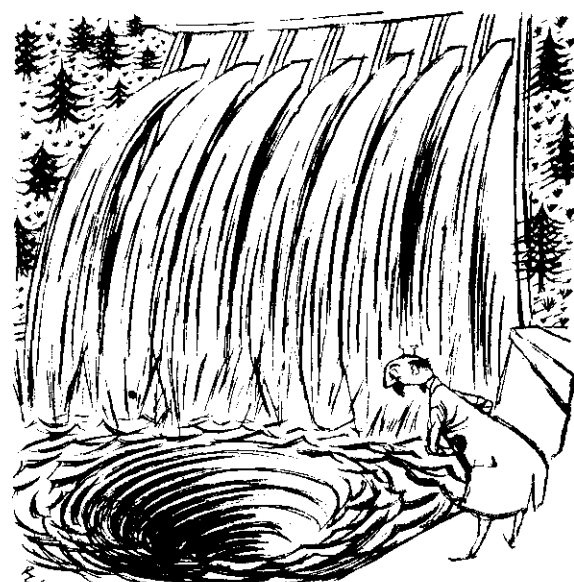
DURING the past year or so television sponsors learned with dismay that although viewers were watching the

entertainment portions of their shows they were not sitting through the commercials. Proof of this came from the most unexpected source—the public utilities supplying water to the city areas. These authorities found that during one of the most highly rated of all programmes the water flowed into the cities at a greatly increased rate during the three commercials which accompanied the half-hour show, and that it eased off to a mere trickle throughout the remainder of the telecast. This peculiar discovery indicated that viewers were not looking at the commercials but were using these convenient breaks in the programme to hurry to millions of bathrooms throughout the nation. To the advertiser and his agents it should also have proved that the commercials were insufficiently interesting to hold the attention of his audience.

To counteract this break-away tendency many sponsors now insist that the commercials be written into the programme format so that there is no noticeable break in continuity. On variety shows it is not unusual to see a singing star raise his voice in melodic praise of the sponsor's product. In a popular mystery-thriller carried by a tobacco company the competent private-eye spends part of each enthralling episode in the store of a tobacconist friend who busily sells the sponsor's cigarettes and tobacco to a procession of famous personalities who just happen to drop it at precisely the right moment. Hour-long comedy programmes which feature some of the oldest of old-timers (how much better they seem to some of us!) run singing and dancing commercials as items by the players themselves. So cleverly are they interwoven into the scheme of the show that the viewer is not immediately aware that he is watching a message from the sponsor, and usually he will sit it out and delay the journey to the bathroom until a more convenient time.

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BY contrast, the worst feature of American television commercials is the unfortunate practice of shattering the continuity of a first-class drama with an advertisement which is so out of keeping with the mood of the play that the viewer loses both the thread of the narrative and his desire to watch it to the end. This is not too important during light or comedy programmes, but it is particularly disappointing if the production is sincerely dramatic. The televiewer sitting in his front room comfortably enmeshed in the entanglements of some stark drama of human emotions is not at all happy if half-way through the show he is jolted back into his own uneventful life by a smiling lady who shows him how to smear a cake tin with margarine. Nor is the housewife willing to be impressed by the long-haired young announcer who suddenly throws himself on to the screen,



"Water flowed at a greatly increased rate during the commercials"

during a complicated love triangle to tell her that she should use a particular brand of deodorant—even if it does come in an unbreakable easy-squeeze plastic bottle.

Wise sponsors have recognised the incongruity of such badly-placed commercials, and many now advertise only at the beginning and the end of the programme.

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ONE of the biggest sponsors of sixty-minute dramatic shows is a famous cheese company, which has found its advertising so effective that it now presents two fine plays each week, all year long, on competing networks. The commercials on these shows are so beautifully written and produced that even the sight of a cheese omelette during the commercial break seems not at all out of place. These particular commercials combine a soft voice with a convincing recipe demonstration. The advertisers have not detracted from the personalities and performances of the dramatic players by unnecessarily showing the announcer. After all, in advertising things as elusive as the taste of food, it is the voice quality and the inflections of the speaker which do most to convince the TV viewer.

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AN unpopular feature of peak-hour telecasting is the frequency with which commercials occur. In the station break period at the end of one show we frequently see five commercials before the next show begins. The sponsors in the centre of this onslaught are the forgotten men of television who could beneficially look elsewhere for efficient ways of spending a promotional budget.

One major fault of many commercials is a visible display of exaggerated enthusiasm by the announcer. This is not as apparent in his words as in his facial expression and his manner. Any announcer on an advertising radio station knows that sincerity in the spoken word is his finest attribute; on TV, however, where he is seen as often as he is heard, there is an inclination to replace what should be genuine confidence in the pro-

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"A movie star is better qualified to judge . . ."