
idly. The front-page editor and news anchor, Crichton says, are like the old-fashioned telephone operator: "If you've ever had the experience of being somewhere where your call was placed for you, you know how exasperating that is. It's faster and easier to dial it yourself."

Attempting to maintain their audience, the news media use catch phrases and glitzy graphics, endlessly repackaging information as merely another form of entertainment (designed chiefly to get people to look at advertisements). But "news isn't entertainment—it's a necessity," Crichton writes. Information now has value, which is why consumers are willing to pay extra for things such as on-line computer services.

Crichton thinks this technological revolution will have a profound impact on the character of public debate in America. Today, the news media vastly oversimplify complex issues and polarize political debate. On the computer networks that already exist, according to Crichton, the level of debate is far more nuanced and sophisticated. The spread of these networks will end the news media's monopoly and gradually create a more informed public. "I will have artificial intelligence agents roaming the databases, downloading the stuff I am interested in, and assembling for me a front page, or a nightly news show, that addresses my interests," writes Crichton. "How will Peter Jennings or MacNeil-Lehrer or a newspaper compete with that?"

The Bad News Bias

"Bad News Bears" by Robert Lichter and Ted J. Smith, in *Media Critic* (1993), P.O. Box 762, Bedminster, N.J. 07921.

Watching almost any batch of network television newscasts in recent years, one would come away feeling that the nation's economy was poised on the brink of ruin.

In fact, contend Lichter, codirector of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, and Smith, associate professor of mass communications at Virginia Commonwealth University, the standard TV news portrait of the

economy is grossly distorted. Their case rests on two studies that examined more than 17,000 network news stories aired since 1982. Between 1982 and 1987, according to a study by the Washington-based Media Institute, more than 85 percent of the 5,300 economic news stories that had a discernible "spin" had a "negative tone," even though these were good—and at times spectacularly good—years for the U.S. economy. Indeed, the networks seemed to grow gloomier as economic conditions improved. The ratio of negative to positive stories on the economy increased from five to one in 1982 to seven to one in 1987.

The bad news bias continued into the 1990s. Analyzing 2,100 sound bites aired between October 1990 and May 1993, Lichter's organization found that 86 percent came from naysayers. The networks turned even good news into bad. When housing prices rose during the 1980s, they focused on people who were priced out of the market; when prices began to drop in the 1990s, the cameras turned to homeowners whose equity declined.

On television, the authors note, "the complexities of economic affairs are often reduced to simple and familiar stories about villains, victims, and heroes." Rather than report on, say, the complex economic realities of the computer industry—much less hard economic data—network news focuses on a single laid-off IBM worker.

The simplification and melodrama of economic reporting foster the illusion that the average citizen is somehow a victim of careless government policies. The networks' critical eye is nonpartisan. President George Bush may have lost the 1992 election in part because "many people thought [economic] conditions were worse than they were," as political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset observed, but the same overwhelming network negativism has afflicted his successor.

Lichter and Smith think that this relentless carping springs from journalists' assumption that never-ending prosperity is "a kind of birthright enjoyed by every American." Any departure from this norm produces charges of failure and malfeasance as well as "demands that someone set things right." Prosperity, as

journalists see it, "is only to be expected," and thus barely rates a mention.

The Hidden Congress

"Decline and Fall of Congressional News" by Stephen Hess, in *Society* (Jan.–Feb. 1994), Rutgers–The State University, New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

Once a staple of front pages and nightly news shows, regular coverage of Congress is now scant, especially on TV. CNN is now the only TV news organization that has correspondents covering both the House and the Senate full-time, observes Hess, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution.

One reason for the change, he says, is a shift in power within many "mainstream" news organizations. Key decisions about what gets covered now are often made, not by a bureau chief in Washington, but by home-office editors, to whom the intricacies of the lawmaking process seem a good deal less fascinating.

The definition of "news" also has changed. In 1965, 84 percent of the front-page stories in the *New York Times* during one week were about government and politics; in 1992, only 55 percent

were. The trend has been much the same in TV news. Now, developments in business, health, and culture seem just as newsworthy as Washington doings.

Advances in technology also have had an impact. "When Washington had the only coaxial cable that fed directly into the TV networks' New York headquarters, often more than 60 percent of the items on the evening news programs originated in the capital," Hess points out. Satellites, tape, and portable equipment helped change that in the early 1980s.

At first, the use of satellites increased TV's focus on the nation's capital, as some local stations inaugurated their own Washington coverage. Membership in the Senate Radio and Television Gallery jumped from 750 in 1979 to 2,300 by 1987. Before long, however, many Washington bureaus were shut down. As one news director explained, "Government news is boring."

The problem with the decline of congressional coverage, Hess says, is that while the "boring" regular business of the nation's legislature gets less attention, any hints of official corruption draw throngs of reporters. The result: a distorted picture that suggests to the public that Capitol Hill is little more than the capital of scandal.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The Crackup of Philosophy

"American Philosophy Today" by Nicholas Rescher, in *Review of Metaphysics* (June 1993), Catholic Univ. of America, Washington, D.C. 20064.

Early in the 20th century, American philosophy was dominated by a handful of giants—men such as William James, John Dewey, and George Santayana—and their writings affected the thinking of people in many walks of life. For better or worse, observes Rescher, of the University of Pittsburgh, American philosophy today has become "democratized"—and the influence outside the academy of its leading thinkers is virtually nil.

Books such as John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* (1971), Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror*

of Nature (1979), and W. V. Quine's *Word and Object* (1960) have produced "large ripples" in the pond of academic philosophy, Rescher acknowledges. But even the most influential philosopher is, these days, just "another—somewhat larger—fish in a very populous sea." The odd fish without approved credentials is not even welcome to join in the swim. A Spinoza or a Nietzsche, he says, "would find it near to impossible to get a hearing in the North American philosophical world of today."

The number of academic philosophers (and, thanks partly to the "publish or perish" ethic, most professors of philosophy can claim to be not just teachers of philosophy but "philosophers") has grown enormously. Membership in the American Philosophical Association has in-