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Michael C. Mitchell

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Television and the Vietnam War

Major Michael C. Mitchell, US Marine Corps

The Vietnam war was the first major American conflict to be presented to the public through the medium of television. Inasmuch as a case may be made that television has a potential for influencing American national security policy through public opinion, considerable controversy has centered on the coverage of that war by the major networks. Roger Mudd, reflecting upon the impact of television on the conduct of military operations in Vietnam, once wondered "whether in the future a democracy which has uncensored television in every home will ever be able to fight a war however moral or just."[1] With television we are faced with a form of technology that has the potential not only to inform but also to change the course of events. If we, in the military, are to successfully operate in a wartime environment that is subject to the close public scrutiny provided by television, then we must ascertain its potential and its limitations.

Responsibilities of the Networks in Broadcasting the News

Television plays an extremely important role in the conduct of American public affairs. Because the people of this country can elect and instruct their leaders only when they have free access to information obtained in a context of open debate, the individuals involved in the production of network news have certain responsibilities in the public affairs arena. The American public has a right to be informed and the networks, as the controllers of a major means of communicating information, have an obligation in this process. This obligation to accurately inform the public was succinctly described in the report of the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press. Published in 1947, this report stated that the mass media have five basic responsibilities.

1. To provide a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning.
2. To provide a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism.
3. To project a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society.
4. To present and clarify the goals and values of the society.

An artillery officer by trade, Major Mitchell holds an advanced degree in operations research.

5. To provide full access to the day's intelligence.[2]

Publication of a list of responsibilities by a commission with no enforcement power does not necessarily guarantee that these responsibilities will be met. In order to ensure that television stations serve the public interest, the Federal Government regulates the television industry by requiring stations to be licensed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). In order to obtain and retain this license, each station must adhere to the tenets of the FCC's Fairness Doctrine.

Basically, the Fairness Doctrine imposes four fundamental requirements on the networks: The networks must present "accurate and comprehensive news in a meaningful context." The broadcaster has a right to proffer his own opinions concerning controversial affairs, but he must also present "all other major views on that issue." The networks have an obligation to actively seek out annunciators of these opposing views. The networks must provide "a reasonable opportunity" in regard to currency, time, audience, and quality for the presentation of these opposing views.

Currency: Although the presentation of opposing views need not be simultaneous, all presentations should be made "during the period when the issue is still current."

Time: Equity in the Fairness Doctrine does not require precisely equal time, only that a "reasonable opportunity" for the expression of opposing views be provided. "If a broadcaster airs an attack on an issue or a set of ideas, he is expected to provide a 'balance' by airing a defense or an affirmative analysis of that issue or set of ideas."[3]

Audience: The opposing views need not be presented before the exact same audience but an effort must be made to ensure that the sizes of the audiences are comparable.

Quality: The individual allowed to present opposing views should be "of approximately the same stature, prestige, or capacity to articulate his position."[4] What this requirement means is that there must be "equity of conceptual policy" (a difficult standard for the networks to meet because they cannot always ensure the intellectual abilities of spokespersons). Nonetheless, "what they must *not* do is to seek in any way to *diminish* or *augment* the potency of one side or another by any act of selectivity or editorial stress."[5]

To do all of these things, says the FCC, is to display fairness in broadcasting—to fail to do any of them is to be guilty of biasness; and a serious breach of the Fairness Doctrine through the display of such bias may precipitate the loss of or failure to renew a broadcast license (although no television station has ever had its license denied for Fairness Doctrine violations).

In addition to the requirements imposed upon them by the FCC, the networks are also restricted by the broadcast industry's two major ethical

codes. The *Code of Broadcast News Ethics* of the Radio Television News Directors Associations "pledge(s) its members to provide a news service as accurate, full, and prompt as human integrity and devotion can devise."[6] This code does not require its members to seek balance among opposing views and, therefore, fails to meet the full requirement of the Fairness Doctrine. In comparison, The *Television Code* of the National Association of Broadcasters requires that news reporting be "factual, fair, and without bias" and that the stations provide an "adequate and well-balanced" news schedule.[7]

Television's Portrayal of the War in Vietnam

During the early stages of the war, Southeast Asia in general and Vietnam in particular were considered by many Americans to be outside of this country's sphere of interest; consequently, coverage of events in Vietnam by the television networks was characterized by what might be termed "benign neglect." But as the United States began a gradual military buildup in that area, Vietnam became "an American story" with American commentators consistently showing support for the war effort. However, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong Tet offensive of January-March of 1968 soon changed this relationship and surfaced the congenital adversarial relationship between a free press and government. Prior to Tet the Administration had led the public to believe that victory in Vietnam was well within the grasp of the United States and her allies. However, the attack on the American embassy in Saigon and the initial general impression of a US disaster presented by the networks caused such trauma that the American public simply could not recover. In retrospect, it has since become clear that the import of the assault on the embassy was exaggerated and that for the North Vietnamese, the Tet offensive was a *military disaster*. However, the net effect of television's coverage of the events of Tet was to exhort the American public into its first real misgivings about the war and to initiate the movement of the public into active dissent.[8]

The inaccuracy and subjectivity of network news coverage of Tet and the subsequent failure of the networks to correct the false reporting of the initial stages of the offensive drew much public criticism. Charges of partial reporting and advocacy analysis by commentators were leveled at the television industry by individuals both inside and outside of the Administration. As the war dragged on, the debate between those who believed television programming to be biased and those who believed it to be fair increased in intensity, and triggered several studies of the subject. The most damning of these was Ernest Lefever's analysis of CBS Evening News programming of 1972-1973. In this study, all CBS Evening News programs of this period were appraised by subject and theme analysis and the 1972 broadcasts by viewpoint analysis. A "viewpoint coding system" was developed to determine the viewpoint of all programming content on

national security affairs, using the Administration's official position as the point of reference. In brief, three specific viewpoints were identified.

Viewpoint A: "the threat to U.S. national security is greater than that on which present policy is based or we ought to do more to deal with the threat";

Viewpoint B: "the threat is approximately the same as that on which present policies are based and government efforts are generally appropriate"; and

Viewpoint C: "the threat to the U.S. national security is less than that on which present policy is based or the government ought to do less in response to the lesser threat."[9]

Lefever concluded that the Fairness Doctrine allows the networks to advocate any one of these particular viewpoints as long as they give a "reasonable opportunity" for the expression of the others. This, however, CBS Evening News failed to do. For example, in 1972, of 1,719 total sentences of programming devoted to Vietnam, 25 sentences (1.45 percent) expressed Viewpoint A, 493 sentences (28.68 percent) expressed Viewpoint B (which was based on the Administration's official position), and 1,201 sentences (69.87 percent) expressed Viewpoint C.[10] CBS Evening News coverage for 1972 and 1973 weighed heavily on criticism of the US armed forces and devoted almost no programming to positive reporting on the military. Lefever's group found that:

"The citizen-viewer who relied solely on CBS-TV Evening News during 1972 would have received a vivid, dramatic, and clearly etched picture of the Vietnam War—U.S. participation in this essentially civil conflict in Southeast Asia was cruel, senseless, unjust, and immoral; the South Vietnam government was corrupt, repressive, unpopular, and an obstacle to peace, and its armed forces were inefficient and cowardly; and, in contrast, the North Vietnam government had the support of its stoical people, its armed services fought courageously, and it treated American POWs well. The responsible course for the United States, according to this portrayal, would be to cease bombing military targets in the North, speedily withdraw its troops from the South, and show less concern with the fate of South Vietnam."[11]

In regard to meeting the requirements levied upon it by the Fairness Doctrine (and the television industry's own broadcast codes), Lefever found that "CBS Evening News was seriously deficient in presenting a fair, full, and meaningful picture of national security developments"[12] and that CBS openly advocated Viewpoint C without providing a reasonable opportunity for the expression of other opinions.[13] Consequently, in the opinion of the researchers CBS Evening News had effectually failed to fulfill the requirements of the Fairness Doctrine and the broadcasting codes. In fact, they concluded that, "all evidence suggests that CBS Evening News employed

various techniques of selective reporting and presentation to advocate a position opposed to U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. It failed to present a full or fair picture of opposing viewpoints on the issues of peace negotiations, the problem of American POWs, the nature of the U.S. military presence, or—on a larger canvas—the significance to the United States of the struggle between Communist and non-Communist forces in Southeast Asia."[14]

Although Lefever's study looked most scrupulously at CBS Evening News, he considered his findings to be indicative of the broadcast industry at large. The evidence appears to support him. Edward Epstein, in his studies of the news media, found the networks to be liberally slanted and "loaded with bias."[15] Edith Efron, in her content analysis of all ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news broadcasts during the 1968 Presidential election campaign concluded that "the networks actively slanted their opinion against U.S. policy on the Vietnam war."[16] Individuals both inside and outside the news industry generally agree that the media's coverage of events during that war was prejudiced. The bigger question that must be answered, however, is, "Did this bias actually affect wartime national security policy and, if so, how?"

The Effect Of Network News Bias On Vietnam War Policy

From the early days of the Vietnam war, television's impact on government policy had been heavily debated. Because over half of the American people received the majority of their news concerning the war through the medium of television,[17] the potential ability of the networks to narrow the limits of public debate and, thereby, to affect public opinion by manipulating the news worried policymakers. As Lefever noted in 1974, "if the mass media persist in excluding a significant sentiment or preference from public debate, that preference will eventually be ruled out as an alternative deserving serious policy consideration."[18] The implication was that, because the public could only be expected to support those policy options about which it had some familiarity, policymakers, who required the consensus of the people, would be limited to electing from among only those options that were aired by the media.

But do the networks, in fact, possess an ability to affect public policy through their influence on public opinion? The director of CBS News in Washington, William Small, has written, "When television covered its 'first' war in Vietnam it showed a terrible truth of war in a manner new to mass audiences. A case can be made, and certainly should be examined, that this was cardinal to the disillusionment of Americans with this war, the cynicism of many young people towards America, and the destruction of Lyndon Johnson's tenure of office."[19] Indeed, to assert that television has no ability to alter public opinion is to deny that advertisers have a justifiable reason for buying airtime from the networks.

This argument seems quite persuasive, yet there is still no consensus that television's coverage of the war turned the public against the Administration's

policy. A survey conducted in 1967 for *Newsweek* suggested that, rather than turning the public away from the war, television coverage had actually encouraged a majority of viewers to support the war effort, and another *Newsweek* survey, conducted in 1972, showed that the public may even have developed a "tolerance of horror" in the news programming originating in Vietnam.[20] In addition, Edward J. Epstein's survey of television producers and news editors for his 1973 book, *News From Nowhere*, related that over two-thirds of those interviewed felt that network news had had "little effect" on American public opinion of the war. Epstein stated that "an opinion commonly expressed was that people saw exactly what they wanted to in a news report and that television only served to reinforce existing views."[21]

Quite obviously, then, considerable disagreement exists as to the extent to which (and the direction in which) network news coverage of the war affected public opinion. However, it may not be absolutely necessary for television to *actually change* public attitudes in order to have an effect on public policy. Because politically minded policymakers are susceptible even to *potential* changes in public opinion, the networks may directly affect government policy by playing on politicians' perceptions of the power of television. The change in war policy during the Johnson administration provides a case-in-point.

As previously stated, prior to 1968, the television networks "belonged" to the oval office. The media in general and the networks in particular had accepted, literally without question, the President's position on intervention in Southeast Asia and the government's official reporting of the progress of the war. However, the shock of Tet in 1968 focused public attention on Vietnam and made it patently obvious that the Administration had been purposely painting an inaccurate picture of the war. There is no available evidence that the manner in which the networks presented the events of January through March of 1968 caused a change in American public opinion of the war, but Peter Braestrup, in his study of the media's reporting of the Tet offensive, observed that there were "unmistakable reflections of strong media themes . . . in the Congressional rhetoric and in the discussion by the politically active and media-sensitive elites outside Washington."[22] Indeed, while media coverage of the Tet "crisis" may have had barely a noticeable effect on the American public as a whole, it appears to have had a great influence on the country's leadership. Again, Braestrup found that "the press, politicians, and official Washington, through mutually reinforcing alarms, seem to have been more excited about the specific import of Tet than was the general public."[23] And no one, it seems, was more affected than Lyndon Johnson.

When Walter Cronkite lashed the Administration in his post-Vietnam visit report immediately following Tet, it apparently affected the President

in two ways. "First, he realized that he had lost the center, that Walter both was the center and reached the center, and thus his own consensus was in serious jeopardy. Second, because he liked and admired Cronkite so much and thought him so fair a reporter, he found himself believing that if Walter Cronkite was reporting these things, he must know something."[24] It was then that Johnson began to change the direction of his wartime policy.

Thus, whether or not television's coverage of the Tet offensive had any *real* effect on American public opinion may have mattered very little. It is quite possible that the actual change in public opinion itself was not what redirected Johnson's policy concerning the war but, rather, it may have been the President's *perception* that this opinion was being (or would be) changed and that his party would, consequently, suffer a concomitant loss of electoral support that caused him to change his course. That is, rather than affecting policy through the manipulation of public opinion, television may directly affect the government's position by playing on the policymaker's fear that television will affect opinion.

The Causes Of Network News Bias

We have seen thus far that the network's coverage of the war was, in fact, biased and that this coverage at least facilitated the redirection of government policy concerning the war. But what were the causes of this bias? A sudden seizure of antiwar feeling among broadcasters? An ideological conspiracy by the media against the government? Or were the problems more complex than simple ideational differences? Were they organizational? Technological? Was it inevitable that the war would be presented by television in the manner in which it was? In order to answer these questions, we must study the people, the processes, and the technology that mixed together to give us our first "living room" war.

The People. One of the most obvious shortcomings of network news coverage of the war had its source in the individual limitations of the correspondents themselves. Most of the newsmen assigned to cover the conflict lacked the necessary background regarding the historical, cultural, political, and military morass of Vietnam. Consequently, most were unable to understand (much less convey to the public) the meaning and relationship of events as they hurriedly piled up. In addition, because journalists were rarely kept "in-country" by the networks for periods longer than six months, they were unable to acquire the day-to-day knowledge of the war necessary for giving comprehensive coverage of events. All of this added up to what at times proved to be inadequate, incomplete, and inaccurate reporting.

The Processes. David Brinkley once remarked, "news is what I say it is. It's something worth knowing by my standards."[25] This is essentially correct.

News is what Mr. Brinkley and his fellow newscasters say it is because they choose what will (and what will not) be broadcast as the news. News broadcasting is an entirely selective process; no facts or opinions are televised which the correspondents, editors, and producers have not chosen. What are the consequences of this selection process? In analyzing which events to broadcast, the amount of time to be allocated to each comment, and what emphasis to place on each event, the reporter, the editor, and the producer are all guided by their personal philosophies and preferences, and "in providing connective tissue and interpretive background, a newsman sometimes moves, consciously or subconsciously, into advocacy."[26] As Frank Shakespeare, the former director of the US Information Agency and vice president of CBS, has stated, the problem is that television news is "clearly liberally oriented" because the "overwhelming number of people who go into the creative . . . and . . . news side of television tend by their instinct to be liberally oriented."[27] Therefore, the process by which war news was selected for broadcasting naturally caused the news to be slanted towards the left.

Another process that affected the "message" transmitted to the public by network news was the manner in which the news was "reconstructed." With the exception of planned events, very few newsworthy occurrences were covered by television as-they-happened. Rather, what was seen on the news was a reconstruction or even a reenactment of the story. This reconstruction process tended to cause events to be related in a manner which fulfilled the preconceived notions of the reporting news correspondent. Just as a painting is more the artist's perception of his subject than a completely accurate portrayal of it, so a filmed reconstruction of a story is a reflection of the newsman's perception of the event. If that perception is inaccurate, so will be the newscast.

After an event had been chosen as being newsworthy and subsequently reconstructed for the cameras, bias again was able to creep into the story through the editing process. A two to three minute news story may be edited down from more than an hour of film, and what the film editor chooses to leave in or delete will be based on his own personal decisions (with guidance from the producer) as to what is newsworthy. In this manner, however, very important aspects of the Vietnam "story" were omitted simply because the editor did not realize their significance.

We can see, then, that, rather than presenting the unedited world of events, network news followed set procedures, from the selection of material to be presented, to the reconstruction of events, to the final editing of the film for showing. These connective processes of selection, reconstruction, and editing allowed for the possible injection of personal bias regarding the war at each stage of the programming process.

The Technology. It should not be forgotten that television is, above all else, an entertainment industry and that, consequently, network news programming is

sensitive to the exigencies of the marketplace. In its efforts to attract and maintain audiences, therefore, television has often sought to broadcast news events more for their dramatic value than for their informational content. This "element of theater" inherent in television news programming often causes the networks to substitute action for news. In fact, cameramen in Vietnam were often told to "shoot bloody" by focusing on military action. This emphasis on combat scenes, however, caused the less visible but more important political considerations to be overlooked.

Related to this theatrical component of television is the fact that television is a visual medium and, therefore, the newsworthiness of events is often judged by "visual criteria." Vietnam news items tended to be presented in terms of "visual facts," that is, those that were well-disposed to being filmed were chosen for coverage. This caused those events which were less amenable to filming (but which might have been equally important) to be ignored.

Time limitations imposed on network news also served to distort television's coverage of the war. Rather than reporting on the war as a long continuous event, television reported it as a series of two to three minute "visual incidents." In reality, however, the mix and flow of events is often of more relevance and importance than the short announcements of isolated occurrences fed to us by the networks. In addition, this requirement to compress the presentation of news items into short broadcasts forced commentators to oversimplify. Often extremely complex issues involving many conflicting and confusing viewpoints were narrowed down to a simple conflict between two well matched sides. Consequently, the television audience was provided with a seemingly simple view of what was, most certainly, a very unsimple situation. As K.C. Jacobsen observed, "this compression of time (and issues) that television gave us was deadly to any real understanding of the war and precluded any realization on the part of the American people that the Vietnam problem was a long-term one."[28]

It appears from the foregoing that, at least during the Vietnam war, network news was shaped by structures that were both implicit and imposed. Government regulations, economic necessities and uniform procedures for selecting, editing, and producing programs all led to a news presentation with a definite cant; this slant proceeded as much from organizational structures as from the individual biases of commentators. Because of this reality, the overall picture of the war in Vietnam presented by the networks was incomplete, far from accurate, yet probably inevitable. Can this situation be changed so that future conflicts will not have to be fought under the burden of network news bias?

In developing a means of dealing with the inherent bias of television newscasting during wartime, it is important to realize that, for a democracy,

active censorship cannot be the answer. In the short-run, restriction of the media through legislative requirement or denial of battlefield access may serve to limit public opposition to wartime policies, but, in the long-run, the harm caused by the suppression of the traditional free exchange of information would be a disaster. We could not morally justify fighting a war to protect our way of life if we obviate that way in order to achieve victory. If we firmly believe our method of government is correct, then we must learn to protect it without prostituting it.

However, the military must not lose sight of the fact that its foremost responsibility is to prosecute wars. Neither time nor resources (both precious commodities in war) should be spent in the support of the news gathering function. What both the military and the media need to do is to learn each other's particular responsibilities and limitations, to accept each other as imperfect occupiers of the battlefield, each having a particular mission to fulfill, and then to establish mutually agreeable working compromises that allow them both to meet their objectives. If the military and the networks find themselves unable to coexist during a national crisis, it could only exacerbate an already dangerous situation. In a war it could possibly lead to failure and failure in warfare in a thermonuclear age could be unforgivable.

Notes

1. Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: From Crimea to Vietnam: the War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 14.
2. Ernest W. Lefever, *TV and National Defense—An Analysis of CBS News, 1972-1973* (Boston, Va.: Institute for American Strategy, 1974), pp. 1-2.
3. Edith Efron, *The News Twisters* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1971), p. 20.
4. Lefever, p. 7.
5. Efron, p. 21.
6. Lefever, p. 9.
7. Although it might appear that, because of these externally and internally imposed requirements, network news programming is denied the First Amendment right to be biased, it is important to note that a fair assessment of these requirements indicates they are not censorial in nature. Actually, the intention of the Fairness Doctrine and the two television codes is to ensure that the networks themselves do not censor views opposed to the editorial beliefs of the members of the programming industry.
8. An excellent analysis of the news media's coverage of the Tet offensive is provided in Peter Braestrup's, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1977).
9. Lefever, p. 75.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
15. Edward J. Epstein, "The Strange, Tilted World of TV Network News," *Readers Digest*, February 1974, p. 142.
16. Efron, p. 47.
17. Knightly, p. 410.
18. Lefever, p. 153.
19. Edward J. Epstein, *News from Nowhere: Television and the News* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 9.

20. Knightley, p. 411.
21. Epstein, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 225-226.
22. Braestrup. p. 671.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 703.
24. David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Knopf, 1979), p. 514.
25. Efrou, p. 6.
26. Lefever, p. 11.
27. Epstein, *News from Nowhere*, p. 200.
28. K.C. Jacobsen, "Television and the War: The Small Picture," Naval Institute *Proceedings* March 1975, pp. 59-60.

Bureaucrateez

In Spring 1977 you were kind enough to publish a short article I wrote on the American use of the English language. I wrote it in the belief that, if the USA were to retain (as it should) the leadership of the free world against the Warsaw Pact threat, the correlation of her and her allies' policies and strategies was essential and that, in turn, this demanded clear and simple communication between us all. I expressed concern that clarity was on the wane and received much American support for this view. I hoped that improvement might occur.

The memorandum below might interest you as a possible indication of where clarity now stands. It is the content of a routine inter-division memorandum at a Nato MSC's headquarters. Its author is a member of the US armed forces. The recipient challenged me, as a graduate of the USN War College and a fellow countryman, to translate it. I failed. My USN colleague, another War College graduate, also tried, but with no better results. My question is, "Is this an isolated example of "Americanese" (hopefully) or is clarity still waning?" No non-native English-speaking officer has a chance of understanding the memorandum.

Captain P. McLaren, Royal Navy

An Inter-Division Memorandum

1. Where funds are finite all things cannot have equal importance. As a management tool for the CinC, Areas of Concern, as a conceptual device, has meaning only if it leads to aggregation and the assignment of relative importance to projects. If it cannot do this, it is a sterile exercise since mere register of concern per se will not automatically translate into action.

2. Indeed it cannot as long as prioritization continues to exist only at the project level—where they assume lives of their own not necessarily in tune, or in pace, with broader objectives.

3. On the premise that Areas of Concern should exist as a meaningful management tool we propose that boundaries and definitions of Areas of Concern be more explicit in terms of the constituent mission areas, and then that the Areas of Concern be ranked according to their relative importance and the constituent projects than be reprioritized in consonance with their parent Areas of Concern.

4. Otherwise there is no seeming practical justification for the Areas of Concern concept.