

# TELEVISION QUARTERLY



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TELEVISION QUARTERLY  
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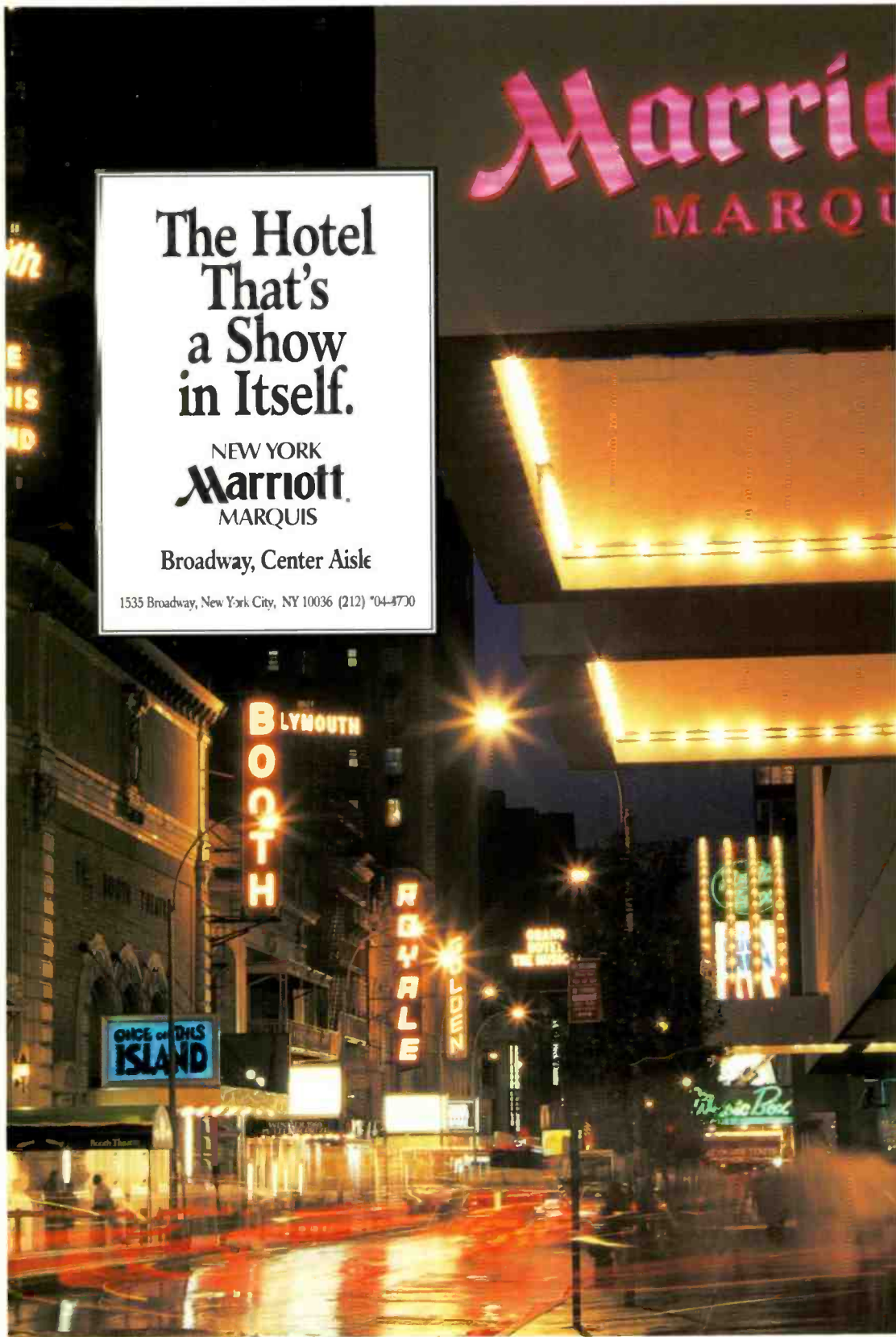
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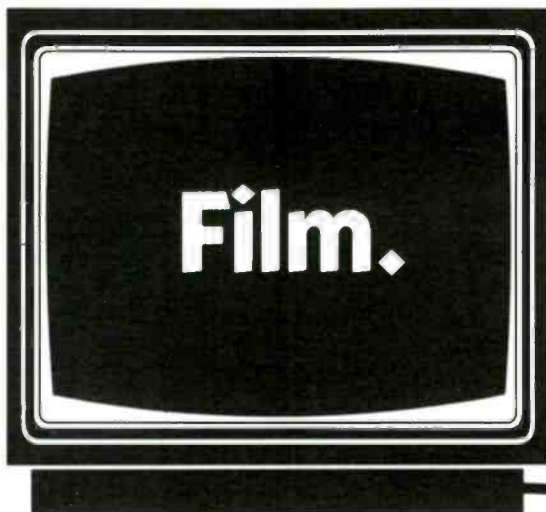
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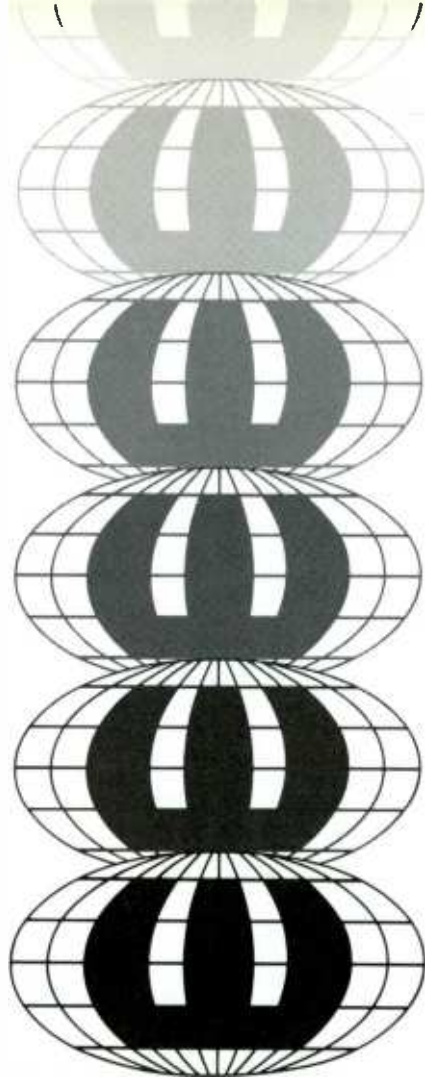
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# TELEVISION AND THE SECURITY OF NATIONS: LEARNING FROM THE GULF WAR

What happened to TV during the Gulf War and why did it happen? What could the networks and other major news organizations have done to fight manipulation? What about the future of the media-military relationship?... A distinguished scholar raises some provocative questions and offers some challenging answers.

**BY PATRICK O'HEFFERNAN**

**"L**essons from the Gulf. The war is over, but the battle between TV and the Pentagon rages on," read the headline in *TV Guide* as the final cease-fire agreement was being signed between the U.S.-led Coalition and the Iraqi government. In truth, there was never more than a skirmish between the media and the military during the Gulf War and the most obvious lesson is that the American military rolled over the media as easily as it rolled over the Iraqi Army — for almost the same reason. Television news organizations, like the Republican Guards, never put up a fight. Instead, they allowed themselves to be manipulated by the United States military, the Department of State and the White House without a whimper and sometimes with enthusiasm.

To understand why this happened requires examining the experience of the Gulf war in light of the interdepen-

dent mutually exploitive relationship between the media — especially television — and the foreign policy apparatus of the U.S. government and the military. These two world-girdling systems need each other to function, but both continually use each other for their own interests.

Government wants to control the media's agenda and the content and spin of stories on the conduct and justification of wars. Mass media's wants are more complex. News organizations want inexpensive and immediate information such as press releases and photo opportunities, and they want access to newsmakers like the President and General Schwarzkopf. But the corporations that own news organizations want other things: they want to be as unregulated as possible, and they want the government to regulate their competition.

This more complex mix of television's wants from government, combined with television's greater technical vulnerability to official controls, can subject it to more stringent government influence than other media receive. It also sometimes leads to invisible self-censorship in net-

work level decisions with an eye on regulatory issues ongoing elsewhere. In light of this, to understand the real lessons of the Gulf War for television we need to ask five questions:

- What happened to television reporting during the war?
- Why did it happen?
- What was the social and political fallout?
- What could television have done instead?
- What does the future hold for the media-military relationship?

*1. What happened to television during the Gulf war?*

The principal media-related activity during the Gulf war was that the media were shamelessly and successfully manipulated by the military. Television was a particular target of this manipulation because of its immediate worldwide reach.

The most flagrant manipulation was television's use as a strategic military weapon. General Schwarzkopf admitted that he deliberately misled the media to think that the major Coalition assault would come on the ground against Iraqi fortifications and by sea onto Kuwaiti beaches. United States and world television ran tapes of assault and landing exercises—all carefully monitored in Baghdad. As a result, the Coalition sweep around Iraqi forces dug in to defend the points the media told them would be attacked was unbelievably successful. The military cynically and premeditatedly manipulated the media for strategic purposes and it worked.

A second form of manipulation included misrepresentations and outright lies fed to a largely uncritical media by the various governments involved in the war. For instance, United States battle casualties were consistently misrepre-

sented by military briefers as "training accidents", to keep them small. This was discovered by a print reporter from the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, Johnathan Franklin. Franklin posed as a mortician to get inside the mortuary that received the remains of United States troops killed in the Gulf. He discovered and reported that actual battle casualties were 400% higher than those reported by the Pentagon<sup>1</sup>. Another example of misrepresentation that especially affected television emerged from the "smart bomb" tapes given TV producers. The saturation use of these tapes on news programming gave the impression that all United States bombing was high-tech and pinpoint, when in fact only 7% of the bombs were "smart" and 70% of all munitions dropped on Iraq missed their target.<sup>2</sup>

The pool system also manipulated television reporting, much more so than it did print. Pooling gave Public Information Officers careful control of the news destinations of camera crews. By denying producers the opportunity to tape the fighting, the military virtually forced them to run a deluge of "hi mom" stories just to get something on the air. Again, print reporters were sometimes able to evade the pool controls and report on real action and uncover misrepresentation, but camera crews and TV correspondents were often too visible and too vulnerable to risk it.<sup>3</sup>

*2. Why did it happen?*

Manipulation of the media like this is not new. Nor is it new that the intent of the military manipulation of the media—and particularly of television—was not military security, but the management of domestic politics. President Reagan in 1983 used a photograph of a commercial airfield being built in Grenada with Canadian funding to justify his claim on the network news shows that Cuban offensive facilities were being built there.<sup>4</sup> What was new in the Gulf is



that, in the face of ample evidence of the negative impacts of this manipulation on public opinion—including the public's opinion of the media—there was virtually no organized resistance on the part of national and international news organizations.

The reasons for television's failure to resist manipulation to the degree it has in other cases are subtle and varied. An important influence seems to have been a sense of guilt over charges that the mass media, especially television, "lost the Vietnam war." Another is the sophistication of government Public Information Officers who built on the experience of Grenada and Panama to intimidate, deceive and distract news personnel.

A third is the tight budgets caused by a downturn in advertising revenue combined with a significant increase in ENG costs due to expensive new technologies and skyrocketing fees for satellite time and other expenses associated with "live global coverage." Finally, corporate eyes on the pending FinSyn ruling, telephone company attempts to enter cable, cable-rate regulation, FCC consideration of limits on advertising on children's programs and other bottom-line regulatory questions before the Administration may have contributed subtly to television's largely uncritical support for the Gulf War policy.

### 3. *What were the results of the manipulation of television during the war?*

Unfortunately, the coverage resulting from the military manipulation of the media during the war now may have led to a number of disturbing changes in public opinion about questioning Administration foreign policy and about increased controls on news organizations. A detailed opinion poll taken during the Gulf War by the Center for the Study of Communication<sup>5</sup> found that:

- While 84% of those polled supported the war, most of them knew very little about it; 74% answered questions regarding U.S. policy toward Iraq incorrectly and only 2% knew that Saddam invaded Kuwait because of Kuwait's lowering of oil prices and drilling for oil in Iraqi territory.

- Television tended to confuse audiences about the war, build support for it, and turn the public against the media in general; the major source of information on the Gulf war was television, but the correlation between TV news viewing and knowledge about the war was negative, as was the correlation between knowledge about the war and support for it. However there was a positive correlation between television news viewing and support for the war. In other words, Center researchers point out, the more television news about the war an audience watched, the less they were likely to know about it and the more they were likely to support it.

Other polls showed that the more an audience supported the war, the less they liked television reporting and the more they supported increased press controls.<sup>6</sup> One conclusion possible from these findings is that television's failure to inform its audience of the true causes and the real impacts of the war may have helped create the negative public image of television news and public support for additional censorship.

### 4. *What could the networks and major news organizations have done to fight manipulation?*

They could have taken four actions, each now a missed opportunity.

- *Litigate.* The television networks and other major news organizations could have joined the lawsuit filed January 10, 1991 in federal court by a number of magazines and wire services, or a companion suit filed by

Agence France-Presse. Not only did they not join the suit, news of the litigation was virtually blacked out in network news and major print media.

- *Retaliate.* One newspaper editor said that if his reporters were to be barred from the pools or otherwise prevented from reporting on the war from the Gulf, he would send them to Washington to do investigative pieces on "every general sleeping with his secretary and every military contractor paying bribes to procurement officers until the Pentagon yelled "uncle" and dropped the controls." While this attitude may not be particularly constructive, it does point out that the major media, and especially television because of its reach and immediacy, can use their power to put pressure on government agencies that refuse to cooperate in the legitimate coverage of news.

- *Investigate.* Network news organizations complained that the pool restrictions allowed few opportunities for independent investigative reporting. Yet the *Bay Guardian* got inside the military's morgue to reveal distortions of casualty figures; the *St. Petersburg Times* used commercially available satellite photographs to show that there was no evidence to support the Administration's claims of an Iraqi buildup threatening Saudi Arabia (photos ABC News was aware of but did not use)<sup>7</sup>; and *Time Magazine*, the *New York Times* and *Jane's Defense Weekly* all uncovered and reported information that belied the Administration's assertion that Saddam was close to possession of nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, unless that kind of information reaches the network news programs, any administration will feel secure in the knowledge that the majority of Americans are unaware of its misrepresentations and keep repeating the claim.

- *Violate the rules in time-honored American journalistic custom.* Many print and television journalists did violate the rules in the Gulf, conducting unauthorized interviews and sneaking into military units that were willing to have them along, some at great personal risk. At the end of the war a number of television reporters were able to get close to the front with uplinks and beam real-time reports to a voracious audience. But there were no massive refusals to cooperate in the censorship and, unfortunately, there were incidents of network pool reporters turning in independent reporters who violated the rules in order to get past the official line and report the facts.<sup>8</sup> Easier said than done; violating the rules requires a suspension of some of the competitiveness that marks American TV journalists. Coalition Public Information Officers were able to use this competitiveness to keep many of the more enterprising reporters in line, with television being most sensitive to these pressures because of its equipment requirements, million-dollar investments in Gulf reporting, and enormous stakes in ratings.

##### 5. *What does the future hold?*

At the heart of the answer to this question is the built-in tension between a military that wants to hold information for review and resolution and a media that wants to broadcast it immediately. Given the mutually exploitive relationship between television and government, and the military's built-in national security argument in wartime, predicting how the lessons of the Gulf war will affect future war coverage is risky. At best, we can say that there are a number of possible outcomes of the military-media conflict during and after the Gulf war:

- *Technology will obsolete the existing rules.* Pocket-sized satphones based on existing satellite beeper technology, use of compressed im-

ages on phone lines, small easily concealed betacam, routine use of satellite photography and other technologies as yet undeveloped will give news teams the ability to evade censorship at the source and get the pictures out. This will not solve the problem of retribution for broadcasting embarrassing material, but it will give ENG crews and TV news directors more flexibility in the face of censorship.

- *The international (non-U.S.) media will become more willing to sidestep U.S. media controls.* As non-United States news organizations grow in size, capability and technical sophistication, they may grow bolder in resisting United States press controls than U.S.-based organizations because they are not burdened with conflicting regulatory and business concerns in Washington. However, as global and regional news organizations interconnect more through tape sharing, syndication, and other agreements, images and information collected by one nation's reporters will be increasingly available quickly to those of many other nations for rebroadcast or comment making source restriction by the military tougher.

- *Global all-news organizations like CNN, ITN, VizNews and the BBC may push the envelope of permissibility and innovation more than the networks.* CNN's innovation in broadcasting from Baghdad may start a tradition of risk-taking and pre-planning on the part of all news organizations that must live or die on the strength of their news coverage. All-news organizations are also freer of regulatory concerns than the entertainment/news networks, and therefore more willing to take risks. Because of the multination reach of CNN, ITN, BBC and other global news organizations, they have a more diverse and demanding audience to satisfy, further incentive to

resist censorship or innovate around it.

- *All or none of the above: muddling through next time.* If this occurs, it is likely that TV will cover the next war like they covered the last war, rushing reporters and equipment to the scene while the Public Information Officers make up the rules as they go along to protect domestic politics and gain maximum positive image for the military and its weapons. And the same tensions and arguments will be heard as were voiced during and after the Gulf war.

##### 5. *What should be done?*

No one can predict how television will respond to the next war, but one step can be taken now to reduce the media-military conflict and insure a free and appropriate flow of information to the people in whose name that war will be fought. This step is a recognition by both the media and government of the new role of television in international relations and nations' security in time of war. More than any other news medium, television has shifted from an observer/reporter to a player in world politics and that shift is most apparent in war reporting. Live, real-time globally broadcast reports from battlefields or refugee camps make every war everyone's war.

All nations and all peoples are now audiences and judges of international actions, especially those that involve violence. Technology will continue to make control over images and information about war more illusory. And as images and information are broadcast, they will be used to support military action, to shape public opinion, to pressure and embarrass governments, to start, stop, enlarge, reduce, justify and condemn wars. The mutual exploitive relationship between media and government will continue to evolve and change, making old rules and traditions ob-

solete but seldom producing new ones. New rules will come only with determined, focused international effort.

That effort could be initiated in the form of an ongoing international structure to continually discuss and monitor the media-security relationships and formulate guidelines, anticipate problems, and keep all sides informed of new developments. Such a structure could be set up under the auspices of the United Nations Security Council or Military Staff Committee and involve the NAB, RTNDA, CNN's World Report organization, the United States Army's Defense Information Institute, and international representatives of the interests involved in questions surrounding media and national security and war coverage. The structure would function as a kind of interna-

tional coordinating and consultive body that keeps all sides informed and thinking ahead so that muddling through will be the last, not the first choice when it comes to covering the next war. Such a course will serve all the parties at the table, and the important one that is not there: the emerging global audience. ■

Patrick O'Heffernan who is Associate Director of the Center for International Strategy, Technology and Policy at the Georgia Institute of Technology, and Visiting Professor of International Relations, directs the media research program of the Center. Dr. O'Heffernan is currently managing two research projects for the Center, one on the impact of mass media on national security, and another on *glasnost* and the Soviet use of mass media. Among his books is the recently published *Mass Media and U.S. Foreign Policy*.

#### NOTES

1 "Inside the Desert Storm Mortuary," by Johnathan Franklin, San Francisco Bay Guardian, March 6, 1991. According to Guardian story, one mortuary worker confided to Franklin that the real number of deaths in Desert Storm was closer to 200; the government acknowledged only 55. The Guardian used interviews with mortuary workers as the basis of a report on Sept. 26, 1990 that combat deaths from the Panama invasion were also disguised as "training accidents." Such interviews were not difficult to obtain and could have provided the network and CNN news with the kind of independent verification of officials sources many complained the sequestering of reporters during the invasion prevented. Similar initiative on the part of the network news teams, perhaps using palmsized camcorders inside the mortuary (as CBS used to outfox the Chinese government during Tiananmen Square) would have provided the verification of the government's numbers lacking during Desert Storm.

2 The American Air Force released this information after the war. See New York Times 3/20/1991, page A15.

3 And unfortunately some of those that risked it, like a CBS news crew, were captured by Iraqi forces or arrested by Coalition military police.

4 Knut Royce. "Did U.S. Distort Facts on Key Gulf Issues?" San Francisco Chronicle, January 30, 1991.

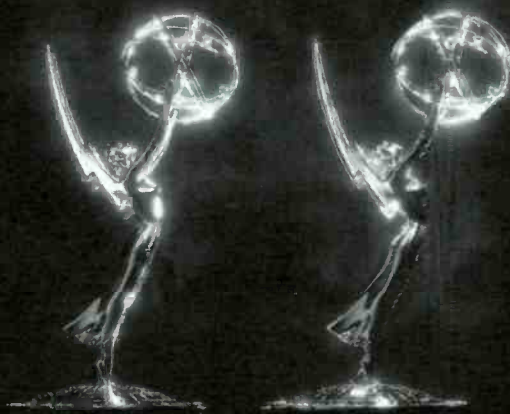
5 Sut Jhally, Justin Lewis and Michael Morgan, "The Gulf War: A Study of the Media, Public Opinion and Public Knowledge" reprinted in *The Persian Gulf War, the Media and Our Right to Know*. (Oakland CA: DATACENTER, March 1991).

6 USA Today poll, February 24, 1991; ABC News-Washington Post Poll, February 14, 1991.

7 Jean Heller first reported the story in the St. Petersburg Times on January 6 that Russian satellite photos bought from the Soyuz-Karta agency and interpreted by a former government expert showed none of the troop, tank, ammunition or infrastructure claimed by President Bush on September 11. In These Times reported on February 27, 1991 (pages 1-2) that ABC news purchased the same photos in November, with the exception of one photo of the strategically important areas of southern Kuwait—available from the agency for \$1560 with only a phone call—and decided not to use them or to pursue the story. See David Albright and Mark Hibbs. "Hyping the Iraqi Bomb." *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 1991.

8 In one case, pool reporters were being told by the US military PIOs that the Coalition had retaken the town of Khafji, when in fact, it had been captured by Iraqis. A reporter from The Independent of London made his way to the scene independent of the pool to verify this; an ABC reporter who spotted him and turned him in to the Marine public affairs officer. See *Washington Journalism Review*, March 1991 pages 2-4.

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## LEONARD BERNSTEIN — THE TELEVISION JOURNEY

He is remembered as a great conductor and composer, but he was also a remarkable figure in the history of television. A colleague provides a memorable closeup of Bernstein as a teacher who showed how to use the medium as an instrument for making great music accessible to the millions.

**BY SCHUYLER G. CHAPIN**

**O**n October 14, 1990, Leonard Bernstein, America's seminal force in the world of music, died at age 72. Exuberant and uninhibited as a composer, conductor, pianist, writer and educator, he was arguably the most talented musician this nation ever produced. He was also, for over thirty-five years, a good friend and colleague who detested any thought of aging or dying, yet even during

his excruciatingly painful last weeks never lost his overpowering passion for music or his humor. A few days before his death, with friends and family sprawled around his bedroom, he began sketching his own obituary. "Struck down in the prime of life..." he said. His friend, the actor Michael Wager, asked what came after that beginning. "I don't know," Bernstein murmured, "that's up to you!"

It's my view that an unspoken part of the "up to you" centers on television, a fact brilliantly recognized by

critic Robert S. Clark in his tribute essay marking the Museum of Broadcasting's 1985 Bernstein television celebration: "Some of the gifted among us are twice blessed: they yoke arresting talents to historic coincidences that enable them to make the most of their gifts. Leonard Bernstein is one of these: it was his—and our—good fortune that he and American television grew to maturity together."

Clark goes on to say that had television not existed, Bernstein's career would have been the most remarkable career ever for a classically trained musician in America, yet to him—and to me—it seems unarguable that his creative and recreative work is indivisible from its television manifestations.

Bernstein's activities in this field seem to fall into three distinct but interconnected areas: the first are programs where he acts as teacher/interlocutor for music of many different kinds—mainstream classical, contemporary classical, jazz, musical comedy and rock—and where, beginning in 1954, he took this role to its ultimate in a continuing string of appearances on *Omnibus*, *Lincoln Presents* and *Ford Presents* and, from 1958 until 1972, in the fifty-three remarkable programs that make up the acclaimed *Young People's Concerts*; the second are programs of his work as a composer, including his symphonies and some of his stage works—*Mass*, *Trouble in Tahiti*, *Wonderful Town* and *Candide* in particular, plus his deeply moving *Chichester Psalms*; and third in the over seventy programs of his appearances as a conductor, with orchestras that included the New York Philharmonic, the London Symphony, the Israel Philharmonic and, especially, the Vienna Philharmonic.

In my view, however, the programs that brought the most unbelievable dimensions to the medium are in the first category: his role as unique musical mover and teacher, talents

which first came to public attention in 1954 as a result of the program *Omnibus*.

**A** word of history here. *Omnibus* began its life in 1952, created as the TV/Radio Workshop of the Ford Foundation. It was the first commercial television outlet for experimentation in the arts, and from the beginning the program's approach to music was fresh and unusual. As an example, an early telecast featured selections from Modeste Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, but instead of a traditional concert-style performance the program enlisted showman/maestro Leopold Stokowski to explain the story behind the composition. Stokowski gave viewers a guided tour through a mock art gallery, pointing out the particular pictures that inspired each musical section.

Excerpts from the pieces were played along the way, causing the critic Howard Taubman to note that "if the television audience must be led by the hand, it should get its verbal guidance at the beginning and the end, but once the composer has the floor he should be allowed to hold it." Never mind: the program clearly demonstrated *Omnibus's* determination to make the arts come alive on television.

The series' most slam/bang music programs, however, took off with Bernstein on November 14, 1954, oddly enough eleven years to the day since his first front-page explosion with the public when, as the assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic, he stepped in to replace an ill Bruno Walter on a Sunday afternoon Carnegie Hall concert and CBS radio broadcast. The November 1954 program, his first on television, featured the then 35-year old maestro discussing the structure of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.



From its opening moments, it was obvious that a totally new approach to music and television was underway. Bernstein stood on a huge studio floor painted with the score of the first movement and pointed to the first four notes with his shoe. "Three G's and an E-Flat," he said, looking straight at the camera, "baby simple..."

During the half-hour that followed he took viewers on an intense and fascinating exploration of musical creation. He deployed instrumentalists as stand-ins for notation, alternating visual representations of Beethoven's first, second and sometimes later-generation thoughts about now familiar passages with illustrations of their sound.

It was both illuminating and amusing; the orchestra—unaccustomed to the glare of the camera's eye—sometimes looked like a bunch of embarrassed children caught playing hookey. Using the giant score as a backdrop, and with the camera looking down at a high angle, the musicians were arranged in positions which corresponded precisely with their instrument's notation in the score—the oboist seated above the oboe's musical part, the clarinetist above his part, and so on. All this was accompanied by the maestro displaying his unique gift for combining homely metaphors (the "last lap" of a symphonic movement) with nutshell lessons ("The artist will give away his life and energies to be sure that one note follows with complete inevitability").

This first TV appearance opened up a revolutionary era in music telecasting. The maestro brought the medium more than just his boundless enthusiasm and natural gifts: He knew how to convey the intellectual and emotional passion of his art in a way that was accessible and stimulating to all types of viewers. His style at once confronted the middlebrow on his or her own level, without stooping; you might say he

escorted and seduced his viewers along the paths of least resistance. As a result, more than any musician before—or since—Bernstein understood television's potential to unlock the mysteries of music and make the home audiences care as deeply as he did about the glories of its expressive language.

**A** year later, another *Omnibus* appearance confirmed his status as one of the medium's "great communicators." This time, in a segment entitled "The World of Jazz," he applied his skills to explaining the intricacies of "The St. Louis Blues." With slides, piano demonstrations and a jazz quintet to support his points, he again revealed his special knack for making musical discussions vivid and fun. Even if viewers couldn't completely grasp all of his examples of harmony and minor scale developments, it was easy to be carried along by his charm and infectious enthusiasm.

"The World of Jazz" was followed in late 1955 by "The Art of Conducting," a program in which he discussed and illustrated the importance of the conductor, and what might happen if an orchestra worked without a leader. A year later he explored "The American Musical Comedy," tracing its history back to *The Black Crook* of 1866, Gilbert and Sullivan and Victor Herbert, discussing its roots in vaudeville and variety shows. Carol Burnett was one of his assisting artists on that program, doing a never-to-be-forgotten imitation of Ethel Merman in *Du Barry Was a Lady* as well as singing excerpts from *South Pacific*.

One of my favorites of the *Omnibus* series was aired on March 31, 1957. On this program he set out to demolish the notion—often widely held—that the music of Johann Sebastian Bach is boring. Right at the start, he plunged in by declaring that when he was a young piano student he

was taken by the "immediacy" of the slow movement of the Italian Concerto. He proceeded to illustrate his point but then conceded that much of Bach can come across as "more motion than emotion." Asserting that audiences today are accustomed to music of dramatic contrast, he characterized Bach's music as being "about one thing at a time, just as the architecture of a bridge grows inevitably out of one initial arch." He went on to talk about Bach's musical structures as basically being a single theme or idea, after which came elaboration, discussion, reiteration and argumentation.

"That frightening bugaboo counterpoint," he said, "is nothing to be afraid of," and he illustrated from scores, showing at one point how the contrapuntal strands of Bach's chorale preludes resemble "smoothly flowing rivers dotted-with islands" of chorale tunes. A choir, dressed to suggest the churchgoing fashion of the composer's time, as well as a troupe of instrumentalists, aided in his remarkable effort to get beneath the skin of Bach's scores.

That same year, CBS decided to feature Bernstein's talents on a more regular basis by televising the New York Philharmonic's Young People's Concerts. The concerts themselves were a longtime Philharmonic tradition; I can remember as a child sailing paper airplanes around Carnegie Hall during long, and I'm afraid, boring presentations of various kinds, but in Bernstein's hands the concerts had become the perfect forum to showcase his flair for instruction and inspiration. But the question remained of how to transform those live music events into interesting television.

Enter Roger Englander, a young musician and stage director who had worked with the maestro at Tanglewood eleven years earlier, when Bernstein conducted the American premier of Benjamin Britten's *Peter*

*Grimes*. They had become good friends, even at one point discussing a collaboration to adapt a James M. Cain novel for what would have been Bernstein's first opera. When that project evaporated, Englander moved on to television, where he became a CBS staff producer-director assigned to news, sports and public affairs. At heart, though, he was still a musician, and as such deeply concerned about finding more television commitment for good music, especially for young people. Richard Lewine, then Director of Special Programs for the network, suggested he might be just the person to work with Bernstein, a collaboration that grew to create what is now recognized as television's greatest contribution to music and arts education.

The format devised by Bernstein and Englander began with the first broadcast on January 18, 1958. Recognizing that few people could match the maestro's attention-holding powers, Englander knew it was equally important to use some of the medium's unique resources to enhance and underscore each concert's primary themes. Not only was camerawork carefully planned in advance to coordinate with the music being played, but special visual material was inserted to illustrate key points.

**P**ictures of composers appeared at the mention of their names; so did views of rocket ships when they were needed to demonstrate the propulsion of, say, a Gioacchino Rossini overture. In this way the Young People's telecasts combined the best features of a live concert program—the excitement of musicians performing before a large audience—with technical feats more often associated in studio productions.

Bernstein's magic with the audience at Carnegie Hall, and later at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall,

and his fervor in discussing the first concert's topic of "What Does Music Mean?" came across with such effectiveness that two more Young People's broadcasts aired in the months that followed, and their successes, in turn, persuaded CBS to keep the series going, airing them live on the Saturday mornings when the concerts actually took place.

They probably would have stayed indefinitely as live presentations tucked safely away in broadcast limbo had it not been for the famous Newton Minnow speech voicing public sentiment about the blandness of network programming. Minnow, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission at that time, lashed out at network television, calling it "...a vast wasteland." CBS countered his stinging words by scheduling the Young People's Concerts at 7:30 PM on Saturday nights, virtually prime time. They stayed that way for three seasons, until the FCC went on to other campaigns and the pressure was off. Then they were transferred to Sunday afternoons, and many of the new viewers followed.

By this time, the Young People's Concerts had become part of pop culture. They were parodied on nighttime comedies, cartoons appeared in magazines and there were references to Beethoven and Bernstein in *Peanuts*. Films of the concerts were loaned to schools through the Bell System and McGraw-Hill; two volumes of Bernstein scripts were published by Simon and Schuster and the shows themselves were translated into twelve languages for syndication in forty countries.

As Englander himself described, Bernstein usually planned the subjects and the programs in such a way as to include music he was also rehearsing for the Philharmonic's regular subscription series. Weeks before the concert date he would send a draft of his script, handwritten in pencil on yellow legal pads,

ready for typing. "The script conferences were happily anticipated rituals held at Bernstein's apartment," Englander noted.

"Our staff was small, but boisterous and creative. Mary Rodgers, with her experience in writing children's books, would suggest ways to clarify and simplify the text; young John Corigliano would advance musical arguments befitting a budding composer; Ann Blumenthal, stopwatch in hand, would time Bernstein's script-reading and piano snippets, miraculously allowing for the badinage of crosstalk and peppery asides; Jack Gottlieb would meticulously catalog the musical examples for the orchestra's cue sheet; and Candy Finkler would document the word changes in the script, and insist that we maintain some level of decorum."

Englander went on to say that Bernstein always wrote every word of each script, inviting suggestions and comments in the process, but insisting that since he was doing the speaking he would not be comfortable delivering someone else's words. "On the other hand," according to Englander "he left the visual side of the productions completely to us."

And that visual side was really the orchestral score. It became the shooting script, with the music holding the answers to the director's task of translating sound into pictures. Englander goes on: "As in all temporal forms, the individual shots were important only in context; changing the image at the correct musical moment was more important than the content of the picture itself."

These methods did not pass unnoticed. An early review in *The New York Times* commented that "the exceptionally good camera work of the television crew appeared as if it were part of the orchestrations themselves."

**D**uring the early years of the Young People's Concerts, Bernstein was also, occasionally, invited to return to the more adult-oriented format he had pioneered with *Omnibus*. On a late Sunday afternoon in November 1958, in a slot usually reserved for *Ted Mack's Amateur Hour*, the maestro and the New York Philharmonic offered another of his ebullient lecture/demonstrations, this time on the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Seated in what appeared to be his office, the program opened with the maestro grabbing the score, looking directly into the camera and proclaiming: "What a phenomenal work; there's so much in this work!" He then began an enthusiastic discussion, punctuated at the piano by assorted examples, and once again uncovered the wonders of musical structure in a way that helped even inexperienced listeners come to terms with Beethoven's formal power.

This time Howard Taubman wrote: "Bernstein has the gift of making music fascinating. His talks are knowledgeable, witty, serious and ingeniously threaded with musical illustration... As an intelligent musician he never loses sight of the fundamental nature of the art he is analyzing. As a performer who rejoices in the pleasure that flows from a responsive audience, he has mastered the knack of throwing light on the processes of music in an exciting way. He knows the uses of legitimate showmanship; he can illuminate his subject without patronizing or demeaning it."

After the performance of the "Ode to Joy," with the Westminster Choir and soloists Leontyne Price, Maureen Forrester, Leopold Simoneau and Norman Scott, the program concluded as it had begun, with Bernstein back in his office, calmly smoking a cigarette. The toll of conducting was apparent in his sloped shoulders and more relaxed manner, but with the gracious-

ness of a host at the end of a long party, he thanked the audience for watching. The intimacy of television made a small moment like this almost irresistible.

In 1968, Bernstein stepped down as the New York Philharmonic's music director but continued the *Young People's Concerts* until 1972. 1968 also marked the year I was winding up my job as vice president for programs at Lincoln Center; he and I decided to create a small production company together in anticipation of major technological changes in television and home video. Our prime purpose was to film or videotape musical performances for the then non-existing cassette market. No American broadcasting company had any interest in what we proposed to do, but Roger L. Stevens, the distinguished Broadway producer did. He bankrolled our first venture, a video recording of Verdi's *Requiem* made in St. Paul's Cathedral, London, with the London Symphony Orchestra, the London Symphony Chorus and soloists Martina Arroyo, Josephine Vesey, Placido Domingo and Ruggerio Raimondi.

**T**he success of that project led CBS to invite us to create a ninety-minute prime time special celebrating Beethoven's 200th birthday, which we filmed in Vienna 1970. With the distinguished BBC television director Humphrey Burton as our production partner, the program was a Bernstein biographical and musical tour of Beethoven's life and works. The network, delighted with the show (it came in on schedule and under budget) nonetheless aired it, for no apparent reason, one year late.

It was at this point that Beta/Unitel in Munich, a production company with an eye very much on the long-term future, approached us with an

almost irresistible offer: to film the nine symphonies of Gustav Mahler, the four symphonies of Brahms and other works Bernstein might decide with whatever orchestras he wished.

It was a fabulous and timely moment. Humphrey Burton signed on as series director; I was executive producer until I left to join the Metropolitan Opera, at which point my place was taken by Harry Kraut, who held the post until the maestro's death. Over the years that association produced over seventy different musical programs that have been seen all over the world, many on PBS in this country. Plans for additional productions were already set into the 1990's.

As it turned out, one of Bernstein's final appearances on what we might refer to as normal American prime time commercial television, was the aforementioned CBS Special marking the 200th birthday of Beethoven. Called *Beethoven's Birthday: A Celebration in Vienna*, it contained, along with a series of marvelous performances, a magnificent statement about the quality of Beethoven's music. Looking right into the camera, as was often the Bernstein way, he described the composer's music as being "accessible without being ordinary."

If you look carefully at those four words they also describe Bernstein himself, who was certainly accessible—to ideas, people, music, life—but never, never ordinary. As *The New York Times*, in an editorial two days after his death, put it: "Leonard Bernstein had 72 years of life. They weren't nearly enough for all he wanted to do, all he could have done, all he should have done. 'Should' because talents like his impose enormous responsibilities. If he didn't wholly fulfill all of them the fault wasn't his. Time got in the way... America discovered that musician on the afternoon of November 14, 1943, when the 25-year old assistant

conductor of the New York Philharmonic took over for an ailing Bruno Walter. For the next 47 years Leonard Bernstein was an important part of America's culture, and its conscience. Forty-seven years: not long enough." ■

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**MCA TV**

**The Call Letters  
Of Show Business.**

# TELEVISION JOURNALISM IN THE '90s: STAY TUNED. OR WILL YOU?

A media critic sees the need for more reforms, including a multiplicity of choices and more minority voices, leading to a truly informed consent.

**BY BEN H. BAGDIKIAN**

**W**hat is the state of television journalism as America enters the 1990s? It is not an idle question. But it must be viewed in the context of television's dynamic changes.

After 40 years as a national mass medium, TV is the largest single source of daily influence on national values, culture, news and politics. Children spend more time watching television than they spend in school, or talking with their parents. The typical adult, Nielsen reports, watches 3½ hours a week.

Answering the question of the state of American television depends on which state of the institution you look at.

The easiest overall answer is about technology and the industry as a whole. Both are booming. Technology continues to expand and diversify. Satellites, cable, VCRs, stereo sound, and the prospect of high definition movie-like screens and interactive computer connections mean that the forms and outlets of televised images continue to expand.

The aspects of television most reported in the news deal with financial and industrial change. Television en-

gages ever more of national dollars and corporate might. The networks still dominate screens, though they have lost some viewers to VCR and cable. Several large multinational corporations continue their growing ownership. They interlock with the entire communications and financial world. The industry is no longer isolated as "television" but is part of corporate complexes of which partners are newspapers, cable companies, magazine and book publishers, movie producers, banks and investment houses, Wall Street, and of parent firms whose other major investments range from nuclear weapons to insurance and oil.

Increasingly, the top giants join hands in expanding their power in every form of televised images, like the recent proposal of a joint satellite broadcasting operation by broadcasting subsidiaries of General Electric, General Motors, and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation.

The various interests within "television" quarrel with each other over turf and slices of the pie, but when political, tax, regulatory and other issues come to the forefront, every major medium is an ally in preserving the economic interests of the entity known as "television."

What difference does it all make as seen from the living room couch? The

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viewers daily see the product of technological virtuosity and burgeoning hardware.

**T**oday there are almost 1400 television stations on the air. They transmit in color. Ninety-seven percent of homes have color sets, and two-thirds of them have more than one in the house. More than half of all homes receive cable and by now the average cable system has 30 channels. Thanks to satellites and mini-cameras and other high-technology, it is not unusual to see events as they happen in distant parts of the globe, or, during space shots, from the vastness of the solar system.

These are often celebrated as offering vast choices to the public. Instead of the traditional three networks, there are now three-and-a-half (Murdoch's Fox Television is working toward full network status). There are more than 9,000 cable systems in 25,000 communities and they reach almost 50 million TV households out of the 95 million in the country. Ted Turner's Cable Network News is a new and different choice, mostly for cable customers, a 24-hour TV news service with far more foreign origination points than all the networks combined.

It these do not provide enough, more than a third of TV households subscribe to pay cable channels with specialized programs like sports, first-run movies, theater and more. And if all of these pall, almost two-thirds of TV homes now have VCRs through which they can see rented movie cassettes, or record programs they wish to watch at times of their own choosing. Especially with the advent of cable, there are more specialized programs, sometimes foreign language broadcasts and sometimes public access by community groups or civic bodies.

Whether the great expansion of outlets available to most homes

translates into a proportional expansion of choice and diversity is a different question. Most of the added channels are imitations or reproductions of what appears in the earlier limited channels and of what appears in competing channels.

Are the viewers happy? Broadcasters, cable operators and others in the industry have a powerful answer: Total TV-equipped households increase (more than 98% of the 95 million dwellings in the country). Viewing per household has risen over the decades. Advertisers pay ever higher annual rates for each second of commercials. To critics and promoters of regulation, the industry can cite these real figures of steadily added viewers and channels. And they are obviously correct when they say that no one forces the viewers to look if they don't want to.

The numbers are basically correct in terms of added channels and continuing huge numbers of regular viewers. But there are other ways to look at television that the numbers do not answer. As the national population grows, for example, so do potential viewers. But higher education also is growing and as median years of education increase, median television-watching goes down. What does that mean?

If, as critics say, there are harmful cultural and economic consequences in the nature of commercial television, it is true that no one forces the millions to watch. On the other hand, very few cigarette smokers or crack users or AIDs victims are "forced" to indulge in their damaging activities, but for a variety of reasons, millions do it. Something else is at work in those self-victimizations.

In the case of television, is there a "something else" that explains massive watching, though there are quite undesirable after-effects to what people watch. It is not easy to dismiss consequences of heavy TV-viewing:



passivity and short attention spans, raising violence and gratuitous sex to a national norm, encouraging compulsive buying of marginal goods while savings, basic human and educational needs go underfunded, and the world is running out of ozone and renewable resources.

Furthermore, television, like all mass media, but infinitely more powerfully, instructs its audience what to expect from it. After a time, the audience expects only what it has always seen. It sees the message as an inherent characteristic of the medium itself.

Television burst on the post-World War II American scene as a truly stunning phenomenon: motion pictures and events as they happen, seen inside the living room. No need for baby-sitters for the pre-war average of two visits a week to the local movie house, or for the cost of dinner out or ice cream sodas afterward, or for changing clothes and going downtown after a hard day's work or house-tending. For the initial outlay of money for the set, payable in installments, and the nightly cost of electricity equal to an ordinary light bulb, the whole family could save baby-sitting, movie ticket money and travel. In the end, the new set paid for itself. Movie theaters closed, downtown stores and restaurants became abandoned.

Public policy expectations of broadcasting were quite different from what soon developed. The radio industry, and later television, demanded government regulation to prevent competitive jamming, which meant licenses to broadcast. It is a federal felony to intrude on a station's monopoly on its frequency. In return the Congress said licenses would be given to those groups most likely to operate in the public interest, and established broad criteria for "public interest."

## How Local Are Stations?

**T**he Communications Act, which is still on the books, assumed that station broadcasts would be heavy with local news, access by local civic and citizen groups, local issues and local talent. This seemed natural because American communities are far more self-contained in their own local and regional governance than in other developed countries. Television and radio stations would be mainly "local," not only in geography but in production. That is why every broadcast license requires that the broadcaster maintain local studios.

But over the years, with the development of commercials and high profits and the attendant powerful lobbies in Washington, the original local programming changed. New audiences were conditioned to the change and so public expectations have changed. With the exception of local news and a small number of other shows, if all the 1,000 local commercial television stations had no local studios, but were simply transmitted points from a set of central studios in Omaha, for pre-recorded and automated shows, would the output of most local stations look different?

Television programs, like those on radio before it, were originally created to stimulate sales of sets. Then, in 1950, Hazel Bishop tried TV ads and as a result went from an obscure firm to a multi-million dollar phenomenon. Television had discovered its financial Garden of Eden, or, depending on your point of view, the serpent had entered the garden. From now on, the purpose of commercial television programming was to sell merchandise, something it could do more effectively than anything known before in history.

The serpent in the Garden was called "ratings." The higher the

ratings, the higher the fee for advertisements. The profits for local stations—still a semi-secret—became and remain fabulous, ranging from 20 to 50 percent annually pre-tax. In most markets, there is hysteria to be Number 1 in the ratings, and executives and producers who fail regularly get fired or demoted. But it is not because Station No. 2 or No. 3 in the ratings is going broke. It is also a semi-secret that Numbers 2, 3, and 4 also make high profits; they just do not make quite as much as No. 1.

How do you maintain ratings? By freezing the hand that reaches for the channel switch. You can do it with programs of such striking originality and talent that people tune in night after night, excited to know what will be different and involving. But television is so powerful in selling merchandise that the broadcasters need more time to run the commercials. So they have come to operate 18 hours a day.

It is impossible to find original and exciting new material to fill 18 hours every day, 365 days a year. Arthur Millers, Paddy Chayevskys, and other truly creative and skilled screenwriters, or star performers do not grow on trees. But something else does grow on programming trees, something that requires mostly imitative and technical skill but keeps eyes glued to the screen, away from the channel switch or, worse, the "Off" button: fast action, quick cuts, physical and emotional spectacles.

And thereby hangs the tale of why, from the start of massive commercial profit, American television has steadily escalated its sex and violence.

## Endless Fast Action

**N**o amount of complaint has changed this escalation. Not the Report of the Surgeon General on how TV violence begets violence in real life, or long, bitter national cam-

paigns by the Parent-Teachers Association, or the annual lecture by the former chair of an importance Senate committee, the late Sen John O. Pastore, or the complaints of powerful conservative religious groups. Permutations of killing human beings, of crashing cars, exploding aircraft, of pre-bed, post-bed, and in-bed sex can be repeated endlessly, not because the audience is a mass of sex fiends and aggressors (though the growth of youth and adult violence is not easily dismissed). But because once relaxed before the set for evening entertainment, fast, dramatic scenes are hard for anyone to cut off as they unfold. The trick is to have endless fast action and quick-cut changes of scene. In time, the crashed car, machine-gunned body, the passionate partners rolling in and out of the sheets, become national idioms, like the flag, apple pie, and, once upon a time, the courageous cowboy riding into the golden west. And in time, the classroom attention span becomes measured in seconds.

It is no mystery why children's programming on commercial television continues to be a national scandal, full of graphic violence, in control of the advertisers who have turned "programs" into one long commercial. The goal of every commercial broadcaster, regardless of extremely high profit levels, is to make every second of air time pay at a maximum, whether for men, women, or children.

As more of the industry is merged into ownership by large multinational firms, the pressure for fast profits has increased. The pressure is relentless. Most of big firms compete on the stock market against the hottest stocks worldwide, meaning fast, short-term profits of a magnitude to match those of pharmaceutical houses and tobacco companies. By now most stations are absentee-owned by firms who invested to get the high immediate cash flow and

fabulous profits with little official pressure to conform to the "public service" functions mandated by the Communications Act. Some were able to capture these money machines by high-debt takeovers with high interest payments beloved by their bankers.

## Network News Hurt

**W**hen it comes to news, the networks, loaded with debt or struggling to fight cable, VCRs, and remote zappers, have been hurt by the new technology. Local stations have stolen the primacy of the networks on national and international news. Satellites and mobile units that can transmit and create ad hoc local networks, let local stations capture on-scene footage of major events and get on the air with it before the regular network news.

A generation ago, broadcasting took away newspapers' function of first announcement of major events. Today local stations and CNN have taken it away from the three network evening news shows. Those network shows, and their late-evening permutations, still have large audiences, but they are no longer the commanding audience-collectors for prime time entertainment shows that they used to be. The networks further weakened themselves by the cost-cutting disarray in their experienced news and documentary teams and closing of most foreign bureaus.

Unfortunately, most local news staffs are not equipped to provide knowledgeable reporting and context to go with their quick footage. They may get all the footage of important news breaks in Moscow or Washington, but local staffs usually lack background to provide the significance of the taped action. Even the footage is seldom edited with network discrimination and skill. There are exceptions in local news, but not many.

Turner's CNN is of some help. It is wire service news without some of the showbiz pretensions on the other networks and many local stations. Its journalists are not usually highly skilled, some of its world news originates with government-controlled film, and there are signs of its developing some of the less admirable characteristics of the networks, but it is generally a welcome addition to a stereotyped and over-dramatized news scene.

**P**ublic television provides some diversity in programming, but it has fallen on turbulent times. Each year it looks more like commercial television and becomes more politically constricted. One reason is the depredations by Reaganite control of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, control now somewhat more dilute. But it struggles with its endemic ailments: niggardly support from the Federal government, support perpetually tied to partisan political strings; and elimination of former skilled, central planning of public network shows and scheduling.

Power in the public system has shifted to a few major stations, in places like Boston, San Francisco, and New York, which create programs they hope to syndicate for their own local profit, at the expense of local-oriented programming.

Public television's growing dependence on corporate sponsorship has had two negative effects. The commercials have become long sales pitches increasingly like regular commercials; it is no longer possible to watch a public TV show without remote-zapper in hand. And because corporations, understandably, are chary of public issue controversies whose negative emotions might rub off on their products, they prefer to sponsor furry animal shows and Victorian dramas.

Smaller public stations still contribute most of the strictly local issue/

local group programming. But in major markets, the big public stations have large bureaucracies and aim for high culture favored by their more affluent subscribers and the corporate-sponsored shows. In the whole public network, nothing like a representation of public groups and issues is given significant air time. A recent study by City University of New York's Committee for Cultural Studies reports that less than one-half of one percent of public television shows in the last two years dealt with workingclass people and problems; most of that tiny fraction was about working people in England—that is, politically safe.

Shows like *McNeil-Lehrer* are more thoughtful and go into greater depth than commercial station news, but it is a program wedded to establishment and conservative commentary, even more so than the commercial networks.

## Political Ads Depressing

**C**ommercial television has become the primary method of national political campaigning. Each year in the last generation, it has become progressively more depressing. The costs of television commercials are a major culprit in the high cost of American political campaigns. Worse, the standard TV political phenomenon is a 5-, 10-, or 30-second political commercial, almost always devoid of content, and increasingly misleading and destructive, without context or depth. The television political ads are worse than useless to voters. The presidential debates have followed standard commercial format—quick, “sexy” questions, brief rhetorical responses, most of it infinitely rehearsed by the candidates.

There has been common cause in political campaign debates and discussions between commercial broadcasters and major candidates:

formats that permit only brief replies, which favor candidates who do not wish to take firm stands in issues and prefer the brevity that is inevitably filled with catchy slogans, the flag, apple pie and attacks on the personality on the other side. For broadcasters, it serves the purpose of preventing the hated “talking heads”—conversation and discussion, which can lead to loss of some audience but happens to be the only meaningful communication in a political campaign. The flag, sloganeering and attempts to avoid issues are nothing new in politics. Overwhelming dependence on the commercial production values of television is new in politics. In 1988 this produced what may have been the most sterile presidential campaign in our history.

## Who Is At Fault?

**I**s this the fault of TV journalism? It is, but it is a fault created and rewarded by the industry. The desired characteristics for TV journalism is brevity, drama, and promotion of the journalist as celebrity. The journalist is rewarded for becoming more important than the news. There are enough good TV journalists to produce better news programs; but net-

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**National climates change. In a severe recession, the power of lobbies will be discredited and reform legislation made possible.**

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works and local stations must be willing to accept the fact that good daily journalism on the air will never make as much money as *Wheel of Fortune* and useful political programs seldom have ratings like *Dallas*.

If media owners' and mass merchants' power in Washington were ig-

nored, remedies would not be difficult, changes that would permit reasonable profits but not fabulous ones.

Public service requirements for stations should be restored, including Fairness Doctrine and Equal Time. (Broadcasters and their newspaper allies said cancelling these would greatly increase public affairs programming; after Fairness was cancelled, public affairs programming not only did not increase, but dropped 31%.) Real local community programming in good viewing hours should be a requirement. National civic groups should be given regular free time in proportion to the size of their membership—unions, industry groups, educational and cultural associations, as done in some European democracies.

All paid political advertising should be forbidden, and generous free prime time needs to be given for two months before an election to all parties that have polled 5 percent or more in the previous election. Licenses once more should be easily challengeable by dissatisfied communities. The number and frequency of commercials should be limited, as the European Community is doing in its new twelve-country rules. Cross-media ownership of stations should be forbidden, combinations of competing media like newspapers, radio and cable should be given a reasonable time to divest themselves of television properties.

A good, diverse, non-commercial public system would be a constant reminder to the public of what an adequate broadcasting system can be. Public television must be restructured with non-political funding from earmarked equipment taxes, as done in Britain and Japan. It should be given multiple channels so that public TV viewers also will have choices of program types. The network itself should produce and schedule news, public affairs and other nationally-oriented programs. Corporate spon-

sorship of specific programs should be eliminated, but permitted as philanthropic donations to the entire system. Local public stations should be more local and move out of the national and international syndication business.

All these will take either an Act of God or an Act of Congress. Neither will occur tomorrow. But national climates change. The mania of the last fifteen years for mergers, takeovers, megaprofits and public sector abandonment may reverse itself—as it did after similar financial binges in the 1980s bring a severe recession, as some economists fear—the arrogance and power of the Washington lobbies will be discredited and reform legislation made possible.

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**It's not true that Joe Sixpack is only interested in ball-games and professors only in medieval art. Both are far more complex.**

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The viewers from the living room couch will not object. Already they try desperately to avoid the commercials. Educators, parent groups, and even police are increasingly angry at the inundation of the airwaves with violence that constitutes hourly instructions on ever more grisly ways to kill human beings. It is becoming more clear that the roots are not basic human characteristics, but corporate greed for huge profits.

Nor are the major news programs even-handed in their reporting on error and avarice in society. The major media speak with clarity and persistence about the sins of the powerless, but they do not speak with clarity and persistence about the sins of private power.

Reforms will not reduce choices. Contrary to the disdainful specula-

tions of current operators, changes need not bring a monolithic broadcast diet of highbrow culture and intellectual head talk by banishing popular sports, games, drama or sitcom shows. There is room for all of them, precisely because there has been such an expansion of available channels and therefore of viewer choice.

It is not true that Joe Sixpack is interested only in the ballgames. Or that professors watch only discussions of medieval art. Joe Sixpack and professors, individually and collectively, are far more complex and varied than the listings in *TV Guide*.

Each generation has to establish its own priorities and re-invigorate the best principles of the society. This generation is no different. By raising small, minority voices today, this generation, like the Jeffersonians of two centuries ago, can produce a change that will strengthen American democracy and validate the principle of a truly informed consent as the basis for a free society. ■

Ben H. Bagdikian is Professor Emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley, Graduate School of Journalism, author of *The Media Monopoly* (Third Edition, 1990), and for more than 40 years has been a reporter, editor and media critic. He has received a Pulitzer Prize, a Peabody Award and the American Society of Journalism School Administrators citation as "Journalism's Most Perceptive Critic."

## QUOTE UNQUOTE

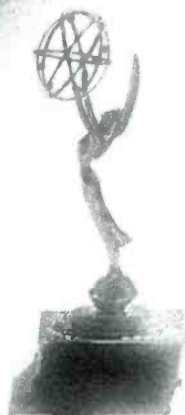
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*"Fred Allen said television is called a medium because it is so rarely well done. I suggest that the reason we do not see more excellence in television is that too often you gifted and talented men and women in television underestimate yourselves, undersell yourselves, and do not expect enough from television. Although you all spend long hours working in television, you frequently set your own sights too low."*

—Newton N. Minow, at the Emmy Awards dinner,  
Chicago, October 6, 1990.



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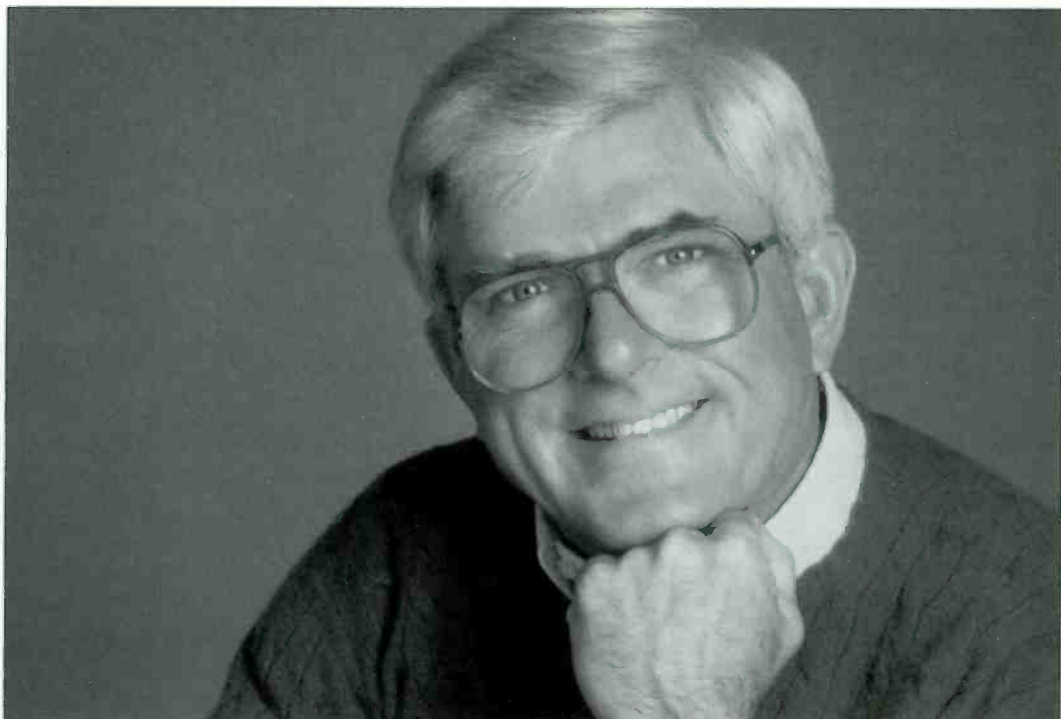
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## PHIL DONAHUE: "I CANNOT BE THE BBC IN AN MTV WORLD!"

The man who started The National Daytime Talk-Show Phenomenon chats with TV Quarterly's special correspondent about the "Elitists" who say: "I am a journalist and you are not!"

**BY ARTHUR UNGER**

**H**as "Mr. Sensitive" lost his soul?

Has the man whom Fred Friendly once called "the people's journalist" whose show David Halberstam called "a televised Ph.D." course become, as a viewer accused on air, "a dirty old man obsessed with sex and perversion?"

Phil Donahue, once called "the Prince of the afternoon talk circuit" until Oprah Winfrey came along and became Queen, listens to all the above actual criticisms and shrugs his shoulders.

"I cannot be the BBC in an MTV world," is his answer.

We are chatting in his duplex penthouse on Fifth Avenue with a 40-foot terrace overlooking Central Park, just a few doors down from the English

Speaking Union. While I had waited for him to descend from his upstairs eyrie, I had surveyed the apartment which he shares with his wife, Marlo Thomas.

The apartment is everybody's fantasy of an ideal New York habitat—the furniture is oversized and comfortable with lots of patterned pillows tossed everywhere. I spotted a couple of Tiffany lamps, a Lalique lamp, many primitive carvings and native baskets, much Chinese export porcelain, many candlesticks on the huge low wooden table which serves as a coffee table. Plants and fresh flowers are scattered about the apartment and in one corner there is a small upright piano. A commodious dining room is near the terrace and a there's a book-lined library beyond the livingroom. At the rear is a stairway leading up to what I imagine are the bedrooms. The apartment reflects taste, comfort, intelligence...and lots of money.

As I wonder if it reflects Marlo more than Phil, he emerges from upstairs wearing a sweatshirt with the word Anchorage printed on it, jeans and white Reeboks.

After the Oriental housekeeper brings orange juice, we talk. The interview starts out with Phil seemingly relaxed and seated comfortably on the sofa, but within a few minutes he is on his feet hopping and weaving about just as he does on the air, constantly clapping his hands to punctuate his thoughts (something he cannot do on air since he carries the mike.)

But, just as on the air these days, he seems to find it difficult to come to the point, constantly slipping and sliding to the edge of incomprehensibility as he gropes for the exact thought, the pointed phrase. Then with a kind of breathtaking feat of verbal acrobatics he manages to get back on the track and makes his point triumphantly. It is exhausting

for his audiences...and for me. However, that famous "cuteness" which to some viewers has begun to seem like irritating archness and which creeps into his on-air persona, is not part of his one-on-one interview persona. He comes across as serious, determined, warm...and very defensive. Mainly about those who accuse him of being a "mere entertainer" rather than the journalist he considers himself and also those, like David Halberstam, who believe he has lost his soul.

**D**onahue is a distinguished-looking cherub. He might be your friendly neighborhood banker, one who jogs every third day—fit but not athletic. His penetrating blue eyes punctuate the round white-thatched head like two bullseyes on one target. When he talks to you, from whatever vantage point he has leaped to in the room, he looks right into your eyes and demands your attention, your agreement, your reaction to what he is saying. He is not a passive interviewee and he demands that you not be a passive interviewer.

Soon, Marlo Thomas joins us for a few moments and whispers to Phil—I gather that she is also expecting an interviewer and Phil assures her that we will be finished before her appointment arrives...or else we will move into her study in the rear of the apartment.

As a matter of fact we later had to move to Marlo's study when her appointment was due. There, amidst her personal memorabilia including a photo of Marlo and the Pope and a bumper sticker on the bulletin board reading, "Honk if you're smarter than Dan Quayle" we finished the interview.

Phil Donahue was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1935, attended Notre Dame where he received a bachelor's degree in business administration. He worked at several Ohio and Mich-

igan TV stations till he joined WHIO-TV/Radio in Dayton, Ohio as a news reporter where he established himself as an award-winning journalist until WLWD-TV in Dayton offered him his own local talk show in 1967. In 1974 the show moved to WGN-TV in Chicago and in 1976 Multimedia began syndicating the show which now appears on around 225 stations. Phil married Marlo Thomas in 1980 after divorcing his first wife in 1975 and is the father of four sons and one daughter from his first marriage.

I tell Phil that I had watched a tape of an October viewer-reaction show and had listened in amazement as he resignedly accepted harsh, often unfair and sometimes accurate criticism from viewers in what he called "for me the longest show of the year." While many viewers praised his intelligence, sensitivity and choice of subject matter, some viewers called him lurid, shallow, big mouthed, constantly interrupting, egomaniacal, patronizing, loud, racist and, for good measure: "What has happened to make a show that pioneered as an educational informative talk show sink to new lows?"

Phil listens carefully to the criticisms, then just sighs. "To coin a phrase," he smiles, "it's a free country. And as I've said before, call us anything but don't call us boring. We may be silly sometimes, and occasionally outrageous but we are consistently willing to address the issues that affect us and our nation."

**B**esides his annoyance at those who say "I am a journalist; you are not" he is most disdainful of those who insist that he is pandering more today than ever before, that shows about male strippers, Lesbian parents and other off-beat people constitute his personal sounding board for kooks and an attempt to go for competitive numbers rather than quality subject matter. He indicates

that these people overlook the many important serious shows he has done such as interviews with Peter Arnett, White House correspondents and other timely personalities involved in important issues. Like the Iran-hostage scandal.

He claims most of those who object, do not watch the show consistently, are not aware how much quality program goes into the mix. "But," he insists, "we cannot survive in a syndicated world if all we broadcast is the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*."

He justifies the fact that his show must spice up the serious topics with titillating ones by pointing out that there has been no change in the patterns. "I was in drag on the show in 1974 so when I did it in 1988 it was nothing new or different for me."

Donahue is fond of repeating an epitaph he once suggested for himself: "Here lies Phil Donahue. He made waves. Occasionally he went too far."

For close to 25 years Phil Donahue has been the host of the longest running national daytime talk show in the history of television, winner of 20 Emmys. He has been consistently informative and entertaining—perhaps too entertaining now and then for some critics, but always perceptive and insightful.

When he is asked how he would like to be remembered, Phil Donahue quotes himself again and it is an observation with which few observers of television would disagree: "At some date in the future, if someone takes a random pick of Donahue shows, they will at the least have a suggestion of what happened to America in the latter part of the 20th century."

Following is a transcript, tightened and shortened, of our conversation. The sequence of some of the answers has been changed but all quotes are verbatim.

**UNGER:** *What do you do for a living?*

**DONAHUE:** Stand on a street corner with an unusually large amount of people gathered to listen to the ideas of the people that I bring on that street corner. I'm a lucky guy because my name is on the street corner. But I chuckle at the question because I really don't think it ought to be important to us. I think if you have to say you're a journalist, it's a lot like feeling that you have to say you have soul. I think the people who ran around in the sixties saying, "I've got soul, I've got soul" were the people who didn't have it.

Who is concerned about titles and names? I think, not always, but often, the people who bring an unbecoming elitism to the whole issue, those who would say, "I am a journalist and you're not" are essentially saying—forget the very important point that we should take our information where we can.

I was a television reporter for some time. I didn't have to appear before a board. I didn't even have to pee in a bottle to become one. Anybody can be a journalist. The thing is, the easier it is to be a journalist, the more likely it is you'll have a big crowd of people gathering information. And that's a good thing because if you have a large crowd of people gathering information, then somewhere in the collective middle of this crowd, you are more likely to find the truth.

**UNGER:** *Do you regret not having a journalism educational background?*

**DONAHUE:** I think a journalism background certainly isn't going to hurt...Let's get back to this very important question of what's a journalist and what isn't. All kinds of people can be journalists. The profession should not be so narrowly defined.

**UNGER:** *You sound defensive about it.*

**DONAHUE:** I am a little defensive about it because I learned a long

time ago that there is an unbecoming elitism within the journalistic community. There are some people in power in Washington, for example, who say "This would be a nice place to work if we didn't have all these new journalists who keep coming in here all the time. It was much more fun when the White House was ours. If you'd just leave us alone, we'll tell you the news. We are the news and you're not." And the result is, recently we got far too many people who were not so much covering the Reagan bandwagon but on it.

**UNGER:** *But how do you decide what is news and what is entertainment? And how do you choose which to focus on?*

**DONAHUE:** We're in an arena that cares more about Madonna than Managua. It's an ambivalent crowd we are trying to pull into our tent. The Saddam Hussein interview with Dan Rather came in 53rd for the week. Brokaw interviewed Mikhael Gorbachev and it was the scoop of the decade. Fabulous! But look at the time period. Tom and Mikhael got beat by "Kate & Allie." Into this competitive arena come several people with this fabulous opportunity of making decisions about what goes out over the public airwaves. In my own specific case and others, during the daytime schedule. I've done Nelson Mandela, Winnie Mandela, Manuel Ortega and we've also done male strippers, women wrestlers and a live telecast of a facelift. And now we look up to discover that the high priests of journalism look down their noses at us and say we're not journalists. And to them, I say, "You come and compete in the daytime. Let me see you stay alive." You cannot be the BBC in an MTV world.

**UNGER:** *How did your ratings fare with the Mandelas?*

**DONAHUE:** Their appearance on the Donahue Show did not draw a large crowd into the tent.

**UNGER:** So is that proof of your thesis?

**DONAHUE:** I think that's facile. I think it's more complicated than that. You find, for example, that people will still watch a Ralph Nader. But it should also be said that we're going to draw a bigger crowd with male strippers.

**UNGER:** *What has happened? One critic recently said that your show has lost its soul.*

**DONAHUE:** I think the criticism that we have somehow lost our soul—that came from David Halberstam—somebody who doesn't see our show. It comes from people who suggest that Donahue, Geraldo, Sally, Oprah, have adopted a pretty much one-note style. They criticize without really seeing our programs. I also think that these are people who criticize because they're bouncing off of our sometimes outrageous subject matter. We were always outrageous. That's how we got here.

**UNGER:** *While you were building up a reputation for doing serious shows, somehow, nobody focused on the lighter ones.*

**DONAHUE:** I wore a skirt in 1974. You know, we had the unisex guys come in and say, "Hey, you gotta do this because it provides air circulation for your body." And the place went nuts. It was one of the funniest programs we did. I ran around the audience with people variously saying, "My God, this is awful! Phil take it off" and others saying, "Hey, loosen up! It's funny." It was a really wonderful show. It was funny. And that was '74. When I did something like that in '88 some people sneered. It's different now.

I think that the increased competition has moved us all to be more creative and more outrageous. And I am saying that if you reviewed the material on these programs collectively you'd find a wide range of the serious and the trivial. I don't care if

you criticize me but I don't think that it's unfair of me to ask you to watch the show if you do. I think it's important to ask yourself "when was the last time I saw the Donahue Show?"

In the increasing competitive arena of the talk show as we know it on the daytime schedule, you're going to find yourself a lot of information that was heretofore unshared when the daytime schedule was pretty much soaps and game shows. And in an age of the 22-minute newscast with more than 90% of our nation's cities having only one newspaper, at a time when *Time* and *Newsweek* are looking more and more like *People* magazine, who's kidding who here? There are more movie stars on the cover of *Time* as each year goes by than there were the year before.

In a nation that has now, multinational corporate media ownership, these daytime talk programs might be the last best hope when the cops arrest your sister. They're going to occasionally—and I think often—bring you information that you're not going to find on the three network newscasts in the evening which are themselves devoting an ever larger number of seconds to the almost compulsory feature story which they feel obliged to include at the end of their newscast. They're almost always two minutes in length and usually longer and will tell you, among other things, why we yawn.

Giraffes do not yawn. I know that because I saw it on NBC News and I'm not ready to shoot anybody for this.

I understand the pressures that they feel. It's no good talking if nobody's listening. And if it's the yawning feature that's going to bring them into the tent, who's going to blame NBC?

**UNGER:** Are you saying that the evening news shows are failing?

**DONAHUE:** I am saying that there's a lot of pretense. I am saying that the

evening news shows, first of all, through no fault of their own, find themselves with a very small palette on which to place their colors. The networks have a worldwide, billion-dollar news establishment peopled by some very, very talented journalists and producers. And the shame is that because of the way our business has evolved in an evolutionary, competitive marketplace way, their own affiliates won't give them or can't seem to afford to give them a larger time in which they might share with us the fabulous information that they must be collecting at their various bureaus around the world. So now, we're down to 22 minutes with Jennings, Brokaw and Rather and even within that 22 minutes, they feel that in order for them to compete, they have got to include more and more feature stories. Last year, an ABC News Person of the Week was an author who became the Person of the Week the week that his book was published. His name was John Le Carré. This is book promotion, not real information from the network.

**UNGER:** But ABC News also gives us Nightline.

**DONAHUE:** Nightline is television history. A fabulous achievement. When you consider what Koppel's done in South Africa, Israel, Manila and Iraq, what a a fabulous, fabulous body of work Nightline has given us. But it is either often delayed to oblivion or not carried at all by as much as one-third of the family of ABC-affiliated stations.

Print guys, who often work for newspapers that have no competition at all, come down from their mountain to say "male strippers! Ain't it awful? You're not a journalist!" To those people, I say "Look in the mirror. Get off this pomposity, here." Everybody's doing it.

There is an unholy alliance, the best of the entertainment marketplace sometimes slops over into the sacred realm of journalism. Often

what determines who gets on the cover on *Time* and *Newsweek* has less to do with news than it does with the premiere date of a multi-million-dollar movie. Everybody should wince just a little bit to see their local reporter covering the opening, for example, of the *Batman* movie wearing a *Batman* memorabilia on her head at \$7.95 with profits to the multinational company.

Americans are increasingly realizing that between all those commercials on television, they're watching another commercial from a breathless person who can't find the words that are superlative enough to describe what a wonderful director presided over this movie which premieres tomorrow.

The pressure to sell tickets and albums and books is enormous. And the industry that has developed to promote that purpose is a multi-billion-dollar enterprise which has developed its own science on the manipulation and the timing of exposure to maximize the sale of these various products. So, what we have to be at least distracted by is; what news aren't we seeing?

What news is not being called to our attention because somebody's magazine made a deal with the studio for an exclusive opportunity to put Kevin Kostner on its cover?

If Kostner wants to do the Donahue show, I guarantee you he's going to get on. Kevin Kostner would help me to enjoy a vital, commercial product that people want to buy because I know that people want to watch him. He's at the center of our popular culture today.

That's not the question. The question becomes the balance: how many shows are determined by the outrageous, independent, creative judgment of the people in the office who make decisions about Donahue, *Time*, *Newsweek* and the "Person of the Week." How many decisions are made by those people and how many are made by Rogers and Cowan or Hill & Knowlton?

If a Pekinese who speaks Chinese gets a very good number, are you going to find yourself doing a week of Pekinese? If we don't control it, there will be no reaching out, there'll be no testing other things. There will be a creative community which is not unlike the greyhounds chasing the false rabbit.

**UNGER:** *Would you do a Pekinese who speaks Chinese?*

**DONAHUE:** Oh sure. A little nonsense now and then is treasured by the best of men. I would. I am not ashamed at all of either the transvestite fashion show with the size 14 high heels men's shoes. I'm not ashamed of having wrestled with women wrestlers. I am not ashamed of having roller skated with roller derby women. I don't ever want to live in a world where I feel obliged to say "Ain't it awful?" five days a week.

Incidentally, Koppel's doing it, too. On the week that ABC News cancelled his Town Hall Meeting on the single most urgent agenda as the United States goes into 1991, what aired was a program hosted by Ted Koppel about sex in Russia. I say, "Good for him." If we do sex in Russia, it's tabloid. If he does it, it's news.

I watch 'em all. I know it's fashionable to say that but I actually do. I am fascinated by what they're doing because I make my living in the same arena attempting to appeal to the same constituency. And everybody in media is tapdancing 100 miles an hour trying to figure out what will work.

I try to never complain and never explain. And move forward and try to do what I'm paid to do and that is to draw a crowd and entertain our audience in the daytime and at the same time, be able to look in the mirror and say, "I have used this magnificent privilege—and that's what it is, a privilege—of deciding what goes on the public airwaves

to bring important issues in news and information to my viewers. "Donahue" has always been a lot more than male strippers. The only thing that I will rebel at is the pretense of those who would suggest that that's all we are. It was never true. It's not true today...I'm not pleading guilty to losing my soul.

**UNGER:** *You're saying that basically you do the same kind of show that you have always done, except you do fewer of the serious ones.*

**DONAHUE:** I'm afraid that may be true.

**UNGER:** *Is there a ratio?*

**DONAHUE:** This is an imperfect science. It depends on what's news. I have to make 230 decisions a year. I have a cover every day. My questions include: What's important? Will they watch for an hour? What will the woman in the fifth row have to say? Will the woman or the man in the fifth row be even moved to get up and say anything? What kind of calls is this likely to get? Is this too narrow? Is it too inside?

I'll tell you something else that has to be honestly acknowledged, another question that's in the mix. My theory is that you can't do wonderful, noble things up until the rating period and then do 2 1/2 weeks of naked ladies. You can't do male strippers five days a week. It's amazing what they won't watch. I think it develops a life of its own. And it's also the result, I think, of an increasing number of programs on television that depart from our decorous journalistic tradition: *Hard Copy, Inside Edition, A Current Affair.*

**UNGER:** *Do you worry about declining popularity?*

**DONAHUE:** You know today's electronic journalist works in a marketplace where his or her survival is determined by how well they're liked. That's a shame. It's not the journalist's fault that that's the arena

in which he and she find themselves working. It's not their fault. But I think it's important to examine the consequences of this.

Nobody's accusing anybody of purposely distorting the news. I do not think journalists sit down and say, "What can I say tonight that's going to make me popular?" But all we have to do is see the miles of smiles on the evening news and the banter between the weatherman and the sportsperson to understand that the reality is that people want to like the people who share information with them.

I have to say that perhaps we're not hitting as hard as we should. I think it's revealing that talk radio has become the scratchy, irreverent voice of journalism. It's certainly not television, with some, rare exceptions. Halberstam reminds us in his book *The Best and the Brightest* that CBS Radio News was blowing the whistle earlier and more vigorously about the truth of Vietnam than was television. You can swing harder and be more irreverent on radio than you could on television.

**UNGER:** *But Phil, you were just saying that you've also got to be entertaining.*

**DONAHUE:** And you've also got the job of telling people what they don't want to hear. So you're between the rock and the hard place.

**UNGER:** *But aren't those the two things that you're doing—informing and entertaining.*

**DONAHUE:** Yes! But I'm also not claiming to be the evening news. I think there is a difference. What bothers me is the elitism and pretension of those who would somehow say that, you know, "I'm the news and you're not" or a variation on a theme thereof. "I'm the big leagues and you're triple A."

I'm fascinated by all this. It's a very, very important argument. It goes to the heart of who we are as a culture.

**UNGER:** *And also very important to you, obviously.*

**DONAHUE:** I love to debate it.

**UNGER:** *You certainly keep coming back to it.*

*What do you feel about Oprah Winfrey?*

**DONAHUE:** Exciting. She brought a lot of attention to the daytime schedule. The arena in which I make my living now has got a lot more buzz in it and my feeling is that we probably have more viewers watching daytime television today than ever before.

**UNGER:** *Because of Oprah?*

**DONAHUE:** That's one of the reasons, yes.

**UNGER:** *How about Geraldo?*

**DONAHUE:** I like him personally and I also think he's a very conscientious guy. I think he's got a very good track record as a reporter—he's a guy with less pretense than some of the high priests of journalism who would criticize him. You know he opened that safe with nothing in it. In my opinion, that entitles him to be congratulated for drawing such a large crowd of people to watch nothing happen and in no way detracts from his own professional reputation.

**UNGER:** *How about Maury Povich?*

**DONAHUE:** I like him a lot. Like me, he's married to a high-visibility woman, Connie Chung. And when we're together, we usually say maybe the two of us ought to stand over here and get our picture taken together so that we don't embarrass our wives.

**UNGER:** *News people criticize daytime talk shows but often lift items from them.*

**DONAHUE:** It happens all the time. *60 Minutes* will, without even a phone call, air pieces of the *Donahue Show*. And when they do, I must not tell a lie, I'm *thrilled*. It helps me. I



am happy to have my program exposed to the enormous audience that watches *60 Minutes*."

What's interesting is that trying to get permission from *60 Minutes* to use any of their material is like trying to get the Pope to hear your confession. It bespeaks of what I call this "unbecoming elitism" within the journalistic community. "Our product is sacred. Your product is frivolous and tabloid." If they're so good, how come they missed Iran-Contra? How come they missed the HUD scandal? How come they missed the S&L crisis? And we can only assume what they might call the small magazine in Lebanon that blew the whistle on the Iran scam.

**UNGER:** *What do you think of C-Span?*

**DONAHUE:** I think it has the possibility of being the single most influential instrument of our time in terms of reminding the people of the blessing of the democratic process.

**UNGER:** *CNN?*

**DONAHUE:** Ted Turner is a can-do hot dog. He's tremendous. CNN may be the instrument of resolution or provocation of future wars.

**UNGER:** *Are you worried about countries like Iraq getting one-sided pictures of current events?*

**DONAHUE:** While you're being concerned about those people getting one side of the picture, it doesn't make me un-American to wonder if you're concerned about how accurate is the picture you're getting from you're own media.

**UNGER:** *Frontline?*

**DONAHUE:** *Frontline* is extraordinary. *Frontline* is a magnificent way to stay abreast of some of the most important stories of our times.

**UNGER:** *Bill Moyers?*

**DONAHUE:** I'm impressed. In terms of the kind of work he does, the extra-

ordinary success he's had in getting the kind of material that he does on the air in an age of MTV and Madonna's "Justify My Love." To draw the crowds he has with talking heads, is an extraordinary achievement and a testimony, not only to the insightful way that he selects his guests, but also the way he draws them out as well. Bill Moyers is the son my mother wanted to have.

**UNGER:** *Is there a growth in the tabloid approach—in print as well as TV?*

**DONAHUE:** I think, they were always here. Man bites dog. Man found in brothel. Great stories. We've always had 'em; we always will. The question is what feature of our consciousness and what part of the marketplace do they now account for today.

The evening news has become in many ways a "Donahue Show." I hate to put it that way because it sounds rather vain. The billboard for the local news often leads with a celebrity—a show business personality. In other words, watch the news tonight not because we're gonna tell you the news but if you watch the news tonight we're gonna have Bette Midler.

**UNGER:** *Prime-Time Live started with a studio audience à la "Donahue"...*

**DONAHUE:** I'm not claiming any particular patent on audience participation but I didn't think that the *Prime-Time Live* studio audience would survive and it didn't.

**UNGER:** *Actually, "Donahue Show" audiences are fantastic. How do you manage that?*

**DONAHUE:** You cannot bring 200 people into your studio without hosting them anymore than you can bring friends to your house and ignore them. You can't bring a studio audience to your studio and ignore them. You have to convince them that you care about them. You have to

talk to them during the commercials. You have to keep the energy in the room. You cannot patronize them. You have to make them laugh. You have to make them really believe that you give a damn about them. And finally, but most importantly, you sure as hell had better have an issue up on that stage that they care about.

**UNGER:** *But how do you find the people? I was there last week and I've never seen such an intelligent, charming, young audience. How much selectivity goes into it?*

**DONAHUE:** I assure you we do not presume to select the studio audience.

**UNGER:** *If you were interviewing. Donahue would you bring up the topic of Marlo Thomas?*

**DONAHUE:** When I interview Maury Povich. I'm sure going to bring up the subject of Connie Chung. I promise you that.

**UNGER:** *Have you ever considered working with Marlo in television?*

**DONAHUE:** Yeah. Certainly. There's never been any serious exploration of that, mostly because she's always doing something special or making a speech. In some ways, we really do two different things. No, we've never given it any serious thought. But I never say never.

**UNGER:** *When your contract expires?*

**DONAHUE:** Oh, it's not about the contract. It's about chasing different goals. She's having so much fun doing what she's doing and I wouldn't want to be an anchor. But it would be fun to be involved with her every day. Maybe in a time period and a product that didn't make the competitive ratings demands that I feel now.

**UNGER:** *How do you feel about Fred Friendly?*

**DONAHUE:** He's certainly a Hall of Fame name. Blew the whistle on McCarthy. I've also benefited from counsel and the writings of Fred Friendly.

**UNGER:** *Who according to my notes...*

**DONAHUE:** ...said that I should be ashamed of myself for wearing a skirt. So I guess I should feel flattered to be that personally evaluated by someone as busy as he is and who has made such a contribution to our industry.

**UNGER:** *Are you disappointed in the ratings these days? It's you vs Oprah and she seems to be the winner.*

**DONAHUE:** No doubt about it, Oprah draws more viewers than anybody else doing this kind of work. But I think you're going to find that we're a strong second.

**UNGER:** *Can you imagine the Donahue Show in Prime Time?*

**DONAHUE:** You know the older I get, the more I come to realize that for every law there is a consequence, for every restriction, there's 17 pounds of paper defining it and how to get around it. I would like to live in a world where there are no artificial restrictions and anybody with an idea gets an equal shot at presenting it. Ideally, the networks ought to be able to produce whatever they want and enjoy whatever revenue they get from syndication. As I don't have to tell you, the problem is how reluctant will the networks be to make a time period available to somebody with a better product in whose syndication life the networks do not enjoy benefit and how much will that prejudice their decision about what program gets on at nine o'clock.

**UNGER:** *Have you had network offers?*

**DONAHUE:** The networks had no interest in me until I couldn't afford to go with them. The networks had no interest in me until I had a program that began to reach as many markets as the networks. And I happen to think syndication is the most honest form of doing business today.

If we had been born on the network, we never would've survived.

We were much too outrageous. In the early days, people got on and criticized Sears, for instance. That never would have happened on a network.

On a network, one vice president, while he's shaving can cancel the whole idea. At least in syndication if I die in Peoria, I'm still on the air in Chicago. Here's the point: that I think that as a result of having more than 200 individual contracts voluntarily engaged in and negotiated for the rights to air the *Donahue Show*, I am not beholden to one person. And it also means that those who would, on the other side of this transaction, engage the *Donahue Show* have the right to decide on their own not only when to cancel it but perhaps along the way which shows they don't want to carry. Everybody has an equal number of cards at this creative table. And I honestly believe, Arthur, that as a result of this over the 23 years we've been on the air, nobody on the air has enjoyed over these past two decades, more editorial freedom than I have.

**UNGER:** You said they weren't interested in you until they couldn't afford you. How profitable is the show to you personally? It has been said that you earn \$10 million per year.

**DONAHUE:** I invite you to take your guess. I'm pleased to live in a country that doesn't oblige me to tell you.

**UNGER:** How do you feel about TV personalities running for office?

**DONAHUE:** May I remind you that P.T Barnum was once the mayor of Bridgeport, CT.

**UNGER:** Would you like to enter politics as a candidate?

**DONAHUE:** I might give it some serious thought in the future. I can't do it while I am on the air and wouldn't want to. Would I be happy? Whether I'm electable is the question. I am pro-choice. I'm against the death penalty. I am for gay rights. I believe that we should reduce defense

spending. I'm for gun control. I think Mapplethorpe should be displayed without restraint by people who presume to know what's good for us. How many votes have I lost now?

So, I bring no illusion as to my own electability. Certainly, the '80s was not my decade. Beyond that, do I want to raise the money? But I do think everybody should do some public service especially guys as lucky as me.

**UNGER:** Are we talking running for Senate?

**DONAHUE:** I don't know. For any kind of public office. The House looks more fun to me. The House looks more like the *Donahue Show*. The House members are obliged to use an economy of language, not so true in the Senate.

**UNGER:** Have you ever been approached?

**DONAHUE:** Yeah.

**UNGER:** Do you feel as Cronkite feels that TV personalities should not take advantage of their prominence?

**DONAHUE:** I've heard him say that. I would respectfully disagree. His point is that if you run, then you bespeak retroactively a bias that you must have had when you were a newsman. And I think that's trying to enshrine the journalistic personality beyond what is necessary. I don't think I have to be a mechanical man walking down the center of every issue, never revealing how I feel. I am lucky in that I have more elbow room than Jennings, Rather and Brokaw. I am able to pop off. I do remind you that on many occasions when I have popped off, I've been booed by my own audience. So the democracy feature of what we do, I think, allows me to certainly do this. I do not expect the anchor people or those who work for a television news division to be running around as advocates, but I don't think it's necessary for a person who becomes a journalist to

check his citizenship credentials forever until death.

**UNGER:** *Do you feel you've ever gone too far?*

**DONAHUE:** Yes. And I'm saying that I think we need more people to go too far. The problem in the media is not so much controversy as it is blandness. I don't think we go far enough.

**UNGER:** *What's next for Phil Donahue?*

**DONAHUE:** Well, I'll have the opportunity in '92 of making a decision of what I'm going to do. At the end of 1992, I will have presided over the *Donahue Show* for 25 years. Nice round number. You know, I feel the temptation to consider what opportunities might present themselves in more thoughtful, less ratings-pressured formats.

**UNGER:** *A weekly format?*

**DONAHUE:** Maybe. Maybe. I think somebody may come along and do a Larry King kind of program at 9 o'clock at night.

**UNGER:** *Is there somebody you'd like to have on who you haven't been able to get?*

**DONAHUE:** I'd like to get everybody smart. For example, I'd like to get as many people as possible who were involved to do a talking head thorough examination of the S&L crisis and how it happened.

**UNGER:** *About your state of mind now.*

**DONAHUE:** First of all, I feel very lucky. We weren't at all sure that we were going to survive as a local show 23 years ago. I assure you that it never occurred to us that we were going to be a national show. But it is also true that we have lived for the past 23 years in a culture that has decayed.

We have been on the air at a time of the deterioration of our racial sensitivity and consciousness. We've

been on the air while our public school system fell apart. We have been on the air while the voting percentages have dropped below 50%. We have been on the air while one of the most popular Presidents in the history of the democratic experiment called the USA spent more money than any other person in the history of the universe. We have been on the air while this nation committed an enormous part of our resources against the Russian Bear. The Russian Bear collapsed of its own weight for committing similar sins.

And now, as we move into the '90s, as we approach the 21st century, it's tougher to be a young person in America today than it was when I was young. We are more likely to tell jokes about politicians that even consider running. The people who are outraged and the most indignant are the people who wave the biggest flags and the people who don't vote at all. So for these and many other reasons, however much I feel fortunate—and I really do, this has been a tremendous odyssey—everybody ought to have a talk show. The money is great. People ask me for my autograph. I get lots of attention. I tell ya, it's a wonderful, natural high to come off that hour knowing that you just presided over a helluva good television program. It's a wonderful feeling.

But the show has spanned the evolution of a very angry nation. Almost everybody in America wants to execute somebody. It scares me when I consider the number of people who were quite willing to let the White House decide where the war was going to be and how many people we were going to deploy to fight it. That terrifies me! It scares me that we have had a series of Presidents who feel insecure enough that they don't even want to have to call Congress in order to commit the trumps.

**UNGER:** *How do you feel personally? You talk about the show and the nation. How about Phil Donahue?*

**DONAHUE:** I feel very content. I've got five kids on their feet, all working, calling their father, I'm happily married, able to talk about my own work and take the issues of the day right to my own home, in my own bedroom and in my own bed.

**UNGER:** *Are there any challenges left for you?*

**DONAHUE:** I hope so. I assure you, the show is more of a challenge now than it's ever been. It's more exciting now than it's ever been. It's more fun. It was more ego-gratifying when we had the top of the mountain all to ourselves. But I can't go to the Soviet Union as I did and orate about the importance of competition and come home and say it's good for everybody but me. The beneficiary of all the competition that we feel today is the viewer. I think all these programs are better because of the pressure that we exert on each other. ■

In seventeen years of writing about television for *The Christian Science Monitor*, Arthur Unger has won national recognition as one of the medium's most influential critics. He is also known for his revealing interviews with TV, stage and film personalities. He recently retired from the *Monitor* to devote his time to travel and writing. *Television Quarterly* is privileged to have him write regularly for us, as Special Correspondent.

## QUOTE UNQUOTE

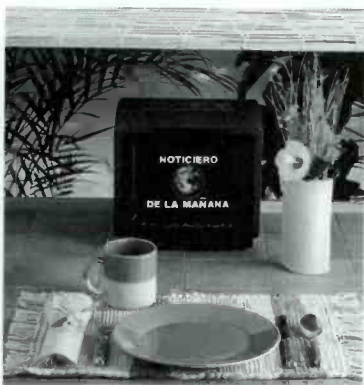
### Worldly Outlooks

*"It is also naive to think that television globalized by immense international systems transmitted by satellite would in time erase national identity in all countries of the world. There is ample evidence that national cultures are never subdued by invasions of entertainment. American movies and popular music play everywhere, and the U.S. is far the greatest exporter of TV programs. But, so far as anyone can detect, this has not imperiled any country's sense of its own cultural inheritance.*

*"Despite television, nationalism is on the rise everywhere—in Catalonia and the Basque region of Spain; in Quebec, Canada; in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland; in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and virtually every part of the USSR.*

*"As a concept, globalization springs from the combination of the satellite's disrespect for national borders and the worldwide adoption of the principles of market economics. But it is nothing more sinister than the process of doing business with the idea of the entire world as a market."*

—Les Brown,  
*Television Business International*



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**AMPEX**

# U.S. TV'S ASTIGMATIC VIEW OF THE WORLD

Short-sighted network news managements may add to the distortion by cutting the number of experienced peacetime correspondents abroad.

**BY BERNARD S. REDMONT**

**A** whimsical *New Yorker* magazine cover some years ago depicted a New Yorker's skewed view of the United States. It showed Manhattan covering most of the page and a tiny strip at the Western edge for the rest of the country.

You could portray television's view of the world correspondingly. A TV Mercator projection would feature the U.S. blanketing nine-tenths of the globe, Europe representing a tiny strip at the edge, and the Third World—meaning most of the earth—getting a microscopic blip, if it's seen at all.

When it comes to international reporting, we are a provincial nation for the most part. The conventional wisdom among the moguls of TV management is that, barring blockbusters like coups and earthquakes, Middle East crises and war, "foreign" news drives ratings into the cellar.

For as long as they lasted, the Gulf crisis and the war were the exceptions that proved the rule; they involved Americans and produced some violent pictures.

By and large, we get our peacetime international news in trickles and spurts, as AP correspondent Mort Rosenblum aptly put it. The networks maintain a thin and ever-thinning band of correspondents abroad. They approach the news competitively,

fighting to get the attention of viewers, not from the viewpoint of what's the real meaning and significance of the story. Too many conventional TV reporters don't even benefit from the sound background in history, culture, languages and economics that their predecessors enjoyed in the Murrow era.

Don Hewitt, the producing genius of *60 Minutes*, notes that "you can't even name one foreign correspondent any more." CBS was the best in the business. William Paley used to "collect" journalists. He gave us Edward R. Murrow, William L. Shirer, Howard K. Smith, Eric Sevareid, Edward P. Morgan. Today, TV recognizes and appreciates Tom Fenton, Bob Simon, Richard Threlkeld and a few more.

But apart from the anchors, name recognition fades, although events in the Gulf did make a few stars like Peter Arnett.

Networks are now covering some places only with crews so that at least pictures will be available, but without an on-scene reporter. Management thinks it can't afford very many reporters. Tel Aviv and other major news centers were "downsized" before the Gulf war. NBC and CBS (except for a *60 Minutes* team) have closed their Paris bureaus.

Joan Richman says sadly, "They are losing people with wisdom, creativity and experience." But corporate management doesn't see it that way, or doesn't care.

Fortunately, you can still call up the world whenever something happens,

and expect to get it on CNN. At last count, CNN had 15 bureaus overseas, while ABC had 12, NBC 13 and CBS 7

CNN may not have many celebrity anchors, and it spends less than CBS, NBC or ABC, but it does the job, largely without show biz pizzazz. CNN's annual budget for "no frills" 24-hour news around the world is \$207,000,000—about \$100,000,000 less than CBS, NBC or ABC.

## Anchors Away

**T**he on-scene anchoring of big stories around the world by the networks has come in for some brickbats lately, not all of it deserved. Somebody calls it "Anchors Away." Why send Rather or Brokaw to the Gulf, the Berlin Wall or Beijing? Is it wise to have anchors running all over the world, spending fortunes that might better be used elsewhere?

Hewitt ruefully remarks that "in the old days, we didn't do this." Hewitt would rather the networks spend the money on maintaining the right people as correspondents on the spot who can give the appropriate perspective. The reporter wouldn't be a fireman, but an expert. He says, "You shouldn't have to move people around so much."

Tom Brokaw did a stand-up at the Berlin Wall, went to Tokyo for Hirohito's funeral, was in Beijing for the crackdown, broadcast from Prague and Rome, and went to the Malta summit like Dan Rather and Peter Jennings. Yet in the long run nightly news audiences have not increased.

There is something incongruous about Rather anchoring from Malta or Jordan and presenting a videotaped segment about fighting in the Philippines. The technology has permitted anchors to go anywhere almost anytime and function as if they were in New York, whether it makes sense or not.

On-scene anchoring, however, has its positive side, according to Rich-

man. She thinks you can do a better job of covering the whole story, and not just by the anchor's presence. "When the anchor man is on the spot, you want to cover more subjects, more angles, and do more reporting in depth."

The anchor often has more access to public officials for interviews. Anchors on the scene also help the viewers to recognize that it's an important story, and they need to pay attention.

The networks bring in a traveling circus of 150 to 250 people for such events. They're spending enormous amounts for satellite costs, with their own dishes—so it makes sense to fill up the time with related stories.

The limitations of conventional TV coverage provide much grist for shop talk seminars and backstage coffee klatsches, when the pros get together. You hear plenty of this kind of soul-searching, self-examination and criticism, particularly about the demand for "bang-bang."

It was a TV insider who coined the guideline phrase, "If it bleeds, it leads." Quiet, thoughtful voices and ideas don't easily get into TV. "You need to shoot your way in," says one hardened reporter.

What's more, the pace of what we see has picked up, possibly due to the influence of MTV and commercials. Surveys show that sound bites are getting shorter, often too short for an international story to make sense.

Visual imperatives dominate the nightly news, and professional judgment doesn't always win the call. Often, striking events take place without striking images to illustrate. Last spring, the *New York Times'* Walter Goodman noted that "anyone who judges the newsworthiness of events by the pictures on the nightly news is likely to come away with a dim comprehension of recent goings-on in places like Lithuania, Nepal, the Arab villages of the West Bank and other hot spots."

Sometimes events take place without benefit of camera presence. Re-



porters and photographers may be kept away deliberately. Or the locales may be too difficult to get to in time. Sometimes we see only old file footage, if that. Journalists may do their best, even in dangerous circumstances. Often it's not good enough.

The picture-directed coverage may leave the viewer with a warped or incomplete view of the reality of the news.

It was wonderful to see the release of Nelson Mandela live, but what did the story tell us about the problems of South Africa? How many stories explain what's going on in Lebanon and why, when we view the ravages of car bombs and wrecked buildings and corpses in Beirut, or Israeli soldiers chasing stone-throwing Palestinian youths on the West Bank?

It was exhilarating to see Eastern Europeans pouring into the streets to oppose tyrants and vote with their feet for democracy, but when did we get enough explanation of what was to come? Who explained to us the differences between Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania?

In the euphoria of the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, who enlightened us on the complexities of German reunification? And what about Yugoslavia?

## Where Are Documentaries?

**N**etwork documentaries, which should have been available to edify us, have gone the way of endangered species, and are almost extinct.

ABC's Peter Jennings anchored a remarkable special that was an exception to the rule. *From the Killing Fields*, about Cambodia, gave us insights into the Khmer Rouge's potential return to power and the collusion of the U.S. and other governments with Pol Pot's madmen. Many TV viewers felt that program put ABC News of the '90s into the same class as CBS News of the '50s and '60s and put Jennings into the same class as Murrow.

On a somewhat different level, Rather's 24 Hours disco-beat roundup on "Soviet Vice," provided a prize bit of reporting on the cops-and-robbers games and the lower depths of *glasnost* and *perestroika* during the recent Gorbachev-Bush summit in Washington.

But such specials are rare.

CNN has a new documentary/investigative team, and we can probably look to them for some solid documentaries about international problems, as well as domestic. PBS' *Frontline* also turns out some first rate programs. What we get on the networks' evening news is fragmentary.

The economic situation of Margaret Thatcher's Britain comes into our consciousness mostly when TV covers unexpected violence in Trafalgar Square.

The repression or tribal warfare in Africa comes alive, but not in totally understandable terms, through heart-rending pictures of starving children.

NBC President Michael Gartner, who made his name in print journalism, provoked some wrath when he remarked in Boston that "television can't cover facts." Not everyone agrees, although he certainly has a point.

TV has all but ignored the major story of European unification, and what 1992 will mean. Hardly anybody covers Brussels. John Chancellor of NBC recalls that the Common Market bureau he opened in Brussels in 1963 was the toughest assignment he ever had. International economics is hard to report on TV. But it can be done. Check Paul Solman on PBS for *MacNeil-Lehrer*.

Once in a while, circumstances combine to make it possible to tell an important Third World story well, and rivet us to the screen with it. This was the case with the Aquino victory over Marcos. You had a bad guy, Marcos, and a heroine, Cory Aquino. You had a revolution—violence and conflict and suspense. You had an American angle—U.S. bases. You had excellent communication facilities available. You had a comfortable Manila hotel

with a U.S. satellite ground station for feeds. And everybody involved in the story spoke English.

It was an ideal event for TV, and it got blanket coverage—while it lasted. It turned American public opinion against an American client, Marcos.

But try to get a Philippine story on the air now that Mrs. Aquino is wrestling with more complex problems difficult to translate into TV images!

## Invisible Third World

**R**acism, bias, the cost of coverage—all play a role in limiting Third World coverage. The capsizing of a British ferry gets more attention than a devastating earthquake in Ecuador.

A network correspondent in Asia wanted to do a story on a cataclysmic monsoon in India. The producers back home retorted, "Why should we care about a bunch of wet Indians!"

CNN, however, appears to understand that the Third World is fascinating, exciting—and important, besides. It is expanding abroad, while the networks contract.

The video revolution may have created a global village, but it has also served in many cases to accentuate differences and exaggerate stereotypes. Robin Wright has noted that the Iranian revolution was covered a decade ago largely in terms of American hostages rather than in its own context.

When a few whites are massacred, it's a story, but when 10,000 Africans are slaughtered, nobody cares. Thousands of Lebanese have vanished, but all we hear about are a score of American hostages, and not very often at that.

Where are the TV stories about soil erosion and the destruction of the rain forests, population growth, environmental issues, the debt crisis?

Av Westin and others have recommended that in this changing period for TV, the traditional nightly news format should be scrapped in favor of mini-documentary, in-depth analysis

and *60 Minutes*-type investigative stories on a daily basis.

More courage, vision and commitment are needed, to refute H. L. Mencken's cynical comment that "no one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people."

More documentaries are needed on network TV and not just on PBS or in short doses on magazine shows. All four British channels, public and commercial, find no difficulty in doing sensitive and interesting documentaries every week, and getting an audience.

American producers, editors and top brass don't give U.S. viewers enough credit for appreciating thoughtfulness. Perhaps more soul-searching among the network executives will help. The rest of us can at least lobby and argue for what we believe.

Television is a business, and exists to earn a profit. It claims not to have any mission to enrich public consciousness or interest. But, as some executives prefer to forget in the era of deregulation, legislative acts have mandated a public interest mission for broadcasting. And that means more and better TV coverage of international news.

Bill Kovach, the Nieman Fellowship curator and veteran journalist, notes another serious blemish diminishing our craft: "Coverage of events outside the U.S. is usually strikingly in tune with American foreign policy." In other words, the TV agenda seems to be set too often by Administration media manipulators.

**H**arvard Professor and author-economist John Kenneth Galbraith makes the point that "over many years, when we have undertaken military operations in foreign lands, the public reaction has been all but invariable. First, there has been a strong, even enthusiastic and compulsively articulate show of support; then with the passing days and months, there have come a sobering

reappraisal and a markedly adverse reaction."

This was especially true on TV. It applied to the Bay of Pigs, the Tonkin Gulf incident and Vietnam, our support of contras in Nicaragua, to El Salvador, Grenada, Afghanistan, Angola, the Marines in Lebanon, and Panama. And probably to the U.S. buildup in the Mid-East.

Manuel Noriega, in effect, surrendered to the U.S. on TV. The fall of Romanian dictator Ceausescu also crowned TV's predominance in image reporting. But to get the meaning and the analysis, we mostly had to go to the newspapers and the weeklies.

TV still hasn't probed deeply enough into how and why Noriega became a U.S. client and into his ties to the drug cartel, Bush, Castro and the CIA. TV has yet to satisfy our hunger for reasons and implications.

As for the invasion events themselves, only a few correspondents were in Panama City before the landing began, and most of them were forced to report from inside the Marriott Hotel, often with the help of their TV tuned to CNN.

Members of the Pentagon pool reporters arrived late, courtesy of the Defense Department, and were kept away from the initial action, a *la* Grenada. Stories were missed, the White House tried to convey the impression that the situation was "under control" when it wasn't, and the Pentagon spin control masters were able to dominate the TV diet. Relatively few critics were heard, even on the interview programs back home. TV, in the main, waved the flag and beat the drums.

Now that it's all over, how often have the networks sent correspondents back to Panama or Grenada to see how things are going? The lack of followup stories to the short-lived Big Stories is a continuing weakness of Television journalism at all levels.

Latin America, in fact, gets little consecutive coverage when there are

no big headline events. We cover the pro-democracy movements in Eastern Europe, but hardly at all in Chile or Brazil. Those two Latin countries held their first free presidential elections in 16 and 25 years, respectively, the first since U.S.-inspired coups had upset their democratically elected governments. Network coverage was trifling, without the needed on-site reports. Why?

Plenty of color was available. The events were both important and interesting, with issues that viewers could relate to. Perhaps it simply didn't appeal to those whom *Frontline's* David Fanning calls the "television priesthood," the comparatively small group of people who determine what to broadcast.

After an initial glimpse into the killing of six Jesuits by military death squads in El Salvador, TV has all but ignored the effort, or non-effort, to carry out justice. One notable exception: a fine piece by *60 Minutes* on the cover-up.

A local news director confided to John McManus of Santa Clara University in California that two series of stories on Central American nations were censored at his station on grounds that viewers might switch channels if they thought the station was showing American foreign policy in a negative light.

How we see the world through television depends not only on the vision, courage and dedication of those who work in it. It also depends on how well they work within and around the limitations of TV.

## **Distortion By Compression**

For years, we've been told that TV has become a headline service, that it can distort as well as inform. The time problems have caused what Walter Cronkite once called "distortion by compression."

TV has also become a victim of its own new technologies, particularly for international news. The very ad-

vances that have increased efficiency and speed in reporting have also forced some of us to move too quickly, often to get us on the air too soon, without time for the essential background and perspective.

The medium is at its best, of course, when stories can be covered live from the scene, as they are happening. Reporting for television is often excellent, and it is done under difficult, grueling and dangerous conditions.

The big question is whether international coverage from the scene, with

expert correspondents, is going to prevail or wither in the increasingly austere and Philistine mood of network news management.

Coming back to *New Yorker* cartoons... a foreign correspondent I know used to keep one on his wall: It shows a TV anchor person on camera, saying, "Owing to cutbacks in our news department, here is Rod Ingram, to guess at what happened today in a number of places around the world."

It's not funny any more. ■

## POST SCRIPT TO BATTLE: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

**H**as television coverage of the Gulf War changed forever America's view of the world? Or, looking ahead, are we doomed to a return to TV-business-as-usual?

Four out of five Americans know what they know of the world from television. This view, for all its powerful impact and frequent brilliance, has often been skewed. Meanwhile, new lenses have refracted our sources of information.

Some tentative conclusions:

- CNN, with its live 24-hour coverage, has emerged as the most important, truly international network with a global reach. CNN is a cable network accessible—unfortunately—to only 60 percent of American homes, and its ratings do not yet approach those of ABC, NBC and CBS, but the Gulf War showed that its audience could skyrocket beyond the most optimistic predictions. Even independents and network affiliates and radio stations use CNN. World leaders communicate through CNN. The Big Three project a nationalistic image, while CNN looks increasingly international and usually less jingoistic.

- The Gulf conflict, for the first time, made war a live TV show, performed as it happened. But it also gave viewers a censored, manipulated tableau that on both sides sanitized the truth while inundating the public with images, sounds and words. It was, in the view of Eric Sevareid, like a flashlight beam in the darkness that left all the rest in the dark.

- New technology somewhat changed the style of TV news from the outset of the Gulf War. But without good video, TV news proved it could also be reduced to something like radio reporting.

- Despite official news management, censorship, and the tensions born of media dissatisfaction with the quality of the information furnished to reporters, the U.S. public at least initially approved of the restrictions. Astonishingly, many viewers felt those rules ought to be toughened. Freedom of the press and the cause of truth became casualties of war.

- TV is a visual medium good at providing Nintendo-like pictures and gee-whiz computer-generated graphics, but it did not adequately prepare

us for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait or the U.S.-led coalition's response. Nor did it prepare us for understanding the political, social and economic consequences.

- In the race to get on the air instantly, unchecked rumors, raw speculation and errors proliferate, and that goes for ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN. Context, meaning and analysis suffer. The speed and other improvements of the new TV technology should mandate more thoughtful judgment and careful editorial function.

- A limited number of journalists, including those of CNN, and later ABC, CBS and NBC, were permitted to report under controlled conditions "from the heart of enemy territory," thus giving us an extra dimension. At the same time, this earned fine reporters like CNN's Peter Arnett unjustified vilification. The McCarthyite attacks on Arnett reminded us of the smearing of another distinguished reporter, Harrison Salisbury of *The New York Times*, when he managed to get into North Vietnam in 1966.

Walter Lippman's defense of Salisbury provides a mordant rejoinder to critics: "We must remember that in time of war what is said on the enemy's side of the front is always propaganda and what is said on our side of the front is truth and righteousness." Only the rare reporter went to Hanoi during the Vietnam War, and such things never happened at all during World Wars I and II or Korea.

John Hart, host of *World Monitor*, said the media were "ill-prepared, ill-trained and didn't raise hell when the rules first came down." Bill Kovach, curator of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard, said that reporters reported what they were told without asking probing questions: "We were controlled but it was our own fault."

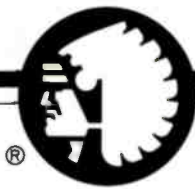
Completely out of their depth, some morning news anchors unashamedly made brilliant comments like "I wonder what language they speak in Kuwait." All networks felt impelled to make expert consultants out of a gaggle of retired military men like Gen. William Westmoreland, who referred sagaciously to Iraq's leader as "Sadat Hussein."

A thousand reporters rushed abroad to flood an area up to then virtually ignored. And what happens when it's over? Bill Wheatley, veteran NBC *Nightly News* producer, has taken the optimistic view that post-war foreign reporting will get a new lease on life after suffering a devastating decline in recent years, but not everybody agrees.

Don Hewitt thought that "maybe it's time for a combined news service for the networks, with the best reporters from CBS, NBC and ABC no longer competing with each other, but with CNN."

—Bernard Redmont

Bernard S. Redmont is an award-winning former correspondent for CBS News in Moscow and Paris and for Group W/Westinghouse Broadcasting Company. He is Dean Emeritus of the College of Communication of Boston University and a frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*.



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# LOCAL NEWS: IT COMFORTS— BUT DOES IT INFORM?

**BY DAVE BERKMAN**

**T**wenty-five years ago, local television was profoundly transformed when stations discovered newscasts didn't have to be loss leaders offered merely for status or to placate an FCC which still jawboned about public interest responsibilities. News is now local TV's major profit center.

In that quarter-century, we've seen profound changes in both the technology and the journalistic worth of TV news.

The revolutionary technological advances—despite occasional excess—can only be welcomed. Journalistic worth, however, is usually another matter.

For, as the economic value of local news has escalated (we all know the dollar value of a single rating point for our own market) its journalistic worth has suffered. Popularity, it seems, is determined not by journalistic merit, but by the trappings we identify with showbiz. This would be sad enough if local newscasting was still the supplementary journalistic medium of TV's early days. But since the late '50s, newspaper penetration has declined precipitously, so that while population is up some 40%, the number of copies sold each day has remained the same. Furthermore, readership among adults under 40 is off by well over

half, to under 25%. Thus, more and more have come to depend on television as their main source of contemporary information. And among the many older people whose only source of news is television, a majority watch only local newscasts.

What are such folks getting from their local TV news?

As I contemplate that question, I keep recalling a promotional spot for WITI, the CBS affiliate here in Milwaukee. It features its male, evening anchor soliloquizing. But not about how an S&L crisis, or the end of the cold war, or an Iraqi war threat, or a burgeoning budget deficit, or threats to our civil liberties, or a deteriorated racial climate affect our community. Nope. It's warmy-feely prattling about his family life. The kicker is a recounting of some cloying, cutesy thing his kid has said to him about the size of his nose.

Can someone who makes such a spot expect to be respected as a journalist? Can a journalistic enterprise which so promotes itself expect to be accorded credibility? But this Milwaukee CBS affiliate anchor and his smarmy promotional spot serves merely as an illustration of how local TV news has come to debase and distance itself from legitimate journalism. We're more comfortable with someone who comes across as a "family man." And thus, this spot is perfectly consonant with what has

become the major concern of local TV news: to comfort, rather than inform.

That the primary concern of local news is not really news, is obvious when we look at how few of the 20 to 22 newshole minutes in each half hour are allotted to hard news. In Milwaukee it averages about 10—with the rest consisting of (1) overly-long weather reports from personalities affirmed as "trustworthy" by focus groups; (2) sports segments in which real news is secondary to affirmation that the sportscaster supports the hometown franchises; and (3) the soft, feelgood, hometowny, final piece. In sweeps months the requisite lead "mini-documentary" series, on teen hookers or new ways to experience love, further reduces the only opportunity those solely dependent on local TV for their news have, for finding out what's going on in the world.

Because local TV's primary concern is to comfort rather than inform, we almost never see, for example, a black male co-anchoring with a white female. To older, more conservative whites, such a race/gender pairing would be implicitly threatening. It's also why so many local male anchors have become multi-decade institutions. Age, and the avuncularity in males which it implies, are implicitly reassuring.

**I**f what seems comfortable draws audience, then what causes discomfort can cost rating points. And what is more discomfoting than complexity? Which is why local news so often tends to oversimplify—and in doing so often ends up reinforcing stereotypes, misinformation, and the distortions of truth.

An illustration: it was a 15-second, foreign news item. The Iranian Parliament that day had passed a law allowing its agents to make arrests in foreign countries of those who

violate Iranian law. End of anchor-read item.

Now it doesn't take a DuPont award winner to realize that, to the average American, such a story will be received with a reaction something like, "There go those nutzoid Iranians again." Except that what the typical viewer who receives no other news would not have also known is that this Iranian law was passed in direct response to a U.S. declaration that we have the right to make foreign arrests of those who've violated American law.

A concern for journalistic responsibility would have meant at least an additional 20 seconds to provide some context about the disturbing significance of an exactly similar action by America. But such complexity can prove extremely discomfoting. And so, in an environment in which explanation that causes discomfort costs ratings, it's safer to leave the disturbing implications unstated, and the comfortably familiar stereotypes undisturbed.

Is this example of distortion by omission in one local newscast typical of what is offered by local TV news around the country? Recall the quality of the coverage the local TV news operations in your own market accorded such recent stories as the civil liberties implications of censorship threats, the real causes of the S&L crisis, increases in racial tension, the profound changes taking place in Eastern Europe, or the coming of the 1992 unification of Western Europe's economies. In pondering this, again keep in mind that for an increasing number of viewers, local newscasts will provide their only exposure to local, national and international affairs.

**H**ow well do local news operations cover local news?

Again, I focus on the market with which my own geographical limita-



tions make me most familiar. At a Milwaukee Society of Professional Journalists program I moderated last year, I invited the PR heads from various units of local government—each a former working journalist—to talk about how they rated the performance of the various news media in covering their agencies. The spokesperson for the county executive—who as both an office and personality was a constant source of major news—said only one of the three network affiliates even assigned someone part time to cover that office and its incumbent. The spokesperson for the superintendent of a school system seriously beset with racial and performance problems, took the audience aback when he stated that anything he wanted the public to hear “my guy saying” TV would carry—with almost never a question or any other follow up.

But Milwaukee, while representative, is not America. So what about those other 210 markets?

In a most disturbing piece in the May/June 1990 *Columbia Journalism Review*, former *CBS Morning News* producer Jon Katz reported his experiences during the three days he spent with each of the local news operations at four stations around the country. Of 32 stories he observed, he found 18, or 56%, “inaccurate or misleading.” At the two largest stations, 13 of 16 stories were distorted to at least some degree.

Inattention to editing, he reported, “constituted an open invitation to make stories more appealing than the facts warranted.” But where an editor did intrude, two series on Central America were censored “because viewers might switch channels if they thought the station was showing American foreign policy in a negative light.”

Once each year, coincident with the annual RTNDA convention, *Broadcasting* magazine asks local stations for their outstanding journalistic accomplishment over the pre-

vious year. The triviality of what they regard as their best is more than depressing. Last year’s rundown contained material on general news coverage submitted by just over 75 stations and on investigative reporting and documentaries from more than 80.

Know what WXYZ-TV, Detroit, found most worthy of boasting about? Its invitation for video camera owners to submit tape. How’s that for unique? WTHR in Indianapolis covered the arrest of a kidnapper. WUSA in DC was the first to report an Amtrak crash. (Doesn’t one station have to be first?) KCCI, Des Moines, sent two crews to an airline crash in Sioux City. And WLTW in Cincinnati did not ignore the Pete Rose gambling scandal. (Neither did the rest of America.)

There were, however, a few boasts about investigative reports which seemed significant. One which I saw, and found myself more than impressed with, was the series of reports by superstation WWOR showing the blatant pattern of racial harassment by New Jersey State troopers. Other stations claimed exposure of various rip-offs, and of instances and patterns of governmental corruption. Yet only one Texas station in this 1989 survey, WFAA, Dallas (and none in *Broadcasting’s* 1988 survey) claimed any investigative awareness of the S&L disaster which was about to befall that state.

**M**uch of the recent criticism of local TV news has focused on the degree to which, at the behest of omniscient consultants, it has tended to focus on and to lead with crime and violence stories.

Without getting into the question of whether such stories are overplayed, I’d like to suggest that such crime coverage may well have far more sig-

nificance than the usual concerns with 'sensationalism' imply.

Research shows that the heaviest viewers—that one-third who account for two-thirds of the viewing—tend to confuse what they see on TV with the reality around them. For example, heavy viewers tend to grossly overestimate their personal chances of being violently accosted. Given this, one must ask to what degree has the superficiality of local newscasts which highlight action crime stories—but which never deal with such complexities as the root causes of crime—helped to induce the paranoia among lower-middle-class audiences that has made mindless law-and-order political appeals so successful in the past decade.

As for the lack of investigative attention by Texas stations to the S&L mess, one has to wonder how many stations in that S&L scandal-rich state kept highlighting instead welfare cheating. (That's certainly been the case in the Milwaukee mar-

ket.) Yet, what such coverage always comes down to, is a pandering to racism. Might this explain why so much of majority America is so wrought over comparatively small welfare cheating, and was so oblivious for so long to staggering S&L scams committed by nice, upstanding, white folks?

News media through decisions as to what, where, and how much to cover, do more than just "report." They also, set the national agendas. Which makes me wonder: Is it local news pandering to popular prejudice that makes it possible for politicians to appeal so mean spiritedly to our racial fears—thereby making us increasingly willing to sacrifice our liberties to maintain an illusion of safety?

If so, local TV news—even if brought to us by those nice folks with their nice kids—has a lot to answer for. ■

## GULF POSTSCRIPT — A 17-MARKET SURVEY

**H**ow did local TV do in covering the Gulf war?

Here in Milwaukee, the gung-ho, cheerleading which followed the outbreak of hostilities, constituted a virtual abandonment by the three affiliate news operations to any claim of journalistic credibility.

In addition to the endless succession of ohh-so-cute stories featuring third-graders mailing letters to the troops, or dedicating peace songs in support of war, WTMJ promoted its coverage of "Wisconsin's Saddam-warriors," while the anchors at WISN narrated an endless series of unctuous voice-overs for "soldier salutes" aired during station breaks. "Vince-the-Nose," the guy at WITI I alluded to above, was transformed into

"Vince-the-War-Correspondent" after a week of recording "Hi, Mom" pieces in the Saudi desert.

He would sit in the middle of a garish, Toys 'R Us, game room map—as if this imbued him with profound insight into military strategies—while pretentiously citing "my Pentagon sources." Since the station promotes itself as "Our Friend," and friends support their soldiers, he and his co-anchors led off a number of newscasts urging viewers to pick up station-distributed "Support Our Troops" lapel stickers.

Based on what I heard during conversations with TV critics in 16 other cities, what I saw here in Milwaukee was apparently not atypical.

In Buffalo, according to News critic Alan Pergament, the war seemed to be about which station was most pa-

triotic. At one time or another, the anchors at all three affiliates donned yellow ribbons. One anchor went so far as to emcee a support the troops rally.

The *Los Angeles Times'* Howard Rosenberg—cautioning that he was no fan of local news—said it was as if the patriotism became part of the news set furniture. Stations seemed to feel that display of support for the war was necessary to put their newscasts in good stead with the public. At KABC, the anchors wore yellow ribbons. Overall, the coverage reminded Rosenberg of what Eskimos do with dead whales—you use every piece and part you can get.

Barry Garron of the *Kansas City Star*, who spent most of his time viewing and writing about network coverage, found an overabundance of yellow ribbons and patriotic displays in the local casts he caught. Each station attempted to take advantage of the growing patriotism and assume it for its own—KMBC going as far as wrapping a massive yellow ribbon around the city's World War One monument.

The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's* Ron Weiskind, who also mainly concentrated on network coverage, felt that in the local news programs he watched, there was a lot of yellow ribbon stuff.

Eric Mink of the *Post-Dispatch*, reported his impression that the St. Louis stations were, on the whole, pretty restrained in their war reporting—although with lots of “we” and “our” as the personal pronouns.

The *Detroit Free Press'* Mike Gunther, who drew the assignment of reviewing network coverage for the Knight-Ridder national wire, found much of the local reporting he did view, utterly irrelevant—either a re-packaging of network material, or flimsy local angles. However, in one respect, he said, the Detroit stations did stand out. Because Detroit is home to the country's largest Arab-American population,

panel discussions usually included those expressing opposing points of view, so that in this city one probably heard more debate than on the networks.

Mark Lorando of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* found the patriotic fervor in the local coverage almost unbelievable. The big New Orleans story developed when Woody Harrelson of NBC's *Cheers*, who had been selected to lead a pre-Mardi Gras parade, was discovered to have expressed opposition to the war. The attempts to bar him from his parade role because of what many felt was a lack of patriotism, became almost a frenzy—with WDSU leading the bandwagon.

According to the *Courier-Journals'* Tom Dorsey, the Louisville stations went with the flow. As with network coverage, he saw no seeking out of alternative opinions, nor any local newscaster stepping away from the long grey line of cheerleaders.

Rick Kogan of the *Chicago Tribune*, said that the war played on the three Chicago owned-and-operated stations with numbing predictability. The NBC owned, WMAQ was a refreshing exception in one thing it didn't do—sending anyone over to the Middle East. That, Kogan said, was a bold and a wise move in that much of what the local anchors and reporters sent back from the Gulf, proved embarrassing, especially the anchors with no reporting experience. Kogan judged these excursions as showboating of a most distasteful nature.

There was a minority of positive reactions.

Phil Kloer, of the *Atlanta Constitution*, stressing he was no fan of the local TV news in that town, felt that on this story, at least, the Atlanta stations did not embarrass themselves.

Both Bob Brock of the *Dallas Times-Herald* and Ann Hodges of the *Houston Chronicle*, thought that in

their focus on the large numbers of military personnel from Texas sent to the Gulf—also Hodges added, on the many Texans employed in the Gulf oil industry—local stations did a good job. Brock felt he saw more cheerleading on the networks and that, all in all, the local coverage had to be judged as quite positive.

A similar reaction came from David Rhein of the *Des Moines Register* about the performance of the stations in his market—and from Kit Boss of the *Seattle Times*. Boss felt the Seattle stations, especially KIRO, should be commended for their continuous coverage of the conflict the first three or four days after hostilities broke out, despite the large revenue losses they assumed from cancellation of local and national spot ads.

Given his city's sophistication, the *Boston Globe's* Ed Segal was not surprised to find less cheerleading and jingo sensationalism in the war coverage by that market's affiliates. Because of the area's many prestigious universities, local TV news programs included a great deal of academic expertise.

The most positive situation—at least in terms of its outcome—was described by the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune's* Noel Holston. Coverage, qualitatively, in the Twin Cities was bifurcated. The NBC affiliate had been acquired by Gannett and, in the upbeat, Gannett/*USA Today* tradition, renamed KARE. And as a station with caring newscasts, it tried to live up to its call letters by constant proclamation of its support for the troops. The ABC affiliate KSTP promoted a station-sponsored Help Line—although it was never made clear what kind of help it could offer. Like KARE it also kept stressing its support for the troops; any pretense of objectivity was dropped.

However, in an attempt to emulate newspapers in their ability to draw upon a multiplicity of news gathering sources, WCCO-TV, the CBS/CNN af-

filiate, distinguished itself, according to Holston, by providing its viewers not only what CBS and CNN were offering, but everything of value it could obtain from the satellites; all of this was coordinated by anchors who assumed a role similar to a newspaper editor in the slot. With its stress on quality and informative journalism, WCCO trounced its competitors in the ratings by some 2:1, consistently scoring shares in the 40s. ■

—Dave Berkman

Dave Berkman, is professor of Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and media columnist for Milwaukee's alternative newspaper, *The Shepherd Express*.

*Something's Happening*

The ABC logo is centered in the lower half of the image. It consists of the lowercase letters 'a', 'b', and 'c' in a bold, rounded, sans-serif font. The letters are white with a slight gradient and are set against a circular background of numerous vertical, slightly blurred lines of varying lengths, creating a textured, almost barcode-like effect. The entire graphic is set against a dark, textured background.

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# HOW KENNEDY INVENTED POLITICAL TELEVISION

The 35th President's introduction of the televised press conference and his use of the medium during the Cuban Missile Crisis shifted power closer to the White House.

**BY MARY ANN WATSON**

**B**y the time John Kennedy won the presidency, he certainly could not complain that television hadn't met its responsibility in covering the election process. When asked at his press conference the day after the election if he felt he could have prevailed over Nixon without the benefit of the medium, he said without hesitation, "I don't think so."

Not only in campaigning, but in holding office, John Kennedy would depend on television to meet his needs while fulfilling its obligations. Though it would not be true for his successors, for the 35th President of the United States, no more mutually beneficial arrangement could have been developed than the live television press conference.

The idea originated with Press Secretary Pierre Salinger. According to his account, he approached the president-elect shortly after the election and said, "What do you think of opening up your press conferences to live television? I don't think there's any doubt you can handle it. You proved that against Nixon in the Debates."

Kennedy considered the disadvantages of the forum before agreeing with Pierre Salinger it was in his best interest. The president-elect knew that overexposure on the airwaves was a possibility and the re-

sult could be citizen disinterest. Kennedy understood that vexing print journalists—the Gutenberg boys, as they were called—by appearing to favor television could be damaging.

He did not, however, buy the arguments made by sincere critics, some on his own staff, who believed that "off-the-cuff" government was hazardous. The thinking was that a slip of the presidential tongue could easily embarrass the United States or its allies. "The stakes are too high," believed David Lawrence, chief editor of *U.S. News and World Report*. Kennedy was sure enough of his own rhetorical and intellectual capabilities, however, to take the uncushioned chance.

As early as November 29, 1960, *The New York Times* reported that Kennedy was considering "occasional live telecasts of news conferences." The official announcement came on December 27, 1960, at Salinger's daily transition-period briefing in Palm Beach. Salinger recalled the assembled reporters broke into "a storm of protest." But he would not entertain their opinions on the matter. Salinger remembered informing the group with stridency, "It was the President's news conference—not theirs—and he would run it his own way. The decision was final. They could take it or leave it."

While New York TV consultant Bill Wilson worked with the White House on the staging of the sessions, the networks worked out their plans for

covering them. The arrangement devised was that each conference would be broadcast through a pool feed to all three networks. ABC, CBS, and NBC would rotate originating the pool. The broadcasts would also be available to independent stations that wanted to tap in to the nearest affiliate.

Only five days after he took the oath of office, Kennedy conducted the first live televised presidential press conference. It took place in the spacious State Department auditorium, which was a huge difference from the cozy setting of Eisenhower news conferences held in the Indian Treaty Room of the Executive Office Building.

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### **'Television was about as hazardous for Kennedy as water for a fish.'**

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More than four hundred reporters were present at the Kennedy debut. One of them, CBS correspondent Robert Pierpoint, recalled, "The President stood on stage, which gave him a psychological advantage, much like a judge seated above the rest of the courtroom."

Chicago Daily News reporter Peter Lisagor remembered that "in Eisenhower's time we were up close to him...we could see his temper flair. We could almost feel like we were shoving a hypodermic needle into him." But, with Kennedy, he said, a nearsighted reporter might have a problem seeing the man. Lisagor complained that conducting the conferences in the mammoth auditorium, with its thick beige carpeting and orange and black seats, was like "making love in Carnegie Hall — and that ascribes to it an intimacy it doesn't have."

While the reporters in the room were not sitting as close to the Chief Executive as they would have preferred, the home viewers did have

ringside seats. They could not have been much closer to John Kennedy if they were making love. They could examine his face and observe his expressions and gestures freely.

The 6 p.m. broadcast of the first live press conference was a ratings success, capturing almost 34% of the total available television audience. It also prompted a spate of telegrams and letters from citizens who felt the reporters were not treating the President with appropriate deference. One viewer wrote to NBC's David Brinkley:

To say it mildly we were all somewhat amazed at the following:

- (1) While they were asking questions a few of the reporters had their hands in their pockets while addressing the President. A non-commissioned officer would not permit this and all of us thought it was disrespectful (sic) to the President.
- (2) One of the reporters was making a speech, and not asking a question.
- (3) The president had to question a reporter as to what he was talking about.

Brinkley assured his correspondent that while the courtesy of the gesture might be questionable, there were no restrictions on reporters placing their hands in their pockets. In years to come, viewers of presidential press conferences would grow accustomed to grandstanding by reporters and questioning in harsh tones. But in 1961, the novice television audience still expected politeness toward a president.

After the first three live press conferences, *Television Magazine* felt safe in declaring "television has proven about as hazardous for Kennedy as water for a fish." Even early skeptics could not deny that the President's grace under pressure and capacity to retain information were remarkable.



## A Videogenic Style

**A**s one student of American political rhetoric observed, Kennedy demonstrated two stylistic virtues essential to the small screen: he was under-expressive in his bearing and gestures and he employed an economy of language well suited to television. While he could be charmingly evasive, he could also be uncommonly direct. Sometimes answering a question with a single word—"No."

While the networks carried the conferences live, a local station in Washington carried them on a delayed basis. Pierre Salinger recalled: "In the early press conferences Kennedy would go back to the White House and watch it. After the first few, he became concerned about how the cameras focused on him and the lighting. That's why we brought Schaffner down. To take a look at our set up." Salinger was referring to the famed TV and film director Franklin Schaffner who had worked on many prestigious television series, such as *Studio One* and *Playhouse 90*.

Kennedy grasped the nuances of television in a way that surprised CBS newsman George Herman. Referring to the press conference of March 23, 1961, he said, "For the first time, I saw a President of the United States do something which was so professional, from a television man's point of view." The President opened the conference with a statement on the advance of communist-backed rebels in Laos, and Herman remembered that when Kennedy spoke "he didn't look at any reporter in the auditorium...he was not trying to give the appearance of a news conference; he wasn't looking around the room. He looked right over all our heads, right into the camera with the red tally light on it, the one he knew was on. It was clear to me at the time that this was something that was carefully planned. This was to go direct to the people."

In April 1961, Salinger met the membership of the American Society of Newspaper Editors on the occasion of their annual convention. The Gutenberg boys were mad. A panel of critics contended that presidential press conferences were unfair to print journalists. "With the television monster all around," Salinger was told, "the reporters have become little more than props." The press secretary's response was to say coolly, "Television is here to stay." He was not worried by the rancor he encountered: "I think things are going pretty well. The people are getting a closer view of their President and the presidency than they've ever had—and that's just what we wanted."

The TV lessons President Kennedy learned through his press conferences extended to his televised speeches as well. NBC correspondent Ray Scherer was present when Kennedy was about to deliver his first formal televised address to the nation. It was the spring of 1961 and Kennedy had just returned from the summit with Krushchev in Vienna. The newsman recalled, "The President told the network men he didn't think he looked his best in one of his recent television appearances." Kennedy told them, "These lights sometimes give me a double chin."

Scherer continued: "He had a *New York Times* photographer sit in (his) chair, and he squinted through the viewfinder of one of the TV cameras. He didn't like what he saw." "Too much shadow around the chin," the Chief Executive felt. The technicians suggested the President take a peek at the monitor in the remote truck in the White House driveway and they would adjust the lighting.

"As Mr. Kennedy walked to the truck," Scherer said, "electricians lowered each of seven floodlights in the office six inches. The President peered into the monitor tube and decided this was a vast improvement."

**B**y the end of the first year of the New Frontier, *Life* White House reporter Hugh Siley believed that because of Kennedy's use of television, "No official face has ever become so much a part of American consciousness." While few would deny that President Kennedy's live television press conferences stimulated the interest of American citizens in the affairs of their government, it was also true that his innovation caused an imbalance between the coverage of the presidency and the coverage of Congress and the Supreme Court. During the Kennedy years, because of television, the presidency psychologically became the center of American government.

Live television press conferences allowed John Kennedy to get his ideas to the American public without a middleman. A prime example of the way this principle translated into power occurred on April 11, 1962. Kennedy, certain of formidable newspaper opposition to his pressure on steel companies to reverse price increases, used a press conference to stimulate public opinion to his cause and thereby force the steel companies into a defensive posture. In his opening five-minute statement the President castigated the action of the steel industry in raising prices as an "irresponsible defiance of the public interest." His televised show of anger was a wounding thrust in the duel.

Through the President likened the process of preparing for a press conference to cramming for a final exam every two weeks, he wanted to keep open the channel that allowed his message to be delivered unadulterated. Kennedy once told his friend, journalist Ben Bradlee, "When we don't have to go through you bastards we can really get our story to the American people."

There was, of course, a consequence the executive branch of government had to bear in exchange for this privilege. During the

Kennedy years, Americans began to harbor inflated expectations of what a president was capable of doing and what he was empowered to do. When the most critical news story of the nuclear age broke in October 1962, it became as much a showdown of individual personalities as a confrontation between governments. And, again, television did not simply cover the story, it was part and parcel of it.

## Mr. K vs. Mr. K

**W**ith the mid-term congressional elections at hand, John Kennedy's track record in foreign affairs was not enviable. He had been humbled by the Bay of Pigs defeat, bullied by Krushchev in Vienna, and was unable to prevent the construction of the Berlin Wall. Leading the partisan assault on the administration's shortcomings in foreign policy were Republican Senators Kenneth Keating and Earle Capehart. They charged that Kennedy was allowing a dangerous buildup of Soviet military aid to Cuba.

The President's response was to warn the Soviets and Castro that offensive weapons—those able to reach the United States—would not be tolerated, but he offered assurance to the American people that the buildup in Cuba consisted merely of defensive weapons. The distinction was not comforting to many critics and Kennedy was not entirely successful in diverting attention from the growing Soviet military presence on the island. The President was sharply criticized by the conservative press for allowing domestic politics to interfere with national security.

Tuesday, October 16, 1962, was a dismal morning for John Kennedy. Reading the early papers in his bedroom after breakfast, he was interrupted by McGeorge Bundy. The National Security Advisor had urgent news. The night before, the CIA had

examined evidence, aerial photographs, which proved conclusively that nuclear missile emplacements were being constructed in Cuba. The warheads were already there and crews were working to make them operational. When completed, they would be capable of hitting targets throughout the southeastern United States. By the President's own definition, the offensiveness of the weapons was undeniable. And Kennedy had pledged to take action if such a situation arose.

## Was Brinkmanship Necessary?

**T**he United States, of course, also had intermediate-range missiles on ally soil and claimed them to be for purposes of deterrence—therefore defensive weapons. Some scholars have blamed Kennedy for generating a crisis that didn't need to exist. He could have regarded the missiles as defensive if he so chose. Whether American cities were hit from established long-range missile sites or from newly constructed ones a hundred miles off the U.S. coast would not be an important distinction to the victims. The missiles in Cuba did not materially alter the strategic nuclear balance—the U.S. remained in a superior position. The brinkmanship was wholly unnecessary, it has been contended.

But, on that October 16th, several theories on the Soviet motives in placing the missiles in Cuba were advanced in the meetings of the President's closest advisors. Whatever might have been true—whether or not the Soviet Union did intend the missiles simply to defend Cuba from an attack by the United States—the theory Kennedy believed was that the missiles were being put in Cuba as a probe of American resolve, that Krushchev was testing the young President's character. Kennedy had made great claims about the strength

of the American will in responding to communism. Now Krushchev, he felt, was calling his bluff.

During the next week the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, Ex Comm, met unremittingly to debate on the course of action to be taken. The meetings were held in strictest secrecy. Even Ex Comm spouses were not to be advised of the situation. To maintain the appearance of normalcy, the President left Washington on Wednesday to keep his commitments to campaign for Democratic candidates.

On Friday, unusual American troop movements led enterprising news reporters to conclude that another Cuban crisis of some sort was imminent. Pierre Salinger, who knew nothing of the situation, was frustrated as he was beleaguered by demands for comment. "All I can tell you is this," Kennedy's Special Assistant Kenny O'Donnell told Salinger, "the President may have to develop a cold somewhere along the line tomorrow."

On Saturday, after being informed that Ex Comm had reached a tentative decision, the President cut short his campaigning. Salinger informed the press that the Chief Executive had a cold. To make the story more believable, the President appeared in a top coat and hat, a rare occurrence, as he departed Chicago for Washington.

By Sunday, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *New York Herald Tribune* had the substance of the story. At Kennedy's personal intervention, all three papers withheld publication of the facts.

On Monday morning, October 22nd, Salinger requested that the television networks prepare for a presidential address of "highest national security" that evening. The night before, Salinger had placed a call to Franklin Schaffner asking him to come to Washington. When Schaffner arrived on Monday he de-

tected an unusually high degree of security at the White House. Schaffner's help was needed in making the President look as relaxed and effective as possible on camera. The medication Kennedy took for his painful back condition resulted in a puffiness in his face. Schaffner's advice on lighting and lenses contributed an extra measure of confidence to the President.

**F**ew people knew, including Schaffner, what Kennedy planned to say. But, as the Chief Executive's TV advisor entered the control truck moments before the telecast, he was given a copy of the text. Schaffner recalled being "besieged by a swarm of reporters who wanted advance word on what Kennedy would say."

After giving his hair a final brush stroke, Kennedy took his place at his desk. Viewers at home were hearing announcements like "Stump the Stars will not be seen tonight..."

The President got right to the point. There were missiles in Cuba. They were deliberately provocative and unacceptable. "To halt this offensive buildup," he said, "a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment to Cuba is being initiated." With these words a crisis was officially underway.

In his study of the press and the government during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Professor William LeoGrande of American University wrote of the TV speech: "It represented a landmark in political communication for it was the first time a president had used television in quite this way...Its impact was extraordinary. Over the ensuing days, the entire nation followed the unfolding crisis which Kennedy had sprung upon it with such drama Monday evening."

Of course, the President had not only sprung it on the American people, he also sprung it on the Russians and U.S. allies. Cuban Missile

Crisis historian Thomas Paterson believes that what is most telling about Kennedy's response to the missiles in Cuba is that he suspended traditional diplomacy "and chose a television address, rather than a direct approach to Moscow, urged upon him by some of his advisers—The President practiced public rather than private diplomacy and thereby significantly increased the chances for war...The President left little room for bargaining, but instead issued a surprise public ultimatum on television—usually not the stuff of diplomacy."

Once the crisis became public, Professor LeoGrande has documented, the press, both print and broadcast, "acted as a willing partner in the administration's strategy." The American mass media did not constitute a forum for differing opinions.

The TV coverage of the Cuban Missile Crisis was continual but not continuous. The networks offered regular news flashes, plus news specials. Unlike a space flight, the missile crisis was not a story with an expected time of closure. A total preemption of programming made little sense to the networks. Not only would the cost be overwhelming, but what could actually be reported? There was a grave danger, the networks felt, if reporters turned to speculation. As noted in the trade press, "that might unnecessarily inflame an already frightened public to terror."

To some viewers, the juxtaposition of news bulletins with commercials put the modern world into a queer perspective. *Washington Post TV* critic Lawrence Laurent saw a deodorant message announcing, "It's new. It's different." "In a world threatened by thermonuclear holocaust," he wrote, "the commercial announcer's horror over a little honest human sweat was too tragic to be ludicrous."

During the crisis, CBS News displayed some especially resourceful thinking that eluded other news organizations. In the effort to monitor

the Cuban television network, CBS chartered a plane and equipped it with two TV monitors and a film camera. About forty miles off Havana, pictures from the Cuban network could be picked up and recorded in the plane. Images from CBS's kine-scope style footage received wide circulation in American newspapers.

On Wednesday, October 24th, when Soviet ships changed course rather than make contact with the naval blockade, there was some relief in Washington. New weapons shipments to Cuba were being prevented. But the problem of what to do about those already there was no closer to a solution. Work on the missile sites was continuing and they soon would be fully operational. The possibility of U.S. air strikes on the missile bases loomed larger.

## A Journalist As Intermediary

**J**ohn Scali, ABC's State Department correspondent, received an urgent phone call on Friday afternoon. A high level Soviet diplomat and KGB officer, Alexander Fomin, said to the American reporter, "Let's have lunch right away."

Scali, who was the State Department expert for the Associated Press for fifteen years before joining ABC in 1961, had met with Fomin on other occasions—but never on such odd terms. Fomin knew that Scali was well-respected and trusted at high levels of the U.S. government. And Scali knew that Fomin had direct channels of communication with the Kremlin.

The Russian told Scali that the possibly dire consequences of the Cuban crisis might be averted. The American was astonished to realize that he was being used as a conduit for a proposal to end the standoff. The participation of newsmen and newswomen in diplomatic affairs would become less extraordinary by the end

of the next decade. In 1962, however, reporters were not apt to think of themselves as players.

Scali was implored to find out if the State Department would be interested in an agreement by which the Soviet Union would dismantle and remove the offensive missiles in Cuba and pledge not to reintroduce them, if the United States would promise before the world not to invade Cuba.

Back at the State Department, the legitimacy of Fomin's proposal seemed to be authenticated by a conciliatory message sent by Nikita Krushchev. The top Soviet was pondering, just as the President, the outcome of a failure of diplomacy. There was, finally, an optimistic note on which to cling.

But, Saturday morning another message from Krushchev arrived. This one contradicted Friday's olive branch. He was insisting the Cuban installations would only be dismantled if U.S. bases in Turkey came down as well. Even though those bases were obsolete and scheduled for dismantling, it was an unacceptable compromise to President Kennedy.

Then an added complication heightened the tension. A U.S. U-2 plane was shot down over Cuba by a surface-to-air missile. It was feared the pace of events might be getting out of control. The U.S. could not fail to respond to the attack. While Washington was trying to figure out what was going on in the Kremlin, the television networks were bracing themselves to cover a possible U.S. invasion of Cuba.

On that bleak Saturday, Mal Goode was a TV correspondent-in-training at the United Nations. Having been a reporter for the black weekly newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and an active radio newscaster, Goode joined the ABC television network in September 1962. He was sent to the UN, usually a fairly slow beat, to get acquainted with the new medium.

But on October 27th he delivered seven network news bulletins to worried viewers. After the crisis, ABC received the following letter from a woman in South Carolina: "I think that was a colored man I saw reporting all day long on the Cuban missile crisis. And although I am white, and although he is a colored man, I want to thank him and I want to thank ABC because this is America, and that's the way it ought to be."

John Scali met with Fomin again on Saturday afternoon to try to find out the meaning of the mixed messages. The Soviet said it was a communications breakdown. The second cable, he claimed, was drafted before the favorable American reaction to his proposal reached Moscow. Scali was angry and told Fomin he thought it was all a "stinking double cross." He advised that the Soviets should not underestimate the determination of the United States to get the missiles out of Cuba—and time was running out.

With the clock ticking, Robert Kennedy devised a strategy beautiful in its simplicity. The U.S. would respond to Krushchev's favorable communique of Friday and simply ignore the contradictory message sent on Saturday. The Attorney General himself delivered a letter to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin promising the U.S. would end the blockade and pledge not to invade Cuba in exchange for the withdrawal of the missiles and a pledge from the Soviets not to reintroduce them.

Early on Sunday morning, CBS correspondent David Schoenbrun was preparing his *Washington Report* program for its noon broadcast. He was reviewing background material in his office to finalize the lead story on the Cuban crisis when he heard bells in the newsroom. An office boy came running to him shouting, "Look, at this, look at this!"

Schoenbrun grabbed the Teletype bulletin from the British news agency Reuters and read, "Radio Moscow

announces an important message to be broadcast at 9:00 a.m." Soon the follow-up bulletins came, "MOSCOW ANNOUNCES DECISION DISMANTLE MISSILES, CRATE THEM AND RETURN THEM TO THE SOVIET UNION."

The correspondent immediately phoned Pierre Salinger at home. His wife did not want to wake the exhausted press secretary. "Wake him, don't argue," Schoenbrun told her, "It's great news. We've won." Schoenbrun recalled that a few minutes later a sleepy Salinger came on the line and threatened, "David, this better be good or I'll beat the hell out of you."

"Pierrot," the Francophile newsman said, "K has backed down. He's pulling out the missiles. Your boss has won." After Schoenbrun read Salinger the lead paragraphs from the major wire service stories, the press secretary realized the President probably didn't even know yet. "Hang up, Dave," he said, "I've got things to do."

"Just a sec, Pierre," Schoenbrun urged, "I gave this to you first and I've got a show coming up at noon. Promise you'll get back to me and give me what you can before noon?" "You've got it," Salinger promised, "And, Dave? Thanks for waking me up, you bastard."

While Schoenbrun began calling and talking to every official he could get ahold of in Washington, the producers of *Washington Reports* were reviewing file film for pictures of the streets of Moscow, the Kremlin, and Soviet military parades.

**A**t noon Schoenbrun was on the air. After running through the details that were known, he went to CBS Moscow correspondent Marvin Kalb. At that time there were no direct satellite pictures available. Schoenbrun recalled: "We ran a still portrait of Marvin as he began to broadcast on a radio circuit, then cut back to me at my desk, listening to

Marvin on the telephone and taking notes on his report." Kalb's account included a description of the grim faces on the people congregating at the Kremlin as they digested the news of the Soviet defeat.

Within seconds, a red light began flashing next to Schoenbrun's telephone. It was a signal from the control room that something was amiss and he should go to a break as soon as possible. Schoenbrun interrupted Kalb and said he would get right back to him. A public service announcement was then run.

Schoenbrun picked up the phone and Pierre Salinger was on the line: "David, I'm speaking from the Oval Office." He told the newsman that an Ex Comm meeting had been adjourned to watch his program. "The President is right next to me," Salinger said. "Please do not let Kalb run on about Soviet defeat. Do not play this up as a victory for us. There is a danger that Krushchev will be so humiliated and angered that he will change his mind. Watch what you are saying. Do not mess this up for us."

Kennedy was gracious in victory. He welcomed Krushchev's "statesmanlike decision." When it was suggested Kennedy might go on television to report on Krushchev's concession, he said shortly: "I want no crowing and not a word of gloating from anybody in this government."

In the days of relief that followed, the President's heroic stature grew and the Democrats were swept into a historic off-year victory in Congress by an unusually large voter turnout. Through the auspices of the Advertising Council, Inc., a campaign urging citizens to vote in the 1962 election was launched. A light voter turnout, it was suggested, might lead the Soviets to conclude Americans were indifferent about their free system of government. President Kennedy recorded a message that was incorporated in the radio and television spots.

The Holiday season of 1962 was a bright one for the 35th President. His mettle had been tested and proven superior. He did not know that in time respected scholars would pinpoint his actions in the Cuban Missile Crisis as the beginning of an arms race that would make the world a considerably more dangerous place. He did not know it was the last Christmas he would see. What he knew was that he was at the top of his game — and he wanted to talk about it.

## Presidential Chat Strategy

**B**ecause of his frequent press conferences, John Kennedy was cautiously selective about other television appearances. He understood that the mystique of leadership could not survive unsparing entry.

CBS correspondent Robert Pierpoint has written that starting with the Kennedy administration "a preceptible favoritism toward television developed — Pierre Salinger started deferring to the networks. He was quicker to answer television correspondents' calls, more accessible to us in his private office, and began a relationship of daily phone conversations and periodic meetings with network Washington bureau chiefs."

Yet, despite this courtship of the medium, the President kept the upper hand in the relationship by playing hard-to-get. He was available for television interviews only when he needed or wanted to reach the American public. Otherwise, the numerous requests were turned down.

But, in December 1962, Kennedy thought the time might be perfect for the television interview the networks were clamoring for. Each network had individually requested a televised discussion with the President at year's end. Pierre Salinger surprised the news division chiefs when he called them to Washington on December 11th to propose a joint interview.

Although CBS's Dick Salant missed the meeting—due to a delayed flight and a taxi stalled in Washington's bad weather—ABC's Jim Hagerty and NBC's Bill McAndrew heard and agreed to the press secretary's plans. He offered the President's availability for a sixty-minute program with one newsman from each network asking questions. It would be a less-formal format than a press conference. But, absolutely mandatory to the plan, was this provision: ninety minutes would be taped and thirty minutes would be edited from the conversation. This way, Salinger explained, slow sections or less-interesting comments could be deleted and a better program would result.

Salant was annoyed by the stipulation and considered pulling CBS out of the venture. ABC and NBC, however, did not protest. When CBS registered its opposition in writing to Salinger, the press secretary advised the network that the White House would in no way interfere with the editing process. A committee composed of one representative from each network would make the editing decisions.

The arrangements were finalized. On December 16th the discussion would take place in the Oval Office. The correspondents would be Bill Lawrence of ABC—a Harvard classmate of JFK's whose close association with the President diminished his credibility in some journalistic circles; Sander Vanocur of NBC—Newton Minow's roommate at Northwestern University; and George Herman of CBS.

As Herman, who had been turned down for presidential interviews in the past, prepared for the taping of the broadcast, he asked himself about John Kennedy: "Why does he want to give this appearance? Why does he want to go before the American people and let them have a look at him at this particular time? What is his aim? What is his purpose in this?"

The correspondent surmised that with the Cuban Missile Crisis over and the President's popularity at a high point, "He wanted to cement this view of himself as a person who was able to handle peace and war—He was trying to project a smooth, quiet, rather deeper image of himself."

The President sat in his rocking chair and the three men sat just a few feet away in a cozy cluster, unlike the imperial distance of press conferences. After about fifty minutes, Kennedy suggested they all take a coffee break. Then they continued to talk for another half-hour.

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**'When we asked an unfriendly question, JFK gave a magnificently dull answer — knowing they were almost certain to be dropped.'**

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The editing committee—Bob Quinn for ABC, Ernest Leiser of CBS, and Reuven Frank for NBC—trimmed twenty minutes from the eighty minutes recorded on videotape. The special news program entitled *After Two Years: A Conversation With the President*, aired the next day, Monday, December 17, 1962. "The Rocking Chair Chat," as it was called, was telecast in the early evening on ABC and CBS. NBC aired the program in prime time. *Variety* noted that NBC would not regret the decision to preempt the most valuable commercial time, because "as they say in Washington 'a Kennedy never forgets.'"

While no broadcast in which he ever participated did anything but enhance John Kennedy, reporter Mary McGrory believed this telecast was "the most effective appearance of his entire presidency—It was perfectly delightful."

Kennedy displayed a range of admirable qualities. He was clever and funny. He was contemplative and



charming. He would occasionally interrupt himself and change course in mid-sentence. He was, viewers had to conclude, the genuine article.

The President's graceful command of the English language was the most impressive of traits as he looked back at the first half of his first administration. In referring to the Bay of Pigs, or as he called it "the Cuber of 1961," he said, "Success has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan." Reflecting on the office of the presidency, he told the questioners, "It's much easier to make speeches than to finally make the judgments." There was no sense, he said "in having the shadow of success and not the substance." And, in a remarkably perceptive and candid stroke of self-assessment, he claimed, "Appearances contribute to reality."

What viewers couldn't see was the amount of control John Kennedy exercised in the situation he was in. George Herman recalled one of the questions he asked that was deleted from the broadcast. He reminded Kennedy that presidential scholar Richard Neustadt had written that "any president who hopes to be considered great by future historians must be widely accused of subverting the Constitution in his own time." "If that's true," Herman posed, "what have you been subverting lately?" It was a witty and tough question.

"Well, he gave me," remembered the CBS newsman, "I think, the coldest stare that I've ever had from anybody. He really sort of looked at me from my head down to my feet and back up again with a look that sort of put icicles on me. And I thought to myself, 'What did I say? What did I do?' And then he said, 'No, I don't believe that's true,' And then he changed the subject completely."

Only after George Herman was out of the circumstance could he fully understand the President's strategy and the insistence of the White House that more material be taped than

used. The newsman realized: "Every time we asked an unfriendly question, he gave the most magnificently dull answer that I have ever heard in my life with the certain knowledge that we were going to have to cut out one-third of the material...all his dull answers to these unfriendly questions were almost certain to be dropped. It was a fascinating performance of skill."

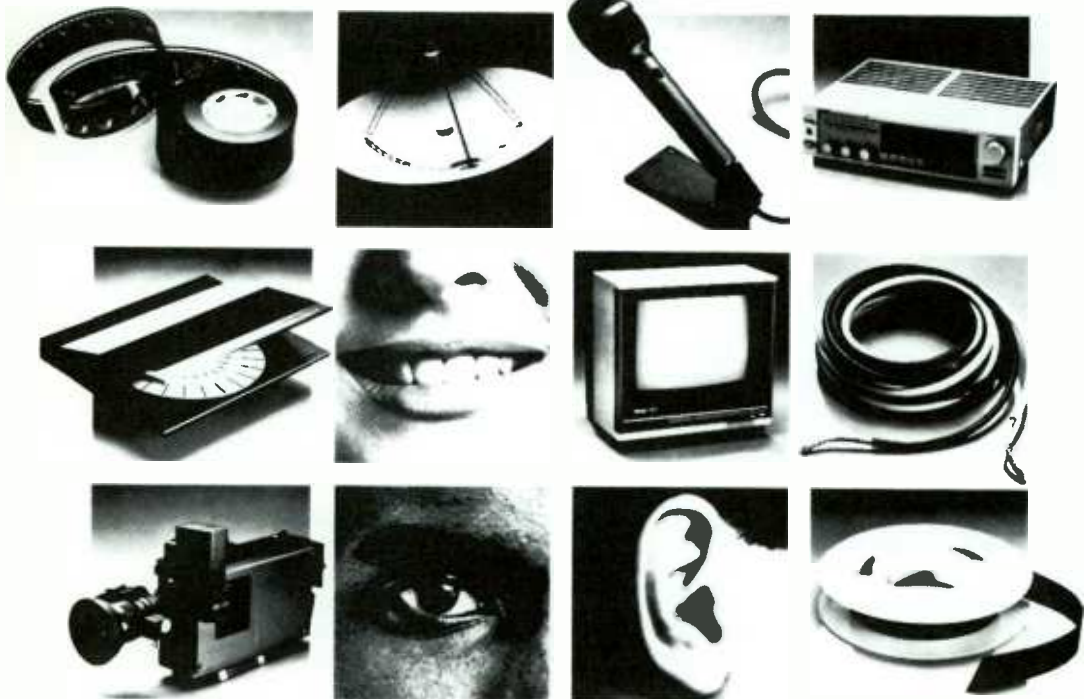
As 1962 ended, not only the President, but the television industry too wanted to celebrate its noteworthy accomplishments. It was a year, *Television Magazine* proclaimed, of "shining hours for TV News"—the year the medium "gave the nation a ringside seat on history."

This was the year, said Robert Kintner, that the networks "proved what's right with television." In those months of swiftly breaking events, the networks brought space flights, the Ecumenical Council in Rome, rioting in Mississippi, comprehensive election coverage, and the President of the United States into American living rooms with deceptive ease. ■

Mary Ann Watson is on the faculty of Eastern Michigan University. She writes frequently for *Television Quarterly*, *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* and other publications.

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# WORD VS. IMAGE: ELITISM, POPULARITY AND TV NEWS

BY RICHARD CAMPBELL

**A**t a round table discussion at the 1989 American Society of Newspaper Editors meeting, a familiar and stale polemical debate resurfaced. It pitted the altruism and tradition of print against the superficiality and technology of television—in other words “real” news versus “entertainment” fluff.

This debate, however, really masks a larger war pitting the elitism of print media against the popularity of commercial television. As Phil Donahue pointed out, there is an “unbecoming elitism” among the print press, an attitude that says to television, “I’m the news and you’re not.”

In a 1989 interview, Don Hewitt, who was also at the ASNE meeting, told me that he gets tired of defending his own *60 Minutes*: “I went up to speak to this group and the first question was, ‘You guys are really show biz, aren’t you?’ And I spent an hour defending myself, getting nowhere. Went off to speak at Yale... and the first question was, ‘You guys are really show biz, aren’t you?’ And I said, ‘You bet your ass we are. Next question.’ I wasn’t going to spend the hour talking about that. What is *Newsweek* when it’s got the Cabbage Patch Doll on the cover?”

Ironically, a July 24, 1989 issue of *Newsweek*, in previewing new net-

work news programs that planned to include dramatic re-enactments of events, asked, “When reality is rebuilt, is it still reality?” In examining the “right” of broadcasters to produce news, the magazine story took the arbitrariness and reconstruction of its own printed words for granted.

This print critique of television often assumes its own transparency and superiority at the same time it fails to account for the contrivances of *Newsweek*’s (and print’s) own symbolic terrain. The critique presumes that it represents “the real” while television news drama and re-enactments border on sinister fictions.

We could, of course, ask the reality question of the *Newsweek* article, a conventional front-page news story, or this essay. When words are selected to make sentences to form paragraphs, how has some original, pure, unrepresented experience been revealed—as if there were a single genuine reality? Realities are always rebuilt in the news, whether they are re-enactments of presidential assassinations or the routine coverage of yesterday’s press conference. Symbolic convention and interpretation, whether in print or broadcasting or daily conversation, are the only ways we have both to transmit and make sense of experience.

But print hypocrisies (critics ignoring their own symbolic terrain, or worse, their own corporate connections while trashing television) is not

the main issue in the war between print and broadcast, a war that extends back to the threat radio posed to "legitimate" news back in the 1920s and 1930s. This is a contest over what constitutes appropriate representations of reality. It is a contest, often couched in the rhetoric of *information* versus *entertainment* but more fundamentally, pitting word against image.

## The History: Print VS. Broadcast

**T**he press-broadcast war began as a battle between sound and word. In the 1930s the established powers of print tried to stop radio from gathering and reporting news. Entrenched in and protective of its doctrinaire practices in neutral reporting, print tried to saddle radio with the "inferior" role of news commentary and interpretation; print tried to copyright "facts." Deciding to protect its claim to facts and the ideal of neutrality, mainstream reporting marked its territory. By conceding radio the role of commentary, the press for a time guarded its eminent domain.

There is agreement that the rise of interpretive journalism, such as radio commentary, in part grew out of intricacies posed by World War I—especially that war's overt propaganda—and the Great Depression. As a result of "drab, factual, objective reporting," Curtis MacDougall, author of *Interpretative Reporting*, contended that "the American people were utterly amazed when war broke out in August 1914, as they had no understanding of the foreign scene to prepare them for it." In addition, MacDougall, Walter Lippmann, and other critics argued that newspapers also failed to prepare readers for the Depression.

It was amid the press-radio war of the 1930s and the controversy over interpretation's place in print journal-

ism that radio commentary flourished. Lowell Thomas delivered the first daily radio network news analysis for CBS on September 29, 1930, and attacked Hitler's rise to power in Germany. By the end of 1931 there were six regular network commentators, and by the beginning of World War II there were twenty.

As radio commentary evolved, political columns flourished in print, and the weekly interpretive news magazines *Time* (1923) and *Newsweek* (1933) developed. In 1931, *Time*, founded by Henry Luce and Briton Hadden, helped sponsor radio's the *March of Time*—the prototype of the modern docudrama and so-called "trash" television. This radio program (there was also a different newsreel version of the *March of Time* which ran in theaters from 1935 to 1951) featured actors recreating news events of the day.

Luce himself argued that the split between news and story, between information and entertainment, was an artificial one. He recommended that newspapers drop the distinctions between editorials and factual news accounts, suggesting that front pages consist of "intelligent criticism, representation and evaluation of [those] who hold offices of public trust."

Today print must confront its own daily, front-page preoccupation with individual horror stories and worst-case scenarios at the expense of telling dramatic news stories that contain historical, social, and institutional contexts. TV news, unfortunately, has learned its lessons and conventions too well from print.

## The 'Word' As Science

**I**n its rhetoric, print idealizes a pseudo-science model for journalism by celebrating *information* and *fact* and righteously criticizing television as *entertainment* and *fluff*. Even though every act of journalism is an act of interpretation and story-telling

(remember: we call them news stories), mainstream journalists believe that they report—in a balanced way—“just the facts.”

Those who demand that the news media achieve “balance”—if not objectivity—must acknowledge that *balance* is a code word for *middle*—middle American values. These values are encoded into mainstream journalism—how it selects the news, where it places its beat reporters, who and how it promotes, how it uncritically reports and thereby naively supports government positions—in the Persian Gulf, for example. Journalism’s safe, balanced, and often bulging middle needs to be challenged more frequently from within its own ranks, not just by conservatives on the right but by the radical left—if there are any of these types left that have not been shaken into the middle or run off by the dictates of “balanced” journalism.

Since the late 19th century and despite journalism’s ties to literary traditions (which today can be found in the horror and gangster story genres of inner city drug and crime coverage), institutional journalism has aligned itself more closely with science, information and the so-called balance of objectivity.

Ironically, when Adolph Ochs bought and reinvented *The New York Times* in the late 1890s, one strategy he employed sought to counteract the large circulation New York papers of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer with an “informational” paper that carved out a smaller audience among business, political, and intellectual elites. In opposing his paper to the more dramatic journalism of the Pulitzer and Hearst papers, Ochs positioned the *Times* as the “paper of record” filled with the texts of treaties, court reports, congressional hearings, and federal documents. These conventions offered an informational model-mirror-map of reality and an alternative to the “common,” middle-class, theatrical storytelling that went on in the large circulation papers.

Ochs’ strategy was not unlike television marketing schemes today which target smaller, upscale yuppie viewers who control a larger percentage of consumer dollars than their representative numbers among the population.

The icon status of the *Times* as the pre-eminent institution for pristine *information*, as distinct from tainted tabloid stories, obscures the economic strategy that appealed to elitist interests within the market. With Hearst and Pulitzer papers capturing the bulk of working and middle class readers, Ochs and the *Times* aligned *facts* with a higher social status. In other words, on the social class ladder the so-called objective, informational model for reporting was regarded as inherently superior to overt story-telling for making sense of experience. The *Times* eschewed story-telling and marketed itself around the notion that *information* and *story* were mutually exclusive categories. The rise then of an objective ideal was connected as much to elitism and corporate strategy as to any moral sense of journalistic neutrality.

In the history of journalism, the trappings of science have been a pervasive and recurring strategy for establishing and maintaining journalism’s legitimacy as a powerful institution. One journalism textbook, for example, makes explicit reference to the metaphor: “The journalist and the scientist perform different roles for society, but there are similarities in the goals, subject matter, techniques, and attitudes of the two professions.... [Journalists] can improve traditional reporting skills by drawing on techniques of gathering information developed in the sciences.”

This model of practice for journalism achieved its status and dominance, not by being “scientific,” which is outside the boundaries and expertise of the utilitarian imperatives of routine journalism. Rather, reporters and editors implicitly reached a consensus that the strat-

egy of neutral conventions was a practical, economical, commonsense blueprint for organizing events and issues within severe time and space constraints. As sociologist Michael Schudson notes, the science metaphor represented a crucial tactic in transforming conventional journalism into a legitimate profession: "Reporters in the 1890s saw themselves, in part, as scientists uncovering the economic and political facts of industrial life more boldly, more clearly, and more 'realistically' than anyone had done before."

Conventional journalism today continues to mask the objective-subjective conflict by cloaking the identities of reporters in a so-called scientific overcoat. In the "objective" report the *self* of the reporter disappears as attention shifts to the presentation of *facts*—"what's really going on here." The taken-for-granted conventions of this model, such as the separation of hard news from opinion, the use of quotation marks, sound bites, and neutral word choices, the presentation of "both sides" of an issue (as if reality were two-dimensional), and the use of the detached third person point of view, all contribute to the pretense of science.

Because such conventions are practical and efficient (i.e., solve deadline constraints), they help establish journalism as an apparently neutral institution with the power to frame events, identify reality, sell news, and make sense of widely disparate experiences for readers and viewers. We are seldom privy, however, to the relationships of reporters to their sources, to their communities or corporate bosses, or to the commodity nature of news reports. Over time, validated by the consensus of conventional wisdom, personal and economic elements are buried in "natural" reports and institutional practices.

In tracing the ways we discuss journalism, Jack Lule argues that the science model or metaphor limits

meaning: "The ruling metaphor of news as science has allowed news to be experienced in a particular, limited way. It encourages talk of bias, truth, fact, source, objectivity; it discourages other kinds of talk, such as theme, scene, language, meaning, genre, convention. Oddly, it is not that news as science says too much; it says too little.... News as science discourages contemplation of the meaning of the method, style, structure, convention and language that flows through the unreflexive heart of the news."

Lule, a former writer for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* turned academic, calls for opening up discussion on journalism to incorporate its aspects as drama. Thus far, such discourse has generally been closed off or used to discredit news reports as mere trash or popular entertainment.

The science metaphor shuts down certain meanings by limiting discussion of "real" news to its *data-like* or *descriptive* dimensions rather than its *emotive* or *interpretive* possibilities. Margaret Morse frames the argument this way: "In critical discourse, only the journalistic, objective model of news is legitimized, while news in a subjective mode is generally considered nothing but...a degradation of news values, deplored as 'show biz,' 'glitz,' and 'glitter' atypical of the news profession. However, news in a subjective mode can have a far more powerful impact on what we perceive as 'real' than the old news based on print."

Although marginalized by tradition and convention, the news-as-story metaphor potentially could extend rather than limit the commonsense language that we use to discuss and define news. Indeed, in a world where everyday life is increasingly represented in the limited journalistic and social science metaphors of statistics and opinion polls, the search for new and richer metaphors becomes even more imperative.

Unlike the expert domains of medicine, economics, law or science, "in-

formational" journalism does not usually require or demand years of specialized training beyond learning basic data-gathering and formula-writing techniques. Another former reporter turned academic, David Eason points out, "Reporters have no special method for determining the truth of a situation nor a special language for reporting their findings. They make sense of events by telling stories about them."

Taking the story metaphor seriously makes print journalists and many of us uncomfortable. Instead of seeing news-as-drama as a way of enriching journalistic performance and the impoverished neutral model, rather we often condemn the metaphor as outside the boundaries of what constitutes news—as if print news is somehow *natural* and not *manufactured* by reporters working for business institutions which sell news for profit.

## Personal vs. Institutional Voices

**I**n the early part of the 1960s, neutral or "objective journalism." Tom Wicker argued, "reported mostly the contents of official documents, or statements delivered by official spokesmen." This neutral model permitted reporters to analyze experience and "statements only in the most obvious terms." According to that *N.Y. Times* writer, the "press had so wrapped itself in the paper chains of 'objective journalism' that it had little ability to report anything beyond the bare and undeniable" facts. Thus, as the decade confronted countless challenges to traditional institutional structures, the detached conventions of routine journalism offered few avenues for exploring partial or distorted institutional responses to social upheaval. In addition, these third-person voices in print were too often themselves institutional voices—distant and impersonal.

Although under heavy criticism from conventional colleagues, the "new" or literary journalism of Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Gay Talese, among others, tried to repair some of the structural problems of journalism in the 1960s. Part of this movement to personal voices and more dramatic journalism included television's *60 Minutes* which Don Hewitt and CBS started in 1968.

Taking his cue from the cultural variety offered in *Life* and *Time* magazines, Hewitt's program sought to counter, not just the detached voices of print, but the often tedious one-hour, single-subject news documentaries that generally drew small audiences in comparison with other prime-time fare.

"Instead of dealing with issues we will tell stories," Hewitt argued, and he went on to create a "multi-argued subject" format with an emphasis on personal journalism. "If we package reality as well as Hollywood packages fiction," Hewitt maintained, "I'll bet we could double the rating."

To increase its popularity, *60 Minutes* spurned one early convention of TV news (borrowed from print to further the appearance of neutrality)—editing reporters and their questions from the final report, leaving only the "testimony" of the interview subjects described in voice-overs by off-screen reporters. Even today the conventional 2-3-minute reporter TV package, the centerpiece of the network evening news, may often feature reporters only in voice-overs. In contrast, *60 Minutes'* reporters, like Mailer in *Armies of the Night*, overturned convention and became central characters. In *60 Minutes*, for example, Mike Wallace or Morley Safer may appear in as many as 40 or 50 shots in a 120-shot (14-minute) segment.

The prototype of the tough news editor with keen entrepreneurial instincts, Hewitt did double the rating of *60 Minutes* over the years. And along with the dictates of the man-

agerial-types currently running the networks, Hewitt's success with the magazine format has played a part in the demise of the traditional news documentary. Today *CBS Reports*, NBC's *White Paper* and ABC's *Close-Up* are all gone. Hewitt says of all three programs: "[They] seemed to me to be the voice of the corporation, and I didn't believe people were any more interested in hearing from a corporation than they were in watching a document."

Another literary journalist, Mark Kramer, like Hewitt, partially defines personal journalism also by distinguishing between the corporate or "institutional voice" of most conventional reporting and a "reliable voice on the scene" found in literary journalism. The former is represented in print by the detached third person point of view and in broadcast by disembodied voice-over narration; the latter is represented in print through first person accounts that admit the *self* of the reporter and in broadcasting through the dominating screen presence of the *60 Minutes* reporter.

Today in place of the documentaries are other news magazine clones—ABC's long-running *20/20* and *Prime Time Live*—and the syndicated tabloid shows: *A Current Affair*, *First Edition*, *Hard Copy*, among others. Hewitt regards them all as part of his contribution: "The main legacy of [*60 Minutes*] is that it has changed the face of television. In our wake came *PM Magazine*, *That's Incredible!*, *20/20*, God knows how many NBC magazines...*First Edition*, *A Current Affair*, *USA Today* [on TV]. They just keep coming out of the woodwork for a very simple reason. They look for the profit or loss thing and say, 'That's the way to make money.'"

Hewitt is also quick to point to the hypocrisy in print regarding TV critics' outrage over Barbara Walters \$1 million contract back in the 1970s. In 1983, for the Radio and Television News Directors Association, Hewitt

characterized print's reaction that "This is journalism not show business." He said, "Notice how we are journalists when they are appalled by what we make and performers when they are appalled at what we do." Hewitt went on to ask rhetorically how the Hearsts, Scripps, Howards, Chandlers, Grahams, Sulzbergers, and Luces, amassed their fortunes.

Hewitt acknowledges here—where many journalists and TV critics often back away—the messy connections between democracy and capitalism, between news and commodities.

## Hard vs. Soft News

**B**esides making distinctions between information and entertainment, document and drama, word and image, another way that conventional journalism defines its terrain is through the distinction between "hard" and "soft" news. Journalists generally believe that these categories are natural, not historically produced, and accurately define how reality divides and works.

Not only is the hard/soft news designation a commonsense way for journalists to sort kinder, gentler features from rugged, manly news, but these categories elevate particular reports—the timely, descriptive account or the tough, investigative piece—to a higher status within the profession. Soft features (often written by women in journalism's history) traditionally have been relegated to a lower position in the news hierarchy, inside a newspaper or as the final story of a TV news magazine.

Frequently criticized for blurring the boundaries between hard and soft, between fact and fiction, TV news is routinely condemned by its critics in print. Only on rare occasions and usually in retrospect, (coverage of John Kennedy's assassination, the civil rights struggle, space travel, Vietnam War, Tianan-



men Square, for example) do critics commend the power of television's visual language to describe and reveal, sometimes to explain and change the world.

More often than celebrated, however, television news is blamed—for not being print journalism, as if newspapers had some kind of superior territorial claim on explanation and common sense. The print attack on television rises, first, from the television reporter's more central role as a visible, active character in news dramas, often overwhelming the detached anonymity of institutional print voices. Second, and more importantly, there is blatant disregard of edited visual images as a "language" every bit as complex as—and often more powerful than—the printed word.

The visual image, however, is generally accused of being soft.

## Elitism And The News

**T**he press' resentment of television stems from our cultural obsession with a romanticized past, with nostalgia for the tradition and supremacy of printed texts. Historian W. J. T. Mitchell and others have traced the tendency in Western culture to elevate the printed word over the visual image. Not unlike the celebration of hard over soft news, the superior claims of print have ties to patriarchal ways of thinking about the world. On the other hand, the inferiority of image often stems from its associations with disenfranchised feminine representations of experience. Additionally, in terms of class distinctions, printed texts in modern culture have come to mark the literate middle to upper classes while visual images too often are aligned with the illiteracy of marginalized classes.

The taken-for-granted dualism that separates word from image frequently provides a ploy in the elitist attack on the popularity of television.

Because of its popular middle ground standing, television's ability to cut across class, racial, and gender borders threatens both liberal and conservative elites and their hierarchical hold on what constitutes knowledge and virtue. From above—and often uncritically—they mark television as some monolithic menace, saturated by violent, illiterate, superficial and profane images. Such an argument serves conveniently to protect privileged status and hierarchical class arrangements.

Whether it's the alleged "high art" supremacy of the poetic word over the graven image, or the printed report over the televised newscast, visual language has too often been treated by intellectuals and class elites as an inferior by-product of mass culture. Instead of chasing the usual instinct to separate and categorize differences, however, critics should focus on the common ground where words and images collide—and where they can often dramatically reinforce one another.

This is a difficult task. From the commonsense point of view of conventional journalism, for example, television hasn't been around long enough to suit most reporters, editors, and much of the educated public. And in its naive arrogance, television has shifted the parameters for the way we are supposed to think about news; it has shifted the metaphor from the quasi-science of the printed word to dramatic, televisual stories of *60 Minutes*, *20/20*, and *A Current Affair*.

In contemporary America, it is clear we are moving from a print dominated culture to an electronic culture with television at the center. It is also clear that we need clear-headed critics to tackle the significance of this monumental shift. Instead we have too much blind clawing back to tradition, and a nostalgia for some genuine democracy of a print culture that never existed, not at least for minorities, women, the poor, and the illiterate.

For example, black intellectuals and activists acknowledge that the 1960s' civil rights movement would have had much less impact if it were not for the ubiquity and power of the televised image. Instead of an elitist nostalgia, then, we need our TV critics to prepare us for the impact, popularity and meanings of an electronic culture.

## TV And Popular News

**P**rint journalists have no special language for interpreting the world; they also use the designs and devices of storytelling. Print and its practitioners, however, often hide the narrative impulse in the hard-news, inverted pyramid style of conventional reporting (i.e., more important "facts" at the top of a story and less important details at the bottom). They prefer talking about news using "harder" science rather than "softer" literary metaphors. Secure in the trappings of science, they celebrate their neutral posture and disclaim responsibility for the experiences they appropriate for their news. But with all the talk of facts, information, impartiality, and inverted pyramids, conventional print journalism is still storytelling—only too often with the drama, mystery, and passion of experience siphoned off in the colorless, detached conventions of ubiquitous third person point of view and the inverted pyramid lead. (This latter convention, by the way, serves editors in a practical hurry to cut a story before it serves any democratic impulse.)

Because television doesn't routinely criticize newspapers, and because even more infrequently newspapers do not criticize one another, genuine news criticism is rare. Don Hewitt's voice, for example, has often been a lonely one: "Why is 'ratings' a dirty word and 'circulation' a clean one...why is 'viewer' a dirty word and 'reader' a clean one?" But, on occasion, he may even find a sup-

porter or two out there in the newspaper world.

For example, Michael McWilliams, a TV critic for the *Detroit News*, and one of a handful of big city critics who seems to like television, has also come to the defense of TV news. In late 1988 after the first assault on tabloid television, McWilliams characterized the attack, (especially *Newsweek's* for making money off its Geraldo Rivera broken-nose cover,) as just "as sleazy as the shows it condemns." He labeled some of his critic-colleagues as "liberals in search of Good Taste," and their righteous values as "print-media puritanism."

More pointedly, however, McWilliams argued that too much print reviewing "contains the most naive and esthetically stupid criticism I've ever read." In other words, print has not yet learned how to critique visual language and television as an esthetic medium. When is the last time, for example, a newspaper critic demonstrated that he or she noticed differences between close-up, medium and long shots, between high, flat, and low angle shots, between foreground and background framing, between on-screen and off-screen narration, between a straight cut and a dissolve?

The purpose of this essay has been to give to television journalism another voice that is too often missing. But I do not mean to let television news off the hook here. I do argue that many of its limitations are inherited from print conventions, particularly time-space constraints and deadline pressures.

For example, the new word for the hip, postmodern TV critic is *sound bite*, which after all is merely the print equivalent of the quote. Print journalists have been taking interview subjects and their words out of context for decades. Print critics, however, keep measuring sound bites against the length of print quotes rather than discussing and

critiquing visual images and issues such as the matching of one sound bite against another as if the combatants were actually there sparring. Of course, print stock and trade also involves pitting quotes against one another in a context in which the actual interview subjects may never have even met.

And before sound bites, print critics were in a snit over local TV news "happy talk," the ad-libbed or scripted banter that goes on between anchors, meteorologists, and sports reporters. As Don Hewitt has suggested, whenever we saw a critic ranting about happy talk it was usually in the same section of the paper with a local gossip columnist, "Ann Landers, Jean Dixon, Al Capp, and Beetle Bailey." Like so-called happy talk, these print features are part of the democratic and popular variety of newspapers.

If print critics are going to critique television, instead of merely serving up their own personal tastes, they must first acknowledge that camera distances, angles, framing techniques, and cuts that alter time and space constitute a powerful visual text. If print critics continue only to compare television's paucity of words to print, they will continue to miss the big picture. Although the analogy may strike elitists as offensive, much mainstream criticism of television is sort of like a literary critic damning a poem for not being as long as a novel. Print and television operate out of different sets of conventions, and television becomes even more complicated when TV words and images combine—when narration "voices over" the pictures.

John Fiske, a British scholar who teaches courses on popular culture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, notes that television news is always "caught in the tension between the need to convey information deemed to be in the public interest and the need to be popular. It attempts to meet these contradictory needs by being socially responsible in content,

but popular in form and presentation, and thus runs the risk of being judged boring and irrelevant from one side, and superficial and rushed from the other."

Instead of the predictable elitist call for TV journalism to adhere to some "information criteria" or word model whereby news is judged "objective, true, educational, and important," Fiske demands—and I agree—that TV news images "make the events of the world more popular."

"The more valid criticism of television news," Fiske writes in *Reading the Popular*, "is that it is not popular enough. Far from wishing to improve its objectivity, its depth, or its authority, I would wish to increase its openness, its contradictions, the multiplicity of its voices and points of view."

The problem, of course, is that the main enemies of television news—elitists and newspaper critics—dismiss television's popularity and seldom write of its democratizing potential. For elites, popularity is a dirty word. Elites, after all, gain their status by making sure that most people and most things are categorized below them. They keep their own place in the social order by ensuring that television stays in a place—near the bottom of the cultural hierarchy—by uncritically dismissing and condemning rather than critically analyzing and commending its popularity. ■

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2	<b>GLENROE</b> (Home Produced)	7	<b>FAIR CITY</b> (Home Produced)
3	<b>WHERE IN THE WORLD</b> (Home Produced)	8	<b>KENNY LIVE</b> (Home Produced)
4	<b>DANIEL O'DONNELL</b> (Home Produced)	9	<b>CORONATION STREET</b>
5	<b>DALLAS</b>	10	<b>PLAY THE GAME</b> (Home Produced)

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IRELAND'S · RADIO · AND · TELEVISION · NETWORK

# A LOOSE CANON OF LITERATURE ON TV NEWS



Here's TVQ's recommended reading list of books about sight-and-sound journalism, its history and personalities.

**BY TOM MASCARO**

**A**nytime someone designates a collection of literature as "The Canon," it's wise to be suspicious. In any field there won't be a consensus on which books are the classics. There is likely to be some agreement, however, on the works that continue to be cited in bibliographies—the standouts.

Some talented wordsmiths in TV news fortunately have documented their experiences for posterity. Dedicated scholars have devoted careers to analyzing and chronicling the activities and output of the national news organizations. And some professional writers are simply fascinated by a particular aspect of TV news, for instance its relationship with politics or the progress of women and minorities in the industry. The product of their curiosity is an eclectic body of literature that documents the history of television news and the professional lives of its people.

Without question TV journalism has entered a new phase—beginning with the launch of CNN and continuing with the satellite coverage of the revolutions in Tiananmen Square, and recently the Gulf War. But despite the formidable resources expended in covering a dramatic year, these are still bottom-line, cut-back times.

As staffs shrink and mentors disappear due to layoffs and attrition, one has to wonder how the essentials of TV news traditions will be safeguarded and handed down. Documentarians are certainly agonizing over what will happen to their video form; principled news editors must be fretting over shifts in priorities.

With an army of mobile news teams on the street and a squadron of communication satellites in space, television news is incrementally scaling a new learning curve. So, the records of the past—the literature on TV news—have amplified importance as tomorrow's television journalists begin their apprenticeships, heading toward a new century.

## RADIO DAYS

### "GOOD EVENING!"

#### A PROFESSIONAL MEMOIR.

by *Raymond Swing*,

*Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964*

Economically written, unpretentious and unapologetic, this autobiography chronicles one man's career in journalism and radio news. Swing's book touches the sensitive nerves of broadcast news commentators—getting airtime, fending tawdry commercials, McCarthyism—and reflects on his good friend Ed Murrow.

### PRIME TIME, THE LIFE OF EDWARD R. MURROW

by *Alexander Kendrick*,

*Little, Brown and Company, 1969*

Kendrick's book documents the sunrise of TV news. His exciting replay of the first world news roundup marks radio's emergence as a full-fledged news medium. Out of World War II came Murrow's boys, CBS News dominance and then television. With Murrow came a standard, which invites testing and conflict. The full docket on TV news—image vs. content, value of the long-form, celebrity newscasters, conservative fear over free speech, TV's role in civil rights, bad TV vs. good TV, right vs. wrong—the full slate of TV news issues erupted with the ascension of Murrow.

Other notable works include *Murrow: His Life and Times*, A.M. Sperber, *Freundlich Books, 1986*; *Edward R. Murrow, An American Original*, Joseph E. Persico, *McGraw-Hill, 1988*; and *Writing News for Broadcast*, Edward Bliss, Jr. and John M. Patterson, *Columbia University Press, 1978*, which is a treatise on the craft of the Murrow coterie.

## INSTITUTIONAL BIOGRAPHIES

### ABC News

#### INSIDE ABC, AMERICAN BROADCASTING COMPANY'S RISE TO POWER

by *Sterling Quinlan*,

*Hastings House, 1979*

A narrative describing personalities and policies central to ABC's effort to become a major news-sports-entertainment network.

In addition to Quinlan's history, passages of other works in this list fill in texture: Bluem's book covers *Bell & Howell Close-Up!*; Donaldson's memoir contains chapters on ABC News, *This Week with David Brinkley* and the Roone Arledge era; Einstein's reference lists documentary series and specials with concise historical blurbs; Epstein analyzes the editorial process at ABC News; Matusow devotes three chapters to the career of Barbara Walters; Reasoner recalls the ill-fated co-anchoring experiment; and Marlene Sanders reviews her stint as an executive at ABC News.

### CBS News

Given the number of books written on CBS News, seemingly every conversation ever held at Black Rock is on the record. The advantage of having such an extensive library is that patterns become apparent, for instance the ongoing acrimony between political conservatives and CBS News; the monumental influence of Ed Murrow and the lasting significance of his collaborations with Fred Friendly; and in recent years, the juxtaposition of the proud tradition of Murrow and Friendly with the cataclysm in the News Division, precipi-

tated by events that include the Westmoreland libel suit, massive layoffs and a flurry of management changes. The story of CBS News, then, can best be appreciated by comparing the group of the early works with the latest set of introspective writings.

**AIR TIME,  
THE INSIDE STORY OF CBS NEWS**

by Gary Paul Gates,  
*Harper and Row, 1978*

Gates knows how to shape a compelling story. This one brings CBS people to life; puts the reader in the milieu. More than a decade after its publication, it's still lively and enlightening.

**DUE TO CIRCUMSTANCES  
BEYOND OUR CONTROL...**

Fred Friendly,  
*Vintage Books, 1968*

When CBS opted for a fifth rerun of *I Love Lucy* and the eighth broadcast of an episode of *The Real McCoys* instead of live coverage of Ambassador George Kennan's Senate testimony on Vietnam, Fred Friendly quit as CBS News president. Then he wrote this classic memoir, which covers the birth of the eminent *CBS Reports*, the economics of documentary production, competition with NBC, and an insider's insights on the notable documentaries *Biography of a Bookie*, *Joint* and *Harvest of Shame*.

**BEFORE THE COLORS FADE**

by Harry Reasoner,  
*Knopf, 1981*

This pithy little book—it's smart, irreverent, funny, fresh, sardonic, honest, even touching—has good stuff on TV news at CBS and ABC. The only time Ed Murrow talked on camera about himself was when interviewed by Harry Reasoner. His commentary on co-anchoring with Barbara Walters is remarkably candid. In it Reasoner confesses to his unenthusiastic commitment to anchoring, which he says fueled ABC's

desire to experiment with the two-anchor format.

**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS,  
MIKE WALLACE'S OWN STORY**

by Mike Wallace and Gary Paul Gates,

*William Morrow, 1984*

This sweeping autobiography reaches back to TV's first decade and drives forward—neatly propelled by the alternating voices of Gates and Wallace—to the Westmoreland trial, blending U.S. history, Wallace's experiences, tales of *60 Minutes* and provocative transcript excerpts into a gripping saga of TV news. It's the next best thing to seeing the programs. The interview with one of JFK's Secret Service men is heartwrenching.

**FAIR PLAY:  
CBS, GENERAL WESTMORELAND,  
AND HOW A TELEVISION  
DOCUMENTARY WENT WRONG**

by Burton Benjamin,  
*Harper & Row, 1988*

A dictum on news standards, this case study documents Benjamin's evaluation of the CBS News editorial process in producing *The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception*. This is a program remembered more as the object of a media event—one that sent a powerful chill through the broadcast industry—than as a courageous television documentary.

**PRIME TIMES, BAD TIMES**

by Ed Joyce,  
*Doubleday, 1988*

This is the former CBS News president's side of the story about what went on from 1981 through 1985: the ill-fated morning show, the layoffs, the Benjamin Report, Don Hewitt's bid to buy the Division, the press leaks, his perception of the Rather-Sauter-Jankowski alliance, and more. It's a bitter tale that seems to be aimed at CBS Broadcast Group President Gene Jankowski. The writing is undisciplined—there's an overabun-

dance of trivial details — nonetheless, it adds dots and depth to the picture of CBS News.

**WHO KILLED CBS?  
THE UNDOING OF AMERICA'S  
NUMBER ONE NEWS NETWORK**

by Peter J. Boyer.

Random House, 1988

Boyer, a former media critic for CBS News, has written, an absorbing account of how corporate meddling traumatized the News Division and the effects on and reactions of the people who comprise CBS News. This book also illuminates Ed Joyce's account.

## CNN

**CNN THE INSIDE STORY**

by Hank Whittemore,

Little, Brown & Co., 1990

This history of the revolutionary network is a mosaic comprised of statements by CNN pioneers, held together by the author's narrative.

## NBC News

**WHILE IT LASTED**

by Reuven Frank.

Simon and Schuster, 1991

Reuven Frank's forthcoming memoir, with the working title *While It Lasted*, is a record of network television news beginning with coverage of the 1948 political conventions through 1988, by which time the TV news business had changed entirely. Frank reflects on the *Camel News Caravan*, the impact of the quiz show scandal on the news divisions, Huntley-Brinkley, the rise and fall of the documentary, Mayor Daley and the 1968 Democratic National Convention and the end of the network monopoly on national news. This book, by one of the most important elder statesmen of TV news, is due out in summer 1991.

**SPECIAL:  
FRED FREED AND  
THE TELEVISION DOCUMENTARY**

by David Yellin.

Macmillan, 1973

*Special* offers an intimate diary-like profile of the career of NBC documentary producer Fred Freed, with comments by peers and coworkers along with opinions on the news profession.

Other episodes in the story of NBC News can be gleaned from books by Gwenda Blair, Alanna Nash and Jessica Savitch, on Savitch's career at NBC; A. William Bluem, who covers NBC's *White Paper* series as well as the long-form programs of several NBC producers; Nancy Dickerson and Judy Woodruff on covering the White House for NBC; Dan Einstein, who has catalogued NBC's documentary series and news specials along with capsule histories of these programs; Edward Epstein and Herbert Gans, on the editorial process at NBC News; Barbara Matusow on Huntley-Brinkley, Chancellor and Brokaw; Bob Teague for anecdotes on NBC executives; and Linda Ellerbee's "And So It Goes," *Adventures in Television*, (Putnam, 1986), which chronicles the life of the gutsy news series *Overnight*.

## PBS

Although the amorphous nature of PBS doesn't lend itself to studies that focus on TV news, public television has long been committed to public affairs broadcasting. Insight into this area is provided in:

**PUBLIC BROADCASTING:  
THE ROLE OF  
THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT,  
1912-1976**

by George H. Gibson.

Praeger, 1977

A study of the roots of regulation and development of public broadcasting.



## **NIXON AND THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC TELEVISION**

by *David M. Stone.*

*Garland Publishing, 1985*

A published thesis that examines public television's battle with the Nixon administration in its attempt to take over all national programming authority for PBS.

## **THE EDITORIAL PROCESS**

Spiro Agnew's Des Moines speech of November 13, 1969—in which he criticized TV news for its "instant analysis" of President Nixon's Vietnam policy statements and charged that an elite group of unelected network men were determining the great issues of the day—triggered several notable TV news studies that examine the editorial process.

## **ASSAULT ON THE MEDIA. THE NIXON YEARS**

by *William E. Porter.*

*University of Michigan Press, 1976*

Porter expands the Agnew incident and gives resolution to the picture of government harrassment of the media. This alarming study also enlightens controversies over the CBS documentary *The Selling of the Pentagon* and ABC's *Fire*, which, to avoid a libel suit, aired with nearly a minute of empty screen instead of showing the sequence of a burning baby crib. Porter also reveals Nixon administration plans to eliminate Corporation for Public Broadcasting revenues.

## **NEWS FROM NOWHERE**

by *Edward Jay Epstein.*

*Random House, 1973*

Though Epstein began his on-site observations of the Reuven Frank-Shad Northshield NBC News operation a year before Agnew's speech, his conclusion rebuts the vice-president, stating that news decisions emanate largely from organizational considera-

tions, not some small fraternity, as Agnew suggested.

This book, which caused a great stir in academe as well as in the industry, was followed by a set of studies on the editorial process of broadcast journalism: *Creating Reality, How TV News Distorts Events, David Altheide, Sage, 1976; Making News, A Study in the Construction of Reality, Gaye Tuchman, The Free Press, 1978; and The Powers That Be, David Halberstam, Knopf, 1979.*

## **DECIDING WHAT'S NEWS—A STUDY OF CBS EVENING NEWS, NBC NIGHTLY NEWS, NEWSWEEK AND TIME**

by *Herbert Gans,*

*Pantheon, 1979*

The motivation for this study was news coverage of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Later in the decade and again in 1975, Sociologist Gans conducted on-site observations and interviews at news organizations. Though much of it consists of elaborate definitions of what many intuit to be the nature of news, the book does provide a framework for analyzing the story selection process. And the information on news values offers useful background on the editorial process.

## **UNRELIABLE SOURCES. A GUIDE TO DETECTING BIAS IN NEWS MEDIA**

by *Martin A. Lee and*

*Norman Solomon.*

*Lyle Stuart, 1990*

This book is a contemporary consumers' guide to the political and corporate entities that influence the editorial process of national news organizations. It looks at a wide range of examples that show a pattern of manipulations affecting America's reporting in print and on the air. Written by two former staff members of FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) and appended by an interview with FAIR's founder, this polemical look at news is a call for ac-

tivism. As a classroom supplement, it shows connections between programs, people and policies in a way that should arouse a healthy suspicion of the news gathering process.

## **WOMEN IN BROADCAST NEWS**

In the Mt. Rushmore-like promotional spot for ABC News, there among profiles of Jennings, Koppel, Brinkley, Donaldson and Downs are the faces of two women—Barbara Walters and Diane Sawyer. Women are now established in prime time and in the literature on broadcast news as well, which covers their efforts to overcome the male bastion.

The advances of women in the 1970s resulted in part from the combination of a shift toward infotainment and away from “instant analysis” and controversy; the influence of the women’s movement; and a resultant hiring pressure by the FCC. There is recent evidence, though, that the progress of women since the early 1980s has been static. A content analysis done by Professor Joe Foote of Southern Illinois University reveals that network news will most often be presented to viewers by white males.

### **HARD NEWS: WOMEN IN BROADCAST JOURNALISM**

*by David H. Hosley and  
Gayle K. Yamada,  
Greenwood Press, 1987*

This book, which is neatly organized, reads a little like a collection of lists. Otherwise, it’s a solid primer, including history, profiles and a Christine Craft case study. The authors ask pertinent questions and offer tight, ample nuggets derived from related works, such as *We’re Going to Make*

*You a Star, Sally Quinn, Simon and Schuster, 1975; Anchorwoman, Jessica Savitch, Putnam, 1982, and The Newscasters, which offers an eye-opening interview with Barbara Walters, by Ron Powers, St. Martin’s Press, 1977.*

### **WAITING FOR PRIME TIME: THE WOMEN OF TELEVISION NEWS**

*by Marlene Sanders  
and Marcia Rock,*

*University of Illinois Press, 1988*

An ambitious account of Marlene Sanders’ charge up prime-time hill to earn the first executive position in network news. Hoping to help others gauge the appeal of a broadcast news career, the authors relay personal experience and infuse useful background in an important subject.

### **THE IMPERFECT MIRROR: INSIDE STORIES OF TELEVISION NEWSWOMEN**

*by Daniel Paisner,*

*William Morrow, 1989*

Based on a large collection of interviews with and firsthand accounts by women in TV news—including Sylvia Chase, Connie Chung, Christine Craft, Joan Esposito, Denise Franklin, Deborah Norville, Jane Pauley, Renee Poussaint, Lesley Stahl, Bree Walker and Mary Alice Williams—this readable book presents a spectrum of female opinions on the daily rigors, sexual abuse and professional discrimination they’ve endured.

### **THE EVENING STARS**

*by Barbara Matusow,  
Houghton Mifflin, 1983*

Matusow comprehends a big picture and still manages to humanize the business. She investigates the star factor in network news and discusses in particular detail the experience of Barbara Walters. Nicely written, this book spans the era of TV news.

## BLACKS IN TV NEWS

If women are not making gains in network news, blacks in the business are losing ground. Spurred by activist groups and the temper of the times, the networks in the early 1960s recruited black male reporters, for instance Bob Teague at NBC and Mal Goode at ABC. By the end of the decade a different climate prevailed, which had a chilling effect on the appearance of blacks in the medium. The recent study by Professor Foote confirms that in the specific area of TV network news, blacks are backsliding. And anyone reviewing the literature on television news will find a paucity of books on blacks, in particular on or by black men. Bob Teague's *Live and Off-Color: News Biz* is a notable exception, along with the following.

### **BLACKS AND WHITE TV, AFRO-AMERICANS IN TELEVISION SINCE 1948**

by J. Fred MacDonald,  
Nelson-Hall, 1983

In addition to listing network documentaries on blacks—the ABC series *Time for Americans!* CBS's series *Of Black America* and NBC's *Same Mud, Same Blood*—MacDonald acknowledges the work of many black reporters, among them Ed Bradley, Tony Brown, Mal Goode, Gil Noble and Max Robinson. And he documents the appearances of an array of black public affairs programs on local stations, such as *Free Play*, *Like It Is*, *Ebony Beat* and *Tony Brown's Journal*.

### **BLACK IS THE COLOR OF MY TV TUBE**

by Gil Noble,  
Lyle Stuart Inc., 1981

Inspired by the teachings of Malcolm X, Noble began his career in broadcasting in radio at WLIB in Harlem. When the 1968 Kerner Com-

mission concluded a black presence was almost nonexistent in the mass media, the networks reacted by recruiting employees from black media outlets. Noble went to WABC-TV, where he became a reporter, weekend anchor and ultimately host of ABC's Emmy award-winning, black-oriented interview series *Like It Is*. The black perspective of this autobiography is strong, not only in its voice, but through the references to black influences on Noble.

## WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENTS

These colorful journals elucidate the workday lives of television reporters. These books also give a sense of reporters' personalities, the way they interact with colleagues and political officials, and insight into the professional triumph of getting a story and the anguish of being the bearer of bad news.

### **AT THE WHITE HOUSE, ASSIGNMENT TO SIX PRESIDENTS**

by Robert Pierpoint,  
Putnam, 1981

Pierpoint delivers a thoughtful, edifying treatment, beginning with Eisenhower, that examines press rooms, presidential press conferences, ethics and dealings with press secretaries.

### **AMONG THOSE PRESENT**

by Nancy Dickerson,  
Random House, 1976

This book provides an engaging, self-assured, playful and informative view of Washington's political and other shenanigans. It's private without being tawdry, covering the senate careers of LBJ and JFK, and her story continues up to Ford's presidency.

**THE CAMERA NEVER BLINKS,  
ADVENTURES OF A  
TV JOURNALIST**

by Dan Rather with  
Mickey Herskowitz,  
William Morrow, 1977

When candidate Bush went after Dan Rather on the evening news, he may have been settling an old score for Richard Nixon. There's background on that topic and more in this journal of Rather's early career, which he writes with a humble tone. The vivid narrative puts the reader in the room along with the doctors in Dallas, the boisterous Lyndon Johnson and Nixon henchmen Halde-man and Erlichman.

**"THIS IS JUDY WOODRUFF AT  
THE WHITE HOUSE,"**

by Judy Woodruff with  
Kathleen Maxa,  
Addison-Wesley, 1982

Woodruff describes the news process of reporting on the Carter and Reagan presidencies, the challenge for a career woman in balancing family responsibilities, as well as the influence of television on presidential politics.

**HOLD ON, MR. PRESIDENT!**

by Sam Donaldson,  
Random House, 1987

This anecdotal account, in typical Sam Donaldson style, is about his experiences covering Presidents Carter and Reagan. Donaldson's journal also fills in texture on the personalities and history of ABC News.

**LOCAL NEWS**

Though some broadcast journalists hold a place in TV history for network affiliations, their personal stories include telling experiences of paying dues at local stations. These biogra-

phies, along with the comprehensive treatment by Ron Powers, shed light on who and what matters at five o'clock.

**THE NEWSCASTERS**

Ron Powers,  
St. Martin Press, 1977

A satisfyingly intelligent analysis, with commentary, on the deficiencies in local TV news, including a passionate critique of the influence of outside consultants on news products, a revealing interview with Barbara Walters and interesting background on Geraldo Rivera. Powers is an able thinker and a confident writer.

**LIVE AND OFF-COLOR:  
NEWS BIZ**

by Bob Teague,  
A & W, 1982

Bob Teague writes with affection and respect for his superiors and coworkers in this loosely structured, brassy, streetraw indictment against misplaced priorities in local news, such as the emphasis on sex and human interest stories over those that affect people in the community. Intended to shock readers, the book delivers.

**ANALYSIS,  
CASE STUDIES  
AND REFERENCES**

This group of books includes those that focus on a particular aspect of television news and its relationship to society, along with some valuable references.

**THE IMAGE:  
A GUIDE TO  
PSEUDO-EVENTS IN AMERICA**

by Daniel Boorstin,  
Atheneum, 1972

Originally published in 1961 as *The IMAGE* or *What Happened to the American Dream*, this landmark work

examines the role of mass media in creating out of whole cloth events and images that have marketable value.

### **POLITICS AND TELEVISION**

*by Kurt and Gladys Engel Lang,  
Quadrangle Books, 1968*

Curious about the influence of television, the Langs posted thirty-one eyewitness observers next to TV camera operators covering a MacArthur Day parade in Chicago and deduced that TV viewers saw a different event than the one reported by people on the scene. The Langs also analyzed TV coverage of the 1952 conventions, the Great Debates and election returns. Though their conclusion that television "always introduces some element of refraction into the actuality it conveys" seems obvious today, it was pioneering work that continues to be cited with frequency.

### **THE PEOPLE MACHINE**

*by Robert MacNeil,  
Harper & Row, 1968*

MacNeil provides a thoroughly researched analysis of TV's role in the political process. He includes an insightful, and prophetic, examination of how Ronald Reagan's ad agency created the image that made him a governor. It's an intelligent book—somewhat dated in content, but the thinking is timeless.

### **TO KILL A MESSENGER, TELEVISION NEWS AND THE REAL WORLD**

*by William Small,  
Hastings House, 1970*

Small, a former CBS news director, conducts a clinic on the organism of TV news and mounts a staunch defense against timid critics of bad news. With adept precision he dissects elements of TV news history and personalities—including origins

of in-depth reporting; coverage of civil rights, Vietnam and anti-war protests; and political television. Small explores the genre up through the cataclysmic crisis of the 1968 Democratic National Convention—the "turning point" in TV journalism.

### **LIVING-ROOM WAR**

*by Michael Arlen,  
Viking, 1969*

During the era of the Vietnam War, Arlen paid attention to TV—listened fervently, watched intently—and transformed his observations into a stream of powerful *New Yorker* essays, collected in this classic anthology. The bulk of the writing deals with reporting on the war, but other articles address the Public Broadcasting Laboratory, educational TV and the heinous assassination of Robert Kennedy.

### **THE GOOD GUYS, THE BAD GUYS AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT: FREE SPEECH VS. FAIRNESS IN BROADCASTING**

*by Fred Friendly,  
Random House, 1975*

A staple source on the evolution of First Amendment law as applied to broadcasting, including a case study of the *Red Lion* decision and a discussion of the Fairness Doctrine.

### **DOCUMENTARY IN AMERICAN TELEVISION**

*by A. William Bluem,  
Hastings House, 1965*

Bluem covers the prestige network series—ABC's *Bell & Howell Close-Up!*, CBS Reports and NBC's *White Paper—The Twentieth Century*, individual programs, local documentaries, some educational TV efforts, filmographies with credits, and Reuven Frank's guidelines to the NBC News staff upon expansion to a 30-minute newscast. It's the classic reference on the form; a treasure of a book.

**THE IMAGE DECADE,  
TELEVISION DOCUMENTARY  
1965-1975**

*by Charles Montgomery  
Hammond, Jr.,  
Hastings House, 1981*

Hammond extends Bluem's study and provides vignettes and comments about producers and reporters that personalize the discussion of documentary programming. He also covers the evolution documentary and newsmagazine formats.

**NIGHTLY HORRORS, CRISIS  
COVERAGE BY TELEVISION  
NETWORK NEWS**

*by Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs,  
University of Tennessee Press, 1985*

This academic study comprises a collection, with analysis, of case studies of network news coverage of the People's Temple mass suicides, Three Mile Island, the disaster of Flight 191, Mount St. Helens, the Iranian hostage crisis and the Tylenol poisonings.

**U.S. TELEVISION NETWORK NEWS:  
A GUIDE TO SOURCES IN ENGLISH**

*compiled by Myron J. Smith, Jr.,  
McFarland, 1984*

This 223-page bibliography of books and articles from the late 1940s through the fall of 1983 is categorized by subject, such as histories, foreign affairs, elections and Vietnam.

**SPECIAL EDITION:  
A GUIDE TO NETWORK  
TELEVISION DOCUMENTARY  
SERIES AND SPECIAL NEWS  
REPORTS,  
1955-1979**

*by Daniel Einstein,  
Scarecrow Press, 1987*

This indispensable catalog lists content descriptions, airdates and credits for more than 120 network documentary series and news specials. It also provides brief, informative histories of the series and a useful index.

**FROM OUTSIDE THE  
FISHBOWL**

Some scholars have that special combination of talents that allows them to examine the TV industry and society in an integrated and accessible way. They understand the internal workings of television—its pet peeves, the psyches of its producers, the creative process and the editorial process. But they also understand the way television mixes with the smells in the kitchens of American homes—the import of its messages, how it affects people, how it affects their world. Their goal is not to prove things but to explain them. They give us the long view of television, including its news. Two in particular have presented their views with penetrating insight, written with style and grace.

**THE EXPANDING VISTA:  
AMERICAN TELEVISION IN  
THE KENNEDY YEARS**

*by Mary Ann Watson,  
Oxford University Press, 1991*

From the 1960 primary to the coverage of JFK's murder and burial, TV news metamorphosed with the changing shape of America: live-televised press conferences, national recognition of the civil rights movement, an unprecedented surge in TV documentaries, half-hour news, intimate news, live coverage of space shots, a satellite named *Telstar* is launched—all resonating still; all rooted in the Kennedy years.

**TUBE OF PLENTY**

*by Erik Barnouw,  
Oxford University Press, 1990*

Recently revised and still the standard. Barnouw elegantly chronicles the sweep of television history including the milestones in news and

documentaries and, most importantly, the way these developments intertwined with contemporaneous events.

## **HUMAN INTEREST NEWS**

News is not only about what's happening at the White House or to Donald Trump but about the patterns of culture—what people do and how they feel about life. Human interest features have long been part of the news mix. But often their value is underestimated, even parodied, as by the effervescent character Corky Sherwood on *Murphy Brown*. Though perhaps not with the same importance as hard news, the human interest segment remains a legitimate news form that deserves attention. And no one is better suited to it than Charles Kuralt.

### **ON THE ROAD WITH CHARLES KURALT**

*by Charles Kuralt,  
Putnam, 1985*

Kuralt has a special ability: the Little Prince of TV News sees from the heart real matters of consequence. His two-page foreword speaks volumes on TV news. How beautifully he writes. What poetry he's sifted from the mines of common America. Like Paddy Chayefsky, Kuralt lets us eavesdrop on the marvelous realm of the ordinary—even in a rough world, searching for hope. ■

Tom Mascaro's articles on broadcasting have appeared in *Current, Electronic Media and Television Quarterly*.

## **QUOTE UNQUOTE**

*"The Simpsons are a typical American family—in a way most family-based shows never acknowledge. The Simpson children wrestle with problems like peer pressure and lack of self understanding while getting sincere but useless, perhaps even damaging, advice from their parents.*

*"The educators who have decried The Simpsons...have missed the point. The Simpsons is satire. Rather than engage in the pretentious misrepresentation of family life that one finds in the 'model family' shows (from The Donna Reed Show to The Cosby Show), this program admits that most parents aren't perfect. They haven't worked out their own childhood confusion, and they don't have the answers to all their children's problems."*

—Victoria A. Rebeck,  
*Christian Century magazine.*



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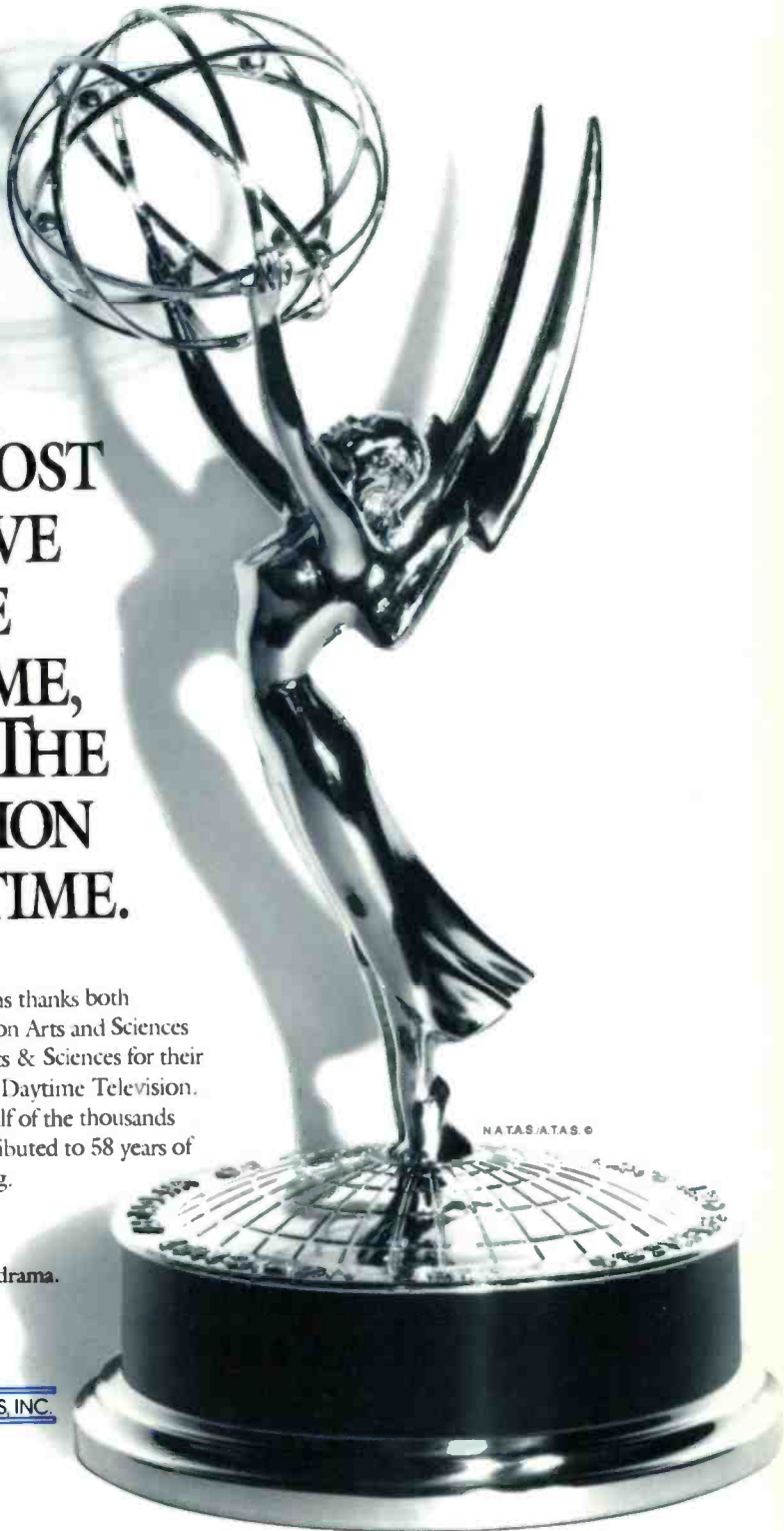
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