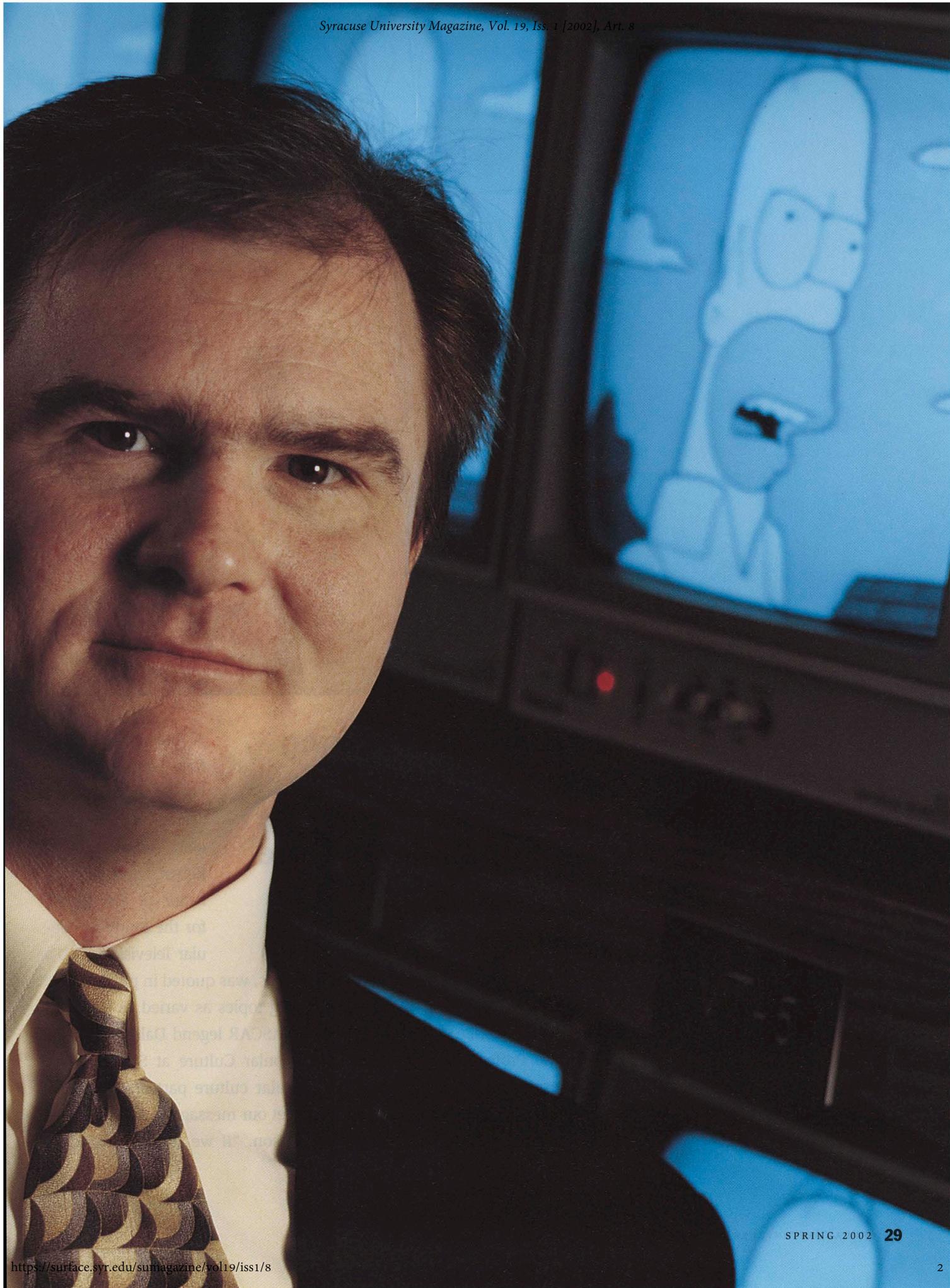


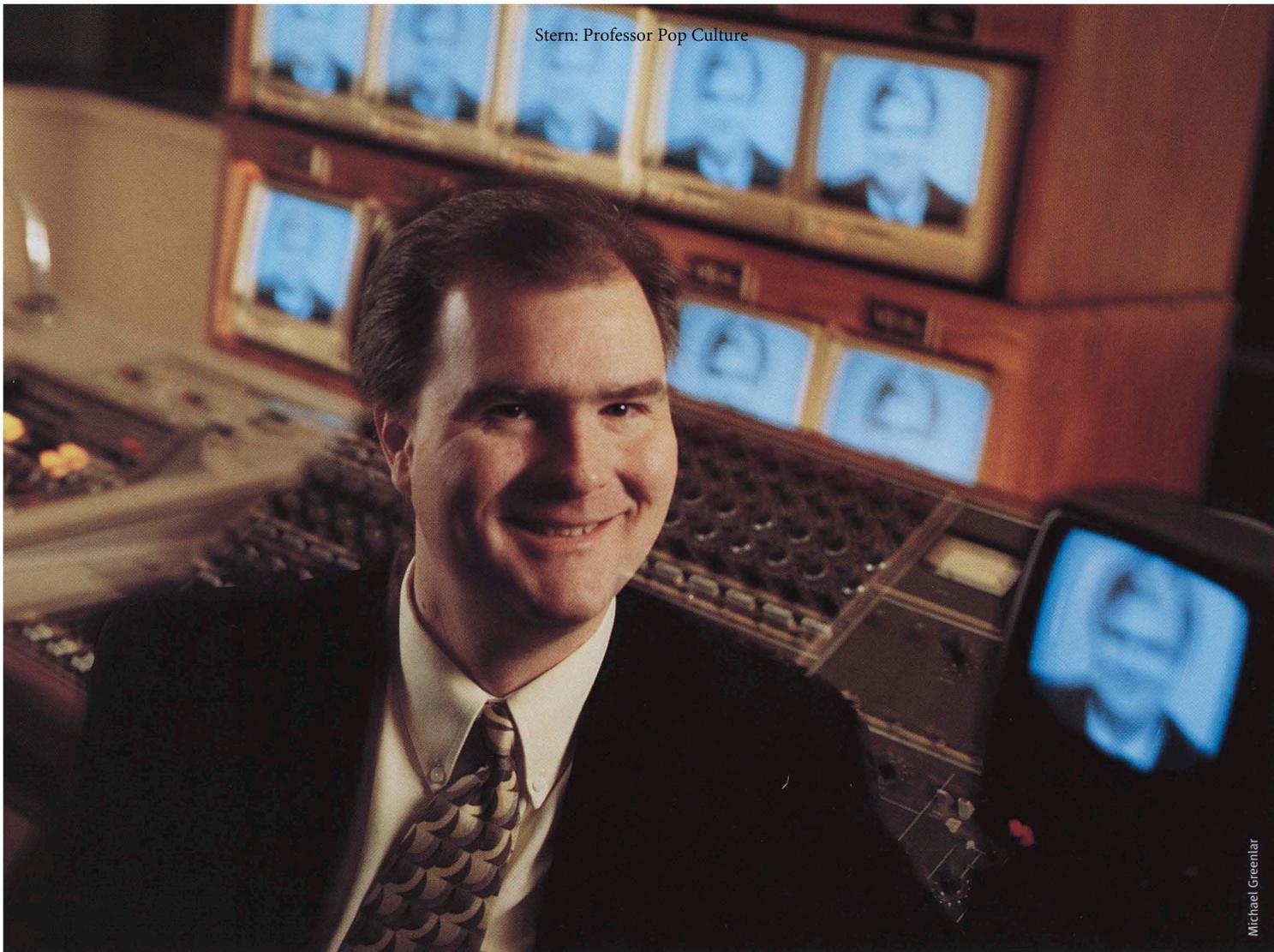
A hand is holding a small, vintage-style television set. The screen of the television shows a close-up of a man's face, likely Robert Thompson, who is the subject of the article. The background is dark, and there are some blurred blue light sources.

Professor Pop Culture

Robert Thompson is one of America's most quoted experts, dissecting everything from TV's *Survivor* to the proliferation of storage sheds

By Gary M. Stern





Michael Greenlar

When reporters are looking for an expert to decipher the meaning of *Survivor*, *The Sopranos*, or popular culture artifacts like aviator sunglasses, whom do they call?

A recent *Baltimore Sun* article, citing a Lexis-Nexis database search of news articles, reported that Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at SU's

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, was quoted in publications 972 times during the past two years, covering topics as varied as the NFL, game shows, *Providence*, and the death of NASCAR legend Dale Earnhardt. The Trustee Professor of Television and Popular Culture at SU considers being interviewed about television and popular culture part of his educational mission. "As educators, our goal is to get our message to as many people as we can," says the 42-year-old Thompson. "If we can do it through journalism, all the better."

The day after *Survivor* completed its second-season finale on CBS, Thompson went into overdrive. Matt Lauer, co-anchor of the *Today* show, interviewed him by remote satellite early in the morning. Thompson then fielded 40 other interviews (a personal record, he notes), including ones with Dan Rather on *CBS Evening News*, National Public Radio's *On the Media*, Geraldo Rivera, the *Chicago Tribune*, MSNBC, a Saskatchewan radio station, and the *Palm Beach Post*, among numerous media outlets. Thompson explained *Survivor*'s popularity by noting that "human beings are voyeurs." When pressed about whether the show symbolized the decline of Western civilization, he resisted, instead calling it "family friendly with no sex, no drugs, no alcohol, and no swearing."

Although Thompson's expertise centers on television, he considers himself a "scholar of popular culture." To study popular culture, he says, "you need a unified theory about how it works and how all the things we consume by choice are related." Indeed, Thompson considers American popular culture unique and revealing of our distinctive ethos. "Pop culture is a monument to the basis of our democratic existence," he says. "We're not born into an aristocracy or caste. We have to determine who we are, and we often define ourselves by what we consume." Just as professors interpret music and literature, a popular culture scholar can place a Big Mac or reality TV into a cultural context. "To understand America you have to understand its cheeseburgers, taxicabs, and interstate highways," he says.

Thompson works hard at studying, analyzing, dissecting, and observing popular culture. He wakes up most days at 5 a.m., reads *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and contemporary fiction, and spends four to five hours a day tracking TV's latest shows, such as *The Weakest Link*, *Fear Factor*, or a new Food Network entry. At Newhouse, he teaches three classes—History of TV from Milton Berle to the Present, Media Criticism, and Introduction to Popular Culture Studies. He also serves as the series editor of Syracuse University Press's television series and has written five books, including *Adventures in Prime Time* (Praeger, 1990) about producer Steven J. Cannell, and *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (Continuum, 1996).

Besides television, he's always studying the cultural landscape, looking for trends. For example, driving around Syracuse, Thompson made a mental note of the proliferation of storage sheds, the mini-warehouses where people stash their treasured memories and all the stuff they can't fit in the attic. "They were taking the place of corn or wheat on the landscape," he says. "To me they symbolized little cells of our memories." When a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times* called to ask why the number of storage sheds was increasing nationwide, Thompson was prepared. "By the time someone has figured out there's a new trend in popular culture to write about, as an academic in the field, I should already have noticed it," he says.



Courtesy of SU Media Library

"TV as an art form was at its best when it was at its silliest and frothiest."

Publicity, of course, often begets publicity. Once the *Los Angeles Times* quoted him on storage sheds, the next reporter writing a story on that subject who did a Lexis-Nexis search would likely track him down. "That makes me nervous," he says, "because Lexis has made research so easy that there's a narrowing of voices."

Why do reporters tap Thompson's expertise? When Rob Owen '93, a TV critic at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, was writing a story about *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* as it ended its lengthy run, he asked Thompson about the show's historical role in children's television. "Bob has an amazing ability to look at TV and understand its impact on our culture," Owen says. "He's good at offering pithy and entertaining quotes." Owen, of course, is no stranger to Thompson. As a Newhouse School undergraduate, he took Thompson's Television and Film Criticism course. "He taught me how to think critically about TV," Owen says. How influential is Thompson? David Zurawik, TV critic at the *Baltimore Sun*, was quoted as saying that when a story broke at a Pasadena, California, conference that the government was paying prime-time shows to



Courtesy of SU Media Library

“Pop culture is the milieu where people swim.”

air anti-drug messages, several reporters raced to a telephone to reach Thompson for comment.

Thompson owes his increasing stature as one of the country's reigning experts on popular culture to *The Love Boat*, known in many circles as one of television's silliest shows. As a graduate student at Northwestern University, earning a master's degree and a Ph.D. in radio, television, and film, he wrote an article for *The Journal of American Culture* on “The Love Boat: High Art on the High Seas.” His premise was that television was a new, modernistic art form that people watched while doing something else—unlike novels or ballet, which demand full attention. Viewers could tune to *The Love Boat* at any point and follow its plot, which, he noted, “broke down into an algebraic equation.” Thompson recognizes that *The Love Boat* was a lightweight show, but says, “TV as an art form was at its best when it was at its silliest and frothiest.” A *Washington Post* reporter read the article and interviewed him in 1986 for an article on *St. Elsewhere*, which coincidentally was one of Thompson's favorite shows. When the then-graduate student read his quote in one of the country's most prestigious newspapers, he admits it “was a heady experience.” Being quoted in the *Washington Post* made him realize that he could exert more influence as an expert being quoted in various publications than delivering a paper to a refined, select audience of scholars at a conference. “There is such a thing,” he says, “as the notion of public intellectual discourse.”

While Thompson has learned what reporters want during interviews, he balks at the idea that they are only seeking sound bites. “You can't answer questions as you would write a dissertation,” he says. Reporters are critical, skeptical thinkers who are seeking insight into the subject they're writing about, he suggests. Most challenging for Thompson,

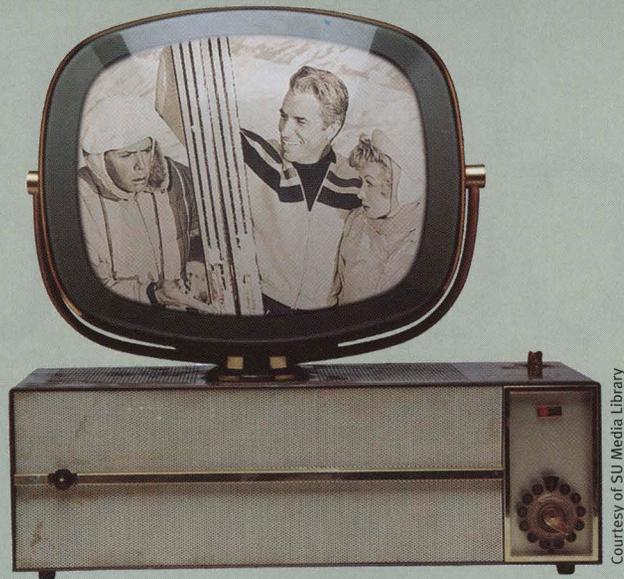
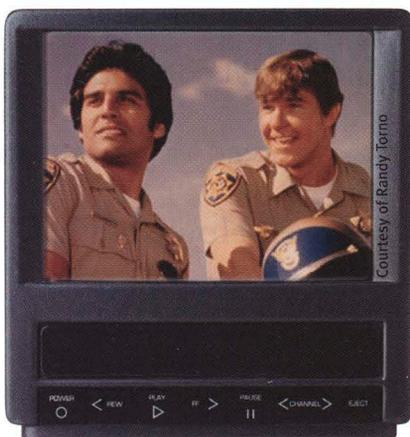
though, is when dozens of reporters converge on him, as they did with *Survivor*. This requires him to try to make every answer sound fresh and original, which is not an easy task.

Some academics, however, are critical of Thompson analyzing television shows in the same vein that other scholars treat James Joyce's novels or Picasso's paintings. In a 1997 *New York Times* article on Thompson, New York University professor and author Mark Crispin Miller chastised the SU professor for treating simplistic television seriously. “Most TV drama is aesthetically unappealing, and most TV comedy is too. For the most part, it's utterly derivative,” Miller said. But Thompson is not deterred by such criticism. “You can't assess TV by the same criteria as the novel any more than you can say ballet is better than opera,” he says. Thompson contends that there's good and bad TV, just like there's good and bad opera. For instance, he calls *The Simpsons* “one of the best cultural and social satires in this country. It deserves to be mentioned with Mark Twain and Will Rogers.” He considers *The Sopranos* and *Hill Street Blues* as dramas with complex characters and irony. “I like fast food and find visceral enjoyment in American television,” he says. “I see no problem reading Henry James's *Golden Bowl* and watching a rerun of *Laverne & Shirley*.” He also scoffs at people who claim TV takes people away from reading. “If you're watching a rerun of *Charles in Charge*, you wouldn't otherwise be reading a Dostoyevsky novel,” he quips. Moreover, he's critical of mass communication professors who do nothing but indict television and popular culture. “Why,” he wonders, “go into a field despising what you study?”

Perhaps it's fitting that Thompson was raised in Westmont, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, located at the crossroads of Americana, where Route 66 meets Oak Brook, Illinois, the international headquarters of McDonald's. Growing up, he was “no couch potato,” but during the late '60s he considered

The Andy Griffith Show as one of his favorite series. Reflecting back as an adult, he says: “Around me the social structure of America was coming unglued. That show represented a total escape from all of that,” a suitable metaphor for what television represents to America. When Thompson, who earned a bachelor’s degree in political science with a minor in art history from the University of Chicago, came home from the library one night, he faced a choice between watching an episode of the police show *C.H.I.P.S.*, and PBS’s Kenneth Clark series on Western civilization and modern art. Weary, he opted for *C.H.I.P.S.* and started thinking about TV’s impact on our culture. This eventually turned him into a graduate student in television at Northwestern University. After completing his studies, he taught at the SUNY College at Cortland before joining Newhouse’s television-radio-film department in 1990.

When asked why it’s so important for people to think critically about television and popular culture, Thompson ultimately replies: “Pop culture is the milieu where people swim. It’s the yolk of their egg.” He suggests that our lives are inseparable from popular culture, and he hopes his comments encourage people to think. “What exactly is the yolk made of?” he asks. “What am I consuming? The goal of any academic is to make someone see something in a new way.”



A Home for Popular TV

In 1997, Trustee Professor Robert Thompson embarked on a project to create the Center for the Study of Popular Television at SU to study and record television’s place in our cultural history. Working in concert with Newhouse Dean David Rubin, Thompson raised more than \$500,000—including \$300,000 from the Steven H. and Alida Brill Scheuer Foundation in New York and the remainder mostly from alumni—to launch the Center for the Study of Popular Television.

The center is dedicated to several goals, including establishing an oral history archive of television that features more than 250 taped interviews with such legends as Milton Berle, Steve Allen, Don Knotts, and E.G. Marshall. All of these interviews can be viewed or listened to at SU’s Bird Library and are also being transcribed and digitized. Through Syracuse University Press, the center has published 19 influential books on television. Among the titles are *Laughs, Luck...and Lucy*, a memoir co-written by *I Love Lucy* creator Jess Oppenheimer; and *Deny All Knowledge: Reading the X-Files* by David Lavery, a more traditional scholarly work. More books are in development. In addition, the center is collecting such TV documents as scripts, videotapes, and memos from executives.

What has been the center’s impact? “It is slowly but measurably making people in the United States think more carefully about TV,” Thompson says, “rather than simply dismissing it as a toxic influence on our culture.”

—Gary M. Stern