

STAR-NEWS

Monday, May 25, 1992

Pasadena, California

Courting real life instead of 'Oprah'

By Royal Oakes

The tragic aftermath of the Rodney King trial and the criticism of the media's coverage of the civil unrest obscured the fact that during the trial itself, television history was being made. The gavel-to-gavel coverage of the trial by Fox Television, on its Los Angeles affiliate KTTV Channel 11, was a powerful rebuttal to those who argue that television has irretrievably shirked its potential.

The public's sustained interest in coverage of the King trial challenged the notion that commercial television news deals exclusively in "sound-bite" communication.

The trial obviously captured our attention with a mesmerizing videotape and the specter of police brutality. Remarkably, however, after the long-awaited kickoff to the trial the public was interested enough in one of the cornerstones of our society — the judicial system — to opt for an uncondensed two-month trial over Oprah, Vanna White and "All My Children." Ratings were excellent, in spite of the fact the trial was anything but a highlights reel of judicial triple plays. It was what trials always are, namely, an unpredictable blend of tedium and excitement. Nonetheless, "overwhelming" is

how Fox Television's senior vice president for news and special projects Frank Garder described the public's response to the trial. The coverage hiked KTTV's daytime ratings by 83 percent.

Coverage of the King trial burst on the scene just in time to challenge a rising chorus of anti-television sentiment. Social engineers such as Jerry Mander (author of "Four Arguments For The Elimination Of Television") and Neil Postman (who penned "Amusing Ourselves To Death") have led the charge, using their much-preferred medium of the printed word to condemn television as a criminal waste of cathode rays.

Their critique descends from a long line of skepticism over the value of electronic mass communication. Discussing television's technological ancestor, the telegraph, Henry David Thoreau wrote in "Walden" that "we are in a great race to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate."

Criticism of television is not limited to curmudgeons whose parents, we suppose, banned the tube in favor of three-dimensional chess and browsing through organic chemistry texts. An editorial cartoon recently pictured an anchorman intoning, "Those are the head-

lines. We'll be back in a moment to blow them out of proportion."

Fox Television indisputably did not blow the King trial out of proportion. By definition, its broadcast of every nanosecond of the trial was precisely in proportion to reality.

The glue holding the effort together was anchor Chris Harris. Working without a script, he deftly wove comments from two reporters on the scene, a pool feed of pictures and sound, and remarks from a dozen lawyers into a cohesive, understandable tapestry that was irresistible to Southern California viewers.

The ozone layer, the federal deficit and uncertainty over the fate of Elvis Presley may get us down, but we can remove from our list of worries anxiety over whether television has any redeeming social value. For those whose definition of utopia is beating swords into plowshares, and turning television sets into planters, Fox's coverage of the King trial makes it clear television doesn't deserve to be trashed.

Royal F. Oakes of La Canada Flintridge, a partner in the Los Angeles law firm of Barger & Wolen, is the legal correspondent for radio station KFWB.