

A LIGHT IN THE SKY

Gilbert Seldes

Announcement has just been made that, following a gift from the Annenberg Fund, a school of communications will be established at the University of Pennsylvania.

For the first time -- and this is what gives significance to the event-- all of these requirements are met:

1. A big, traditional, Eastern University
2. An adequate endowment
3. A separate school

and, most important of all, at the right time. Those who, like myself, have been urging their own colleges to establish at least a chair in this field can be grateful to the academic pedantry that defeated us. Because this school is coming into existence at a time when the major problems of communication, always urgent, have defined themselves and a faculty, coming together in a new field, will not have to waste time on inessentials.

Among inessentials I emphatically do not list the techniques of broadcasting, the movies, and the other mass arts. There have been composers, some of them of the first order, who have not known the capacities of all the instruments of their orchestras, but none, I think, unable to play their scales. The complexities of lights, lenses, and the processes of the control room or editing are the basic grammar of television and the movies. A good school should teach them if only to show how they can be ignored without disaster.

In a recent contribution to this department, Hubbell Robinson, Jr., who is in charge of network programs for CBS - TV, provided a checklist for those who would like television to offer something more than "Westerns... as like as peas in a pod... family comedies devoid of bite and invention... crime series with all white heroes and all black villains..." and the rest.

He wisely noted that we will not get better programs merely by scoffing at the forms now in use, he asked for fresh substance and concepts, and he added:

"The direction (must be) truly creative and the production one which can hold its head up in comparison with the best of its kind in all the entertainment arts." There are, in my opinion, some deliberately bad intentions in making TV programs, but they will not be defeated or displaced by good intentions alone. Good techniques and a respect for the communication process are also required.

The function of a university is not primarily to teach its students how to create excellence, it is to help them recognize and define excellence so that they will find it relevant to their own lives and, if they are creative, will want to offer it to others. So far as communications deals with the mass arts, this means that a school must help to create a new kind of man who might be called a responsible aesthete. The very name of a school of communications indicates that it is concerned with the matrix of society and that its closest neighbors around the campus are the school of art and the department of sociology.

