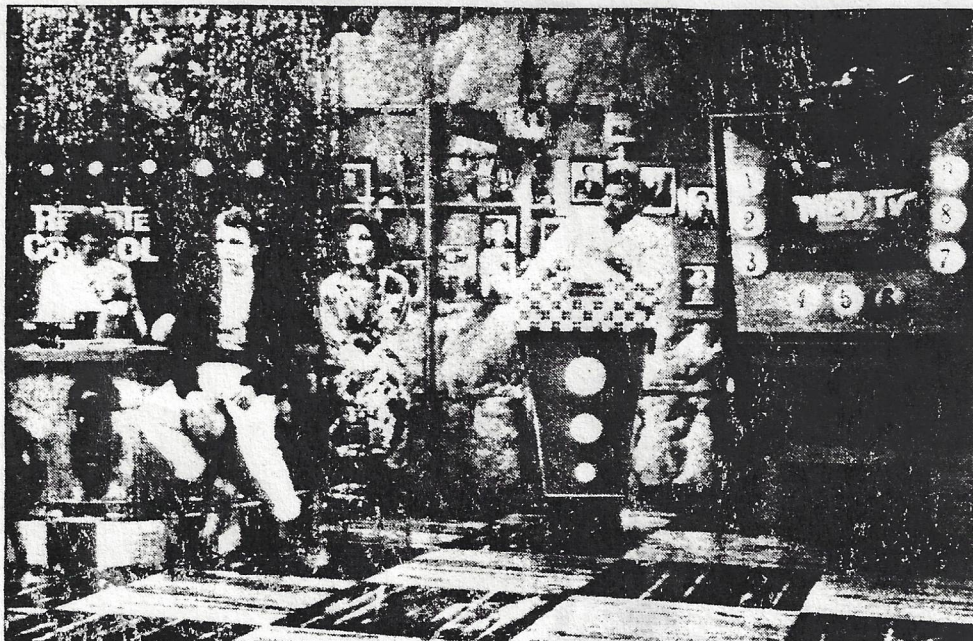




DANIEL ROOT

'Remote Control': The quiz that asks, 'Is it dead, alive or Indian food?'

Get Ready For the New MTV

It's slick, quick, loud, rapping, bopping, popping

Remember the New World Information Order? Well, it's here. But it sure ain't what you expected. During all those years of fretting about "cultural imperialism" and "responsible" news coverage, African ministers, Euro-parliamentarians and Asian politicians never dreamed—never nightmared—the shape of things already come. Now it's descending on them from satellites and slithering into their homes on cables. Some day soon, it may come beaming through little dishes the size of a dinner plate. It's slick, quick, loud, rapping, bopping, popping, full of sex, drugs and rock and roll. It is MTV, Music Television coming at you almost anywhere and everywhere you go.

Blasting beyond the boundaries of the rock videos that once were its *raison d'être*, MTV is following the trail blazed by the much more serious Cable News Network, which has brought the world together into one big info-community (seen in one form or another in 84 countries, from Baltimore to Beijing). MTV now claims to reach 90 million homes in 24 countries. It is pushing ecology along with heavy metal, racial equality along with rap, and, with a new program called "Buzz" set to air in Europe next spring, it will get into the video magazine business;

playing Rolling Stone, as it were, to CNN's International Herald Tribune.

The pilot program for "Buzz" leaps dizzily through categories like "Last" and "Sex" and "Fashion." There are clips of Japanese commercials (some starring Sly Stallone) and Indian ads where Super Dust Tea makes a dad superstrong enough to push a bus out of the monsoon mud. Onward to factoids: the number of years a Zimbabwean can be imprisoned for ridiculing the former president, the Rev. Canaan Banana (five). Measurements if Barbie were life-size (39-23-33). Onward to "Feature" segments: "Fear 1990 Fear; Hope 1990 Hope." A German-accented woman's voice intones from a man's mouth: "If you don't like something you see on 'Buzz,' don't worry, it will be over soon—like life."

Is Moscow next? Is Europe ready for this? To hear MTV executives talk, one might wonder if it's ready for anything else. Music, as they like to say, is the international language, and MTV as entertainment has been up and running in Britain and on the Continent since August 1987, steadily developing a flavor more international and, indeed, more 1992-ish than almost anything else on the air. Not only American and British, but Swedish, Belgian, Dutch and French videos have

scored hits on MTV Europe. The disc jockeys (now video jockeys) come from Denmark and New Zealand, France, Holland and England, producing their shows in London studios. The signal makes its way to Amsterdam on cable, to Athens by conventional terrestrial transmission. There are even 35,000 cable viewers in Hungary, and Moscow looks like a potential growth market. A recent British Cable Authority annual report named MTV its cable station with the highest EC program content.

But if you can catch your breath for a second, which is sometimes difficult to do in the middle of an MTV rush, you have to wonder where all this is leading. European television traditionally has moved at a deliberate (some say stultifying) pace. After watching a bit of MTV, a literary talk show like

France's "Apostrophes"—so interesting in the past—suddenly looks positively soporific. Your attention span starts to shrink like a cheap T shirt. And is the MTV social conscience a sign of sincerity, or merely of fashion? Sure, MTV is producing 32 environmental spots. But is that just because green is an "in" color these days? Its "Rock Against Drugs" campaign accumulated praise. But the bands in the videos still have the zonked-out complexion of Beatles and Cream. Does the multiracialism run any deeper than the United Colors of Benetton?

For the moment, social awareness sells. But when MTV goes sponsor-shopping, only a handful of companies have the money, interest and worldwide market to justify the price. Most of those are pushing soft drinks and candy. Nobody's knocking sugar on MTV these days.

For every eco-spot or factoid, there is a deluge of programming as intellectually nutritious as microwave popcorn. "Remote Control," the MTV game show, is a daily paean to the couch-potato life. Contestants answer trivia questions about the lives of the Brady Bunch and plumb the mysteries of tricky categories like "Dead, Alive or Indian Food." The host says the name Rogan Gosh. Is this someone dead, or alive, or some kind of Indian food? Now how about Salman Rushdie?

"Take a spin through the pop-culture blender," intones the androgynous Everyman hosting the "Buzz" pilot. OK, do it. The problem is, you leave a blender on too long, all you get is mush.

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