EJE

Contents

Preface

More than a half-century ago, Walter Lippmann pointed to a conspicuous gap in the study of American politics:

> Since Public Opinion is supposed to be the prime mover in democracies, one might reasonably expect to find a vast literature. One does not find it. There are excellent books on government and parties, that is, on the machinery which in theory registers public opinions after they are formed. But on the sources from which these public opinions arise, on the processes by which they are derived, there is relatively little.

More specifically, he noted, "To anyone not immersed in the routine interests of government, it is almost inexplicable that no American student of government, no American sociologist, has ever written a book on news-gathering." Since this charge was leveled, despite the fact that technological developments and increased literacy have vastly expanded the audience of news media, there have been few attempts by political scientists or sociologists to explore the processes by

which news is gathered, synthesized and presented to the public. And nearly all the studies that have been undertaken deal mainly with the activities of specialized groups of newsmen, such as Washington correspondents, not with the broader question of how the various methods of selecting and organizing information into news forms may affect the final product reaching the public.

The reluctance of social scientists to grapple with this latter question is not, however, entirely inexplicable. Any systematic attempt to unravel the shaping effects of news processes from the "news" itself runs into difficulties.

For one thing, it is not possible to determine, simply by historical research or content analyses, systematic distortions in the images of events presented in the media without first independently establishing the actual course of the same events. While some social scientists have attempted this mode of analysis on a limited scale—for example, Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang once posted thirty-one observers along the preannounced parade route for General Douglas MacArthur at points which television camera crews were covering to compare television coverage of a single event with that of eyewitnesses—the fast-breaking nature of news usually defies the simultaneous surveillance of news events and news reporting over extended periods of time (at least without resources that heretofore have not been available for this type of research). Coverage of ongoing events, such as wars or even election campaigns, would thus be beyond the means of most academic researchers.

Moreover, news events cannot be expected to take place under the sort of controlled circumstances which lend themselves to methodical analysis. Conditions can rarely be held constant in news events (as they can be in social science experiments), so that modes of reporting can be compared in different circumstances. For example, in analyzing varying news reports about urban riots in different cities, it would be extremely difficult to say with any sort of precision whether the differences in the reports resulted

from variation in news coverage or in the actual circumstances of the disorders. To the extent that news reporting concentrates on what is atypical in events, which is the traditional focus of journalism, comparisons and generalizations have little value. To be sure, after-the-fact comparisons can be made between the way various news media cover the same event, but this still leaves the problem of determining the reality of the event—and the deviation from it.

Another problem is that up until recently, newsmen have tended to work on their own to a large extent, rather than in groups or a tightly regimented office situation. This hardly suits the more traditional forms of sociological analyses, which are mainly concerned with group behavior, or the effects of "social structures" on individuals. And to the degree that one accepts the assertion that newsmen's work, like that of authors and artists, is idiosyncratic, or entirely dependent on their individual judgments of situations, they become uninteresting subjects about which to generalize. (The few studies that have been conducted by sociologists therefore mainly deal with the problem of social control in news offices.)

Finally, serious research about the processes of news gathering has been discouraged, in no small measure, by a lack of access to news facilities. Whether to protect their competitive position in acquiring information or their credibility in presenting it, newspapers have been less than eager to open their newsrooms to social scientists. The *New York Times*, for example, refused to allow Paul Weaver to observe their news operation as "a matter of policy," even though he was then writing his doctoral dissertation on New York City newspapers.

Despite obvious problems like these, this study began as a doctoral dissertation at Harvard University in 1968. The idea that a news medium could be productively studied arose out of a seminar in Organizational Theory given that year at Harvard by Professor James Q. Wilson. The general question explored at this seminar was,

briefly stated: To what extent are the directions that large organizations take, whether they are political parties, city governments, business corporations or whatever, determined by pressures to satisfy internal needs rather than by external circumstances or even long-range goals? The working assumption was that members of such organizations eventually modified their own personal values in accordance with the requisites of the organization, and that therefore the key to explaining the particular "outputs" of organizations—which could be nominations in the case of a political party, policies in the case of a city government, and product design in the case of a corporation—lay in defining the basic requirements which a given organization needs to maintain itself. In the case of news media, this suggested the approach of treating a news service as a business organization rather than as a collective faculty for highly independent newsmen—i.e., "the press." The particular output, the formulation of "news," might then be explicable in terms of what the news organization had to do to stay in business. How successful this approach would prove depends, of course, on the degree to which "news" is selected and shaped by the organization, as well as on assumptions about organization behavior.

I chose network news on television as the subject of this study for several reasons. First of all, each of the three network news services—NBC News, CBS News and ABC News—is a relatively large organization, with hundreds of employees and many tiers of executive control. Comparisons are made easier by the fact that each also has a similar set of requirements it must meet to maintain itself. The Federal Communications Commission, the agency which regulates television, requires that certain standards be met. The parent networks, which allocate money and network time to the news divisions, require that certain economic expectations be fulfilled. The independently owned affiliate stations, which provide most of the audience for national news, require that pro-

graming meet certain specifications. Newsmen and technicians require certain minimum working conditions to be effective in processing information in a credible way. And the home audience, for which each network competes, must also find the material minimally interesting.

Second, it seemed to be an important subject for political science. The three networks provide almost all the national news on television (most local stations tape-record segments of the network news and rebroadcast them as their national reports in the local news), and according to public opinion surveys, the public now relies on television as its major source of news. Indeed, given the fact that up until recently virtually all daily news organs relied on local audiences for support, network news represents a qualitatively different news form. Yet, although it had become the major national news medium in the United States, few serious studies had been done specifically on this subject. It thus seemed to deserve attention.

Finally, as a practical consideration, I was promised —and given—considerable access to the news operation by network executives and producers.

My field study began at NBC in September 1968. Reuven Frank, the president of the news division, allowed me more or less free reign of the news organization: I was able to attend, on a regular basis, the news manager meetings in the morning, which he chaired; observe the proceedings in the newsroom throughout the day; interview personnel; travel with camera crews; and examine memoranda and budget statements pertinent to the news operation. Robert J. Northshield, the executive producer of the NBC Evening News, further permitted me to observe closely the decision making involved in that program on a daily basis for a four-month period, including staff meetings, critiques, film-editing sessions, writing conferences, and the continuous discussions that went on between producers, news editors and correspondents.

The other networks presented some problems. At CBS

News, although Gordon Manning, the vice-president, cooperated in allowing me to interview correspondents and producers and also made available most material I specifically requested, the executive producer of the CBS Evening News, Leslie Midglie, did not permit me to observe the conferences and decision making on that program on a continuous basis. He explained that the presence of an outside observer over an extended period of time might interfere with or inhibit the news operation (and my experience at NBC indicated that this was, to some degree, a valid reason). I thus was given only limited access to that program.

At ABC News, there was a different problem. While Av Westin, the executive producer of the ABC Evening News, allowed me to observe decision making on his program and cooperated fully at that time, ABC News was in a state of flux. Westin, a former CBS and Public Broadcasting Laboratory producer, had just taken over the program from another producer and was then in the process of completely reorganizing it. He told me that he planned to recruit a new group of producers, editors and correspondents, and experiment with various procedures and formats until he found the most suitable one for ABC News. While this certainly provided an interesting situation, it could not be fairly compared to the established procedures at the other networks.

I therefore decided to use NBC as my main field study and attempt to determine, through interviews and limited direct observations at the other two networks, whether there were significantly different procedures for gathering and formulating news at CBS and ABC. In general, I found that the similarities at all three networks greatly outweighed differences, which is not surprising in light of the fact that all news divisions operate essentially under the same ground rules imposed by federal regulation, affiliated stations and an economic logic intrinsic to network television. The "outputs" presented no problem: all three networks gave me full access to their scripts, logs and assignment records.

The research for this study was based on five main sources: direct observation of news operations and editorial conferences for a total period of about six months; interviews with ninety-three correspondents, news editors, producers, technicians and network news executives which were "structured" in the sense that all were asked the same questions about their views on news, politics and the organization for which they worked; informal and off-the-record discussions with individuals in the peripheral organizations which help define the situation of network news, which included audience analysts and executives of the parent networks, Federal Communications Commission officials, owners and managers of affiliated stations, advertising agency executives, public relations executives, comptrollers, and attorneys for the networks and affiliates (in all, there were over one hundred such interviews); network news memoranda, the records of government investigations, and public statements by those in network news; and finally, the logs, scripts and records of news broadcasts. The only restriction placed on the study was that I agreed not to attribute direct quotations to news personnel (except where they made the statements publicly). In any case, the fragments of conversation I quote from newsroom discussions, editorial conferences, and camera crews on location were often said in the context of fast-moving news events and sometimes heated disputes about the best way of handling them, and are intended more to illustrate the climate that surrounds news gathering than as any sort of conclusive proof of the theses of this book.

Since most of the research and interviews for this book were done in 1968 and 1969, the facts and figures in the text reflect the conditions in the television industry in those years, unless otherwise noted. While there have been certain minor changes in the size of the audience that programs draw, affiliate relations and productions costs, the basic structure under which network news operates remains essentially the same.

The central problem this study addresses is the effect

of the processes of a news organization on the news product. The first chapter examines the arguments commonly made by newsmen and news executives that the news they produce is an ineluctable reproduction of reality, not shaped in any systematic way by them; and it concludes that news itself is problematic and that its final formulation is, to no small extent, a product of an organization. The next two chapters deal with the structures imposed on network news from without—by government regulation, affiliates, parent networks and economic realities. Chapters IV, V and VI analyze the effect of the internal procedures of network news—the intelligence systems used for assigning crews in advance, the techniques used by network crews to reconstruct events into "stories," and the decisional rules used for routinely eliminating possible stories from the program. The next chapter, drawn mainly from the structured interviews, discusses the values of those involved in network news, and the question of whether individuals modify their values to meet the needs of the organization or vice versa. Finally, the last two chapters inspect some composite pictures of various aspects of American society, as depicted on network news over a three-month period, and attempt to relate them to the "inputs" defined in the earlier chapters. The book does not hold that network news is entirely determined by the organizational factors. Obviously, the events reported on television take place somewhere and may be seen in different ways by different reporters. It does argue that certain consistent directions in selecting, covering and reformulating events over long-term periods are clearly related to organizational needs.

I am deeply grateful to James Q. Wilson for suggesting this subject, advising me on the research design of the project, and over the course of the past three and a half years, supervising the resulting doctoral dissertation. Without his generous assistance, time and criticism, I doubt that the study could have been completed in this form.

This study has also benefited enormously from the criticisms of friends, colleagues and teachers. I am particularly grateful to Renata Adler, Edward C. Banfield, Byron Dobell, Howard Darmstadter, Yaron Ezrari, Paul Halpern, Carol Katz, Bruce S. Kovner, Seymour Martin Lipset, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, John Rubinstein, William Shawn, William Whitworth and William Marslan Wilson for their comments on parts of the manuscript. There is no way I can express my debt to Cynthia Worswick for the research she did for me on this project over a four-year period.

Amagansett, New York
June 1972

E. J. E.

Chapter 1

Pictures from an Organization

So many different people with so many differing jobs and responsibilities have felt they wandered into the presence of a large blank canvas . . . But the canvas is not blank. And none of us may fill it alone. The problem is given. The conditions for the most part are given.

—Reuven Frank, producer, NBC Evening News

Each weekday at a fixed time in the early evening, the three national television networks—the American Broadcasting Companies, the Columbia Broadcasting System and the National Broadcasting Company—"feed" a limited number of film stories depicting national and world events through a system of closed-circuit telephone cables and microwave relays to their more than 550 local affiliated stations, which in turn broadcast these news pictures to a nationwide audience over the public airwaves. The CBS Evening News, with Walter Cronkite, broadcast by 205 local stations, is seen by an estimated 26 million viewers; the NBC Evening News, carried by 195 stations, reaches some 21 mil-

Chapter 2

The Political Ground Rules

The newspaper or magazine journalist is influenced in reporting the news primarily by the traditional canons of American journalism. . . . The broadcast journalist . . . must also keep in mind that he is working in a medium that, unlike print, operates under Federal regulation that has an impact upon what is disseminated.

—Elmer Lower, president of ABC News

Network news organizations are not independent entities; they are integral parts of the television networks, whose executives ultimately decide on the time that will be allocated for news programs, the amount of money that will be used to produce these programs, and the appointment of the top news executives. The networks, in turn, are heavily dependent on television stations they do not own or control to broadcast their programing over the airwaves. And the stations are licensed and responsible to the federal government for the programs they broadcast. Thus network news operates under conditions and rules defined by other organizations.

Chapter 3

The Economic Logic

The precise composition of the [television] audience is changing every half-hour. The point of nearly every strategy and tactic a network can devise is to get the largest possible share of that audience in each half-hour.

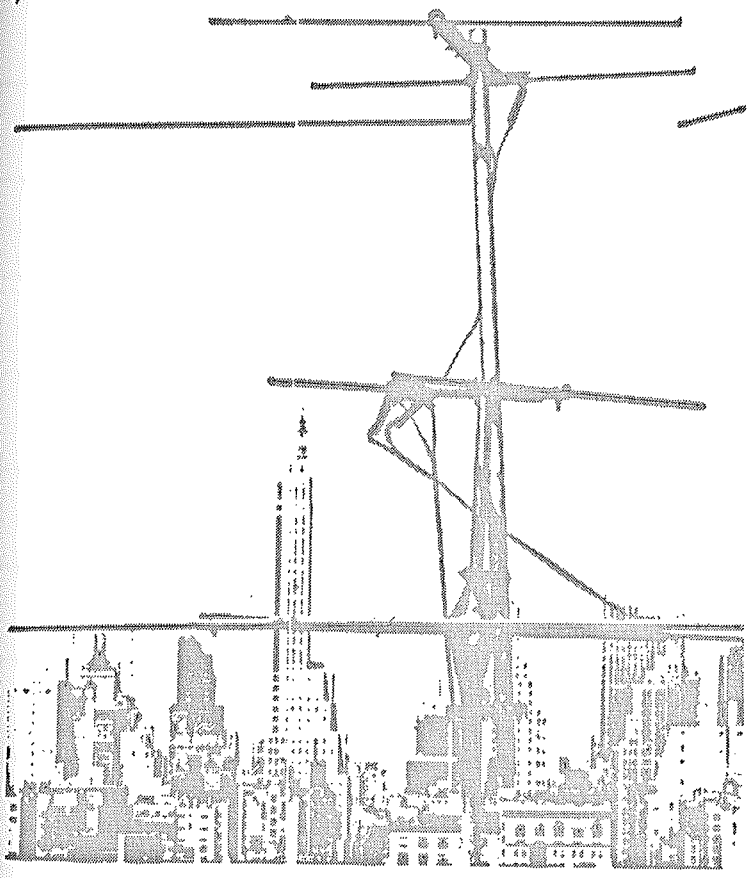
—Paul Klein, NBC vice-president for audience analyses

Before network news can be properly analyzed as a journalistic enterprise, it is necessary to understand the business enterprise that it is an active part of, and the logic that proceeds from it. The business of network television was succinctly if somewhat brutally outlined by an NBC vice-president in his testimony before a congressional subcommittee in 1963:

> Television is not only a program service but an advertising medium which operates in a framework of intense competition. The principal value television has to offer an advertiser is audience, and the rating services furnish us and our advertisers with the measurement of the audience generated by our programs. This is a business requirement of broadcasting,

Part II

The Selection Process



Chapter 5

The Resurrection of Reality

The essence of journalism is the editing process.
—Elmer Lower, president of ABC News

Almost by definition, news events are short-lived phenomena. Except for rare instances, what is seen on network news is not the event itself unfolding before the live camera, or even a filmed record, but a story about the event reconstructed on film from selected fragments of it (or even from re-enactments of it). Despite the hackneyed maxim that television news "tells it like it is," presenting events exactly as they occur does not fit in with the requisites of network news. For one thing, the camera is not always in a position to capture events live or on film as they happen. In some cases, news events are unexpected and occur before a camera crew can be dispatched to the scene. Others cannot be filmed direct because of unfavorable weather and lighting conditions (especially if artificial lighting is unavailable or restricted), or simply because decision-making bodies such as committees of the House of Repre-

Chapter 6

Decisions

For two hours, a half-dozen senior people in the Huntley-Brinkley team . . . debate the question of which stories are important enough to demand inclusion that night, which features should be taken from the shelf, what should come out first. . . .

—Robert Kintner, president of NBC

Not all the stories filmed by network news crews are eventually used on news programs. As a "margin of safety," as one NBC executive termed it, more stories are generally assigned coverage than there is room for on the networks' limited news schedule. Moreover, almost invariably, outside news agencies offer the networks a plethora of film each day. At some point a final decision must be made as to which of the available stories will be used. The executive producer of the NBC Evening News in 1968 explained:

> I have only one job on the show . . . I do a rundown. I take a piece of paper and write out what's going to be on the show in what order and at what length. . . . My whole day is directed towards that, and it is possible to do nothing else all day.

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Chapter 7

Values

The essence of professionalism is discipline.
—Reuven Frank, president of NBC News

Since the perspectives of society that emerge on network news are, in the final analysis, selected and reconstructed by a small group of newsmen, it is commonly assumed that any particular slant that these news pictures appear to have can be best explained by examining the personal values of the newsmen involved in the selection process. Exemplifying this view, Frank J. Shakespeare, the director of the United States Information Agency and a former vice-president of CBS, asserted in a speech 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." Precisely the same logic can be found in Vice-President Agnew's public denunciation of network news, in which he argued that it was heavily influenced by the personal ideologies of a small "fraternity of newsmen

Chapter 8

Pictures of Society

The domestic political story is the skeleton on which all news is built. It's a continuous, repetitive story . . .

—William McAndrew, former president of NBC News

When Walter Cronkite noted that "we live in a time when almost all stories are related: Cambodia is as much a part of Kent State as Kent State is a part of the state of the nation," he was refering particularly to those stories of national import shown nightly on network news. The ways in which these stories on television are related to each other are worth considering.

In some cases, news stories are connected by a cause-and-effect relation. For example, the announcement that American troops were being dispatched to Cambodia in May 1970 was the proximate cause for the student protest at Kent State which ended in the tragic shooting of students. In other cases, however, where the nexus between different events occurring in different places is problematic, if existent at all, a relation between

Chapter 9

Versions of National News

News is essentially protean in character. Any happening can be reported in a multitude of different forms and takes on radically different appearances in different news media. Nor is there necessarily one correct way of reporting an event. Alternative ways always exist for organizing information, and events themselves do not ineluctably determine the forms in which they are reported. Yet in examining the product of a news organization, one may find striking similarities in the ways in which the news is presented and the direction it takes. What accounts for these consistent directions and news forms is the central question that this study attempts to answer, or at least to clarify in the case of network news organizations.

The main finding of this study is that the pictures of society that are shown on television as national news are largely—though not entirely—performed and shaped by organizational considerations. To maintain themselves in a competitive world, the networks impose a set of prior restraints, rules and conditions on the operations of their