THE BIAS OF NETWORK NEWS

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The discussion of bias in television news almost inevitably degenerates into assertions about the personal bias or the personal fairness of newsmen. The assumption is always that bias is a personal attribute of newsmen, and the skewering of news in one direction or another can be analyzed by adding up the personal biases of the newsmen as if one were adding up the number of black and white marbles in a collection. For example, recently I attended a congressional conference on the media which was intended to give legislators a further insight into the problems that concern journalists. High on the agenda was the problem of bias in television news. But when this subject was finally broached, Theodore Kopp, a CBS News vice president, defined the issue as follows: “I suggest that bias lies in the eye of the beholder rather than the newsmen.” His proof was that “Walter Cronkite, and his opposite numbers, didn’t get where they are by being biased.” This effectively ended the discussion, since none of the participants were interested in impeaching the integrity of Cronkite.

Reducing the issue of bias to a simple question about the fairness of individual newsmen not only leads to unproductive and dead-end discussions, but it also tends to obscure a much more serious form of bias — the bias of the news organization itself. Just as a roulette wheel which is mounted on a tilted table would tend to favor some numbers over others, no matter how impartial the croupier might be, a television network which is “tilted” in any consistent direction because of the way it is organized will tend to favor certain types of stories over others — no matter how fair the newscaster might be. If one is interested in the leanings of the table, rather than those of newsmen, it is unnecessary to get into the bottomless morass of judgments about personal bias. Through examining what might be called “organization bias,” or other contours and tilts that underlie network news, it is possible to explain in large measure why television news seems to flow in certain directions.

The New York Fulcrum

One of the main sub-surface features of the national news which comes from the network is that it is filtered through and controlled by a group of producers and editors located in New York City. This is especially true of the three evening newscasts — the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite, the NBC Nightly News with John Chancellor, and the ABC Reasoner-Smith Report — which have a combined audience each night of more than fifty million viewers. The events to be covered, the story line which will be followed, the correspondent, and the editing of the story are all tightly supervised from New York.

Avram Westin, the executive producer of ABC News, candidly described the degree of control in a memorandum, stating “The senior producers decide if the story has been adequately covered and they also estimate how long the report should run. In most cases, correspondents deliberately overwrite their scripts giving the producer at home the option of editing it down, selecting which portions of interviews are to be used and which elements in the narration are to be kept and which are to be discarded . . . In some cases, the senior producer ‘salvages’ a report by assigning the correspondent to redo his narration or by sending a cameraman to refilm a sequence.”

From their common vantage point in New York, the producers and editors at each network receive very similar sorts of information. Most notably, all the network decision-makers I interviewed, or ob-
served at work, read and relied on a single newspaper each morning — the New York Times. Av Westin explained “Like it or not, the Times is our Bible: it tells us what is likely to be considered to be important by others.” Producers, editors, and correspondents at all the networks are powerfully aware of the fact that network executives read the Times and use it as a “scorecard,” as the president of NBC News termed the practice, in evaluating their performance. Indeed, as Harry Reasoner wryly pointed out, the most effective way of legitimizing a story for television is to first leak it to the Times — once stories are published in the Times, they are considered fair game. Even though producers and news editors are generally sophisticated men who read the Times with varying degrees of skepticism, almost all of them use it to orient themselves to the “trends” and issues in the news. In the sense that it allows them to prejudge the relative importance of different happenings, it provides an extremely important perspective in network news.

The efforts of ABC to alter this perspective on the news illustrates the deep-rooted nature of the problem. When Av Westin took charge of the ABC Evening News in 1969 he was given a mandate by management to create a news product that was “radically different” in outlook and “more evenly balanced” politically than the newscasts of the other networks. (This strategy was born more of desperation than politics: A large number of key affiliates persistently refused to carry the network’s news program unless it provided them with a real alternative to the competing programs on NBC and CBS). Westin first attempted to achieve this “alternative” by changing the line-up of correspondents and commentators—Harry K. Smith and Harry Reasoner were brought in as co-anchormen and virtually all the correspondents were reassigned. He found, however, that although the “tone” of the program changed somewhat, the “outlook,” or the way that issues were presented, remained essentially the same. He also attempted to establish a measure of balance by ordering as general policy that if one side of a controversial issue is presented on the program, the “other side must be given equal time within seven working days.” Again, this failed to provide the desired change in perspective. Instead, he found, “The liberal side was always given first stab and the most dramatic piece of film,” while the more conservative side “was made to react and answer.” And affiliated stations continued to protest what they considered the “left jab,” as one affiliate president put it, of network news. Westin recognized that as long as the producers and newsmen in New York, including himself, were “briefed by the same newspapers,” they would tend, willy-nilly, to see issues from a similar point of view. Specifically, the “Eastern-liberal syndrome,” as he identified the point of view, placed a high value on sweeping reforms and a correspondingly low value on maintaining the status quo. Presumably, as long as this “syndrome” persisted, the criticism of social institutions would be given precedence over their defense when issues are presented.

To undercut this impact, Westin decided that he had to consciously “reverse the perspective of news.” He recently explained in a television interview. “. . . Instead of the accepted ‘Eastern liberal way,’ I prefer to have our pieces come at it the other way, and make the Eastern liberal’ position answer, rather than give them first stab.”

Westin gave me a graphic example of this reversing of perspectives: “On the other networks, there is a clichéd formula for doing abortion stories. . . You begin by showing unwanted babies with the narration suggesting that these children exist in their present plight because we have antiquated abortion laws.” An advocate of abortion reform then explains how liberalized laws would alleviate the problem. Finally, an old fogy is shown reacting to this plea and dogmatically insisting ‘Abortion is wrong.’ ” “To reverse the perspective,” Westin continued, “I ordered my correspondent to begin with a shot of a destroyed fetus, or its dramatic equivalent, and state in his narration ‘This death resulted from an abortion,’ next a defender of the present laws was to present the case that ‘respect for life’ was necessary; and then a liberal critic would be allowed to react to this position.” Quite obviously, two very different stories can emanate from the same event, depending on the perspective which is used.

The Truncated Geography of Television News

Not only are the vast preponderance of stories about America centrally selected and edited in New York, but most of the news footage used to illustrate them are drawn from four metropolitan centers—New York, Washington D.C., Chicago, and Los Angeles. More than eighty percent of the networks’
domestic camera-crews and correspondents are stationed in these four cities. Moreover, permanent hook-ups are maintained in these cities so that film stories can be electronically “fed” to the broadcast center in New York; and, with the exception of Los Angeles, no charge is made against the program’s budget for transmitting stories from these cities. In the case of most other cities, special microwave channels have to be leased from A.T. & T. to transmit stories, and this usually involves a heavy expense for the program’s budget. In other words, network news is set up in such a way that stories from a few cities are much more convenient and less expensive than stories from the rest of America.

To be sure, this does not mean that network news crews do not venture out into the hinterland when the occasion demands it: in the case of a major news happening, such as the recent uprising at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, crews and correspondents will be dispatched despite the expense. But on more routine coverage—and especially on more general stories about trends rather than events—the path of least resistance is followed and assignments are given to the crews which are most conveniently located from the networks’ point of view.

The result is that “national” stories about urban violence, civil rights, anti-war protests, ecology, meat boycotts, and inflation tend to be depicted in terms of the special problems of four unique cities. Paradoxically, the concentration of media coverage in these four cities has tended to make them logical stages for demonstrations and confrontations seeking a certain form of national attention, and thus has further reduced the value of the dramatic footage obtained from these cities—at least for the purpose of being representative of national trends and moods.

The National Perspective

Network news programs are sold to affiliated stations on the understanding that they will provide a truly national news service, and thus help the affiliates fulfill the “public service” requirements of their broadcasting license. To meet this requisite, network producers must continually transform the local news happenings in a few cities—and all news events occur in some locality—into national stories. Finding or creating such “national” news is the daily problem of network news. This transformation is routinely accomplished at all three networks by concentrating on themes or general hypotheses about America, rather than actual events. After a national theme is chosen, appropriate events that illustrate it are sought after.

For example, to illustrate the theme of urban unrest in America, an NBC producer commissioned illustrative stories in the five cities in which NBC owns its stations: in New York City, a crew was ordered to film a story about “slums and welfare;” in Washington, D.C., a crew was given the assignment of depicting “ghetto crime;” in Chicago, cameramen were dispatched to film examples of “urban blight;” in Los Angeles, a correspondent was asked to interview blacks about “job opportunities” for minorities; and in Cleveland, a report was requested about the progress of “black politics.” These five segments were then spliced together into a “national” story about the worsening urban crisis. It should be noted that none of the individual segments were precipitated by an actual event, but by the producer’s search for example to illustrate a theme.

In this modern day form of alchemy, where local events (and even non-events) are transmuted into national stories, the news undergoes a significant change. The complexities which tie an event to a single locality are stripped away, and the possible ramifications of the event are raised to a different order of magnitude so that it can plausibly illustrate a national theme. For example, the closing of a single gas station in the suburbs must be abstracted from the surrounding circumstances of the area so that it can be used to dramatically illustrate “the energy crisis” or a drug-arrest in a single high schoo

must be simplified so that it can be used to illustrate a national “drug epidemic.” The logic of producing a steady diet of national stories thus also tends to escalate the importance of incidents to crisis-proportions.

The Requisite of Conflict

Network news has the basic problem of holding the attention of a nationwide audience for half an hour. Whereas local news programs report on happenings of immediate interest to local audiences, even if they are merely ball scores, weather forecasts, or fires in the locality, network news reports on more diffuse matters which cannot be expected to be of equal interest to audiences scattered across the entire
country. But while the information may be of interest to only a limited portion of the audience, it is assumed that accompanying visual action of an exciting nature will have nearly universal appeal. This, at least, is the assumption of network news executives, producers, and news editors. In virtually all network news stories, there is a constant demand for such visual action. Fred Freed, a NBC award-winning producer, describes the three-fold distillation of action in network news: “The cameraman seeks out the moments of high action at the actual event, the film editor then further concentrates the action by cutting out the dead periods in the film of the events, and finally the producer selects the portion of the story which contains the most gripping visual action.”

“Action,” though a prime ingredient, cannot be sought at the expense of confusing home viewers; it must therefore be contained in a form which is instantly comprehensible to most people, especially since there is usually only a few minutes available in any story for explanation. Producers have commonly found that the one situation which provides the highest potential for visual action and the least risk of audience confusion is the violent confrontation between two clearly defined sides.

For example, confrontations between blacks and whites, uniformed police and bearded demonstrators, or any other easily identifiable groups present a drama which is presumably understood by the entire audience (the specific issues causing the clash can thus be neglected or passed over lightly without confusing the home viewers). Moreover, confrontations which seek maximum publicity for their cause are usually scheduled days or weeks in advance of the actual event, and they fit easily into the scheduling requirements of networks, which require some time to dispatch camera-crews and arrange coverage.

Convergent Biases

The organizational tilts in network news can all be seen dove-tailing and converging in a single direction: towards emphasizing challenges to the myths and symbols of national authority. The New York view, through which all network news is percolated, tends to stress the need for reform and change; the geographic contours of network news tend to focus attention on a few metropolitan areas which have been the drumhead for causes and movements challenging the status quo; the need to create national news tends to amplify local problems into apparent national crises; and the action requisite tends to direct the camera towards violent confrontations. Not all stories, or all newsmen, follow these underlying directions, but the attraction is sufficient so as to produce a unique version of national news on television.

It should be stressed that this version of the news is not the product of a group of willful, biased, or political men. To the contrary, in the studies of the network news operations I have made in 1968-1970 and in 1973, I observed correspondents, producers, news editors, and executives constantly struggling to escape the gravity of the organizational tilts but, with a few striking exceptions, being unable to prevent stories from flowing in these consistent directions. During this five year period, producers, editors, and anchormen came and went at the three networks (with the exception of Cronkite), and yet the version of news they presented remained fairly constant. To understand the persistence of this version, I submit, it is more important to understand the structure—and leanings—of the networks than the individual preferences of the newsmen.