

Whittle Foes Miss Medium's Message

By DAVID HECHLER

TV or not TV? That was the question. The answer trumpeted by the New York State Board of Regents in June was a resounding, unanimous "no," banning Whittle Communications' Channel One (and all other commercially sponsored television programs) from public schools. The board's action, which followed California's decision not to reimburse schools for the time during which commercials are aired, raised doubt about the venture's viability.

A decade ago I would have cheered. As a high-school English teacher, I worried that in my students' eyes—glazed from too many hours in front of the tube—Huckleberry Finn was no match for the Fonz. But that was before I attended a provocative workshop sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English.

It was taught by a teacher who shocked his colleagues by confessing right from the top that he actually likes (gasp) TV. Not just "educational" programs, mind you, but the whole gamut! Unrepentant, he boldly asserted that there's nothing inherently wrong with students—or teachers—who share his passion. We frowned until he added that there *is* something wrong with the *way* many people watch. We nodded as one, eager to learn their sin.

All too often, he continued, viewing is purposeless, undirected and continuous. *That's* the problem. The solution, then, is not to wage a hopeless war on the medium. It's to teach our students how to become critical, selective viewers who watch to be

informed as well as entertained.

In his own home, the teacher had established one rule. There must be a reason for watching. If not, off it goes. A few weeks earlier, his young daughter had sauntered up and asked, "Why are you watching the football game, Daddy?" Not quite sure who was playing, he began a tortured explanation that he dropped in mid-sentence. His daughter had already switched it off.

At school, he assigned programs he knew most of his students watched anyway and planned lessons to integrate them. Was there anything heroic about the Fonz? How did he compare with the heroes in their readings?

These exercises evolved into a "Valuable Viewing" guide that he prepared and distributed to his students each week. Along with about a dozen recommendations (including one or two "educational" broadcasts), the guide provided questions for students to consider while viewing. The sample the teacher handed out at the workshop, for example, contained this note on M*A*S*H: "Alan Alda is normally a pacifist, but in this episode he is moved to violence. Is the situation which causes Hawkeye to act in an uncouth manner sufficiently developed to allow us to accept his behavior?"

Students loved it. And the teacher discovered they weren't alone. Occasionally he was too busy to prepare a guide. He was flooded with phone calls. Where is it? Why didn't I get one? The irate consumers weren't his students; they were parents.

Unfortunately, the Board of Regents

didn't attend this workshop. In banning the 12-minute news broadcasts from the classroom, the board rejected more than an opportunity to obtain free televisions, video equipment and satellite dishes offered by Whittle—equipment that could be used for a variety of educational purposes. They also passed up a chance to present students with a positive model of engaged, directed television viewing.

Their reason? Commercials. But the Board of Regents doesn't seem to understand that even these can be used for education. Whittle insists students watch two minutes of commercials that accompany the broadcasts. The company has nothing to say about what happens afterward, however.

English teachers have long used printed advertising when they teach argumentative writing. Ads provide a catalog of persuasive techniques that can be analyzed in class—an exercise increasingly valuable as advertisements, especially TV commercials, play an ever more prominent role in politics.

It's time we recognized that television is educational, whether or not we like what it teaches. The average teen-ager watches more than three hours a day, according to Nielsen. The longer educators ignore that, hoping it will go away, the less likely children—or their parents—will learn to use the medium intelligently.

Mr. Hechler is a free-lance writer living in New York.