



Courtesy of Joseph D. Shein.

If this pensive young woman in Alfred Leslie's Seven A.M. News (1978) is an average American consumer of news, she does not favor "news as entertainment," or TV news over print, or newspapers that strain to cater only to her whims. Surveys indicate that she just wants the news

The News Media

Probably no business in America, of late, has seemed so prone to upheaval as the multibillion-dollar "news business," with the prospective expansion of "electronic home delivery" of news via broadcast and cable, the death or illness of major newspapers, and the surge of media self-criticism. In this special survey, Lawrence Lichty concludes that TV is probably *not* most Americans' chief source of news; Leo Bogart describes the newspaper's changing character; James Boylan analyzes journalists' self-perceptions in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate; and A. E. Dick Howard examines the health of the First Amendment.

VIDEO VERSUS PRINT

by Lawrence W. Lichty

So far, 1982 has been a good year for news, much of it bad news, but highly "visual" news—anguished faces last spring of the relatives of victims of El Salvador's civil war, clouds of grey-black smoke billowing over the high-rises of West Beirut during the Israelis' summer-long attacks, Iraqi tanks clanking into action against the Ayatolla Khomeini's invading revolutionary youths, the demurely smiling face of the Princess of Wales with the newborn Prince William, Solidarity's street demonstrations in Warsaw, Margaret Thatcher sending off the Gurkhas and Scots Guards aboard the QE 2 to humble the Argentines in the Falkland Islands.

For Americans, it was news from far away, a distraction, perhaps, from economic troubles at home.

Television's handling of this "news," more than ever, seemed to fit Walter Lippmann's 60-year-old description of the workings of the press: "It is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode then another out of darkness into vision. . . ."

The three television networks, competing for ratings, exaggerated this chronic tendency, presenting the news, when possible, as one melodrama after another; they were often far more

compelling melodramas than those television could offer as regular entertainment. No star of any TV series was as vivid in 1982 as Yasser Arafat or Menachem Begin or as jaunty as Ronald Reagan, whose aides made no secret of their belief that the 40th President could—and should—play to the TV producers' need for "visuals" and avoid the newspapers' traditional preoccupation with words.

By coincidence, this big news year has also been a time of accelerating change, pushed by economics and technology, in the newspaper business. As suburban papers prospered, big city newspapers, here and there, continued to die or falter. The Philadelphia *Bulletin* folded in January. The *New York Daily News*, the nation's biggest big-city daily (1.48 million weekday circulation), was offered for sale in December 1981 by its parent *Chicago Tribune*; then last spring, the *Tribune* dropped its sale plans, but the *Daily News* still may lose more than \$20 million this year. Among the three major New York City dailies, only the *Times* makes a profit.

The Dog and the Tail

Unsure of the future, a dozen newspaper managements, from the *New York Times* to Times-Mirror, Knight-Ridder, and Copley, are starting or testing "teletext" or home "videotex" services in New Jersey, Florida, California, and elsewhere. (Such electronic services use cable or telephone lines to send textual matter and graphics to a TV screen at the viewer's behest.) The *Washington Post* in early 1982 disclosed plans to provide local news and advertising programming for all cable TV system operators in the metropolitan Washington area. And publishers lobbied vigorously in Washington against moves to permit AT&T to send news via telephone lines into homes.

Yet a 1982 study of videotex usage in Britain found that most customers were usually seeking specific pieces of data (e.g., 60 percent regularly looked up classified listings; nearly half looked up stock exchange information at least every other day). "News" was not the main attraction. Indeed, as a Canadian operator observed, with videotex, information is "the tail not the dog. The dog is [electronic] shopping and banking."

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Drawing by Mort Gerberg. © 1977 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

"And now here's Andy to horse around with the news." *Local newscasts—which "deliver" audiences to later network news and other shows—provide as much as half of a TV station's profit. During the 1970s, "news doctors" prescribed such devices as "happy talk" to boost ratings.*

The biggest expansion in news has come in television. TV news is the child of radio news, and of the Paramount newsreels of the 1930s and '40s; it is not the child, or, in its basic attitudes even a very near relative, of the newspapers. In their rivalry for audiences (ratings) which govern TV advertising revenues, the producers of the evening news shows—local or national—can never relax; when Walter Cronkite retired as an anchorman in 1981, the question for CBS was: Could his successor, Dan Rather, officiate over the news as well, i.e., draw the most viewers? The answer was yes, but all three networks were changing their style and on-camera personalities in late 1981 and early 1982.

The spread of cable television (to one-third of all U.S. television households) prompted Ted Turner last January to start Cable News Network 2, a 24-hour Atlanta-based TV news service, in a direct challenge to the networks. The networks responded by announcing plans to present news from 2 A.M. to 7 A.M.—when 4.9 million TV sets are in use.

This impending surge in broadcast news seems only to confirm the ascendancy of video. Already, the TV viewer in a medium-to-large-sized city faces no shortage of "news." In

Washington, D.C., for example, the city-dweller has only one full-fledged local daily, the *Washington Post*, but he can watch "news" for nine and one-half hours each weekday, including two stretches of three hours (6 A.M. to 9 A.M., 5 P.M. to 8 P.M.). Another five and one-half hours of news is available via Cable News Network 2 from Baltimore's station WMAR-TV.

All told, in the Washington area, there are more than 14 hours of programming—network, syndicated, and local—on three network stations, two independent stations, and PBS's station. If one includes such programs as the PBS *Nightly Business Report*, as well as the lighter *Phil Donahue* and *Hour Magazine*, the total comes to 24 hours.

No Time for Facts

What is striking, of course, is how thin and how much the same all this video news is. On the three network evening news shows, for example, there is about 50 percent duplication of major stories, far more duplication than exists on, say, the front pages of the San Francisco *Chronicle* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, leaving aside strictly local items.

The half-hour evening news show has room for 17 or 18 items in 22 minutes (commercials eat up eight minutes). Eight or nine of these items are film snippets lasting from a few seconds to one and a half minutes; the rest are the anchorman's brief reports written by anonymous network writers from the news dispatches coming in over the studio teletype from Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI). In Washington or the Mideast, the TV correspondent, as NBC's Douglas Kiker put it, is "making little movies," directing a camera crew, scribbling the words he will utter to give significance to the film. He is no "reporter," in the sense that reporters for AP, UPI, and newspapers are. He has little time for fact-finding, and little time on the air to present any facts he does find.

The requirements of TV news do not, therefore, impel ABC, CBS, and NBC to deploy large numbers of information-seekers—although the logistics and technology require a sizable supporting staff. In Washington, locale of 40 percent of CBS News's stories and (not coincidentally) site of its largest bureau, there are 200 CBS News employees. Of these, only 25 are reporters, for both radio and TV—versus 35 Washington reporters for the *New York Times* and 100 for the AP. In Manhattan, station WCBS-TV, like its local rivals, has no such creature as a City Hall reporter, wise in the ways of Mayor Koch and the Board of Estimate; the station usually sends a reporter and camera crew

to City Hall only when the AP ticker indicates in advance the probability of "good film."

Overseas, CBS has only 23 full-time correspondents, versus 32 for the *New York Times*, 36 for *Time*, eight for the *Baltimore Sun*, 19 for the Knight-Ridder papers—and about 300 for the AP, whose operatives and those of rival UPI supply most of the news that, without attribution, Dan Rather (like his ABC and NBC counterparts) reads off a teleprompter every weekday evening.

Television, as *Newsweek* columnist Jane Bryant Quinn observed, gives us "the faces," the voices, the scenery—albeit in highly selective bits and pieces. Its infrequent documentaries draw relatively small audiences but occasionally strike political sparks. At its best, TV provides us with a live view of the great spectacles: a space shot, a presidential inaugural, the national political conventions, the 1973–74 Watergate hearings (when the cameras were allowed to run without interruption), the World Series.

Thus, the further expansion of "video," even as it promises greater diffusion of the same news, does not add greatly to the array of information available to the public. Yet "electronic home delivery" has persuaded many analysts that the "news" in print, as it has evolved over the past 150 years in America, is all but dead. (Rare is the major publisher who has not invested in TV or cable, or both.) Predicts James Martin, author of *Future Trends in Telecommunications* (1977): By the early 1990s, there may be only a "minor intellectual press, a few picture newspapers for low-IQ readers, and some local newspapers," along with a few news magazines. Citing television's pre-eminence at the Dupont Awards ceremony this year, NBC's anchorman Tom Brokaw spoke of the young people who "have come to rely on us as their primary and only source of news."

False Assumptions

Indeed, the conventional wisdom, widely echoed, is that Americans get most of their news from Brokaw and his colleagues in television. This assertion stems largely from surveys by the Roper Organization since 1959, indicating that TV became pre-eminent in home entertainment in 1960, and became adults' primary source of news in 1970. The question Roper has asked his respondents since 1959 is "Where do you usually get most of your news about what's going on in the world today?" In 1981, 39 percent specified television only, 22 percent newspaper only, and 20 percent TV and newspapers. Respondents were permitted multiple answers. When all were tallied, 64 percent

**USAGE OF INFORMATION
MEDIA, 1981
(percent of 'audience'
using particular
source)**

AUDIENCE	ANY NEWSPAPER	2 OR MORE NEWSPAPERS	TIME	READER'S DIGEST	ALL-NEWS RADIO	ALL TV (9+ DAILY)	CBS EVENING HOURS	LATE NIGHT LOCAL TV NEWS**	% OF POPULATION
Men	69	13	15	23	10	20	9	26	47
Women	67	10	11	26	7	20	10	27	53
Ages 18-24	59	9	14	17	5	15	7	22	18
25-34	63	9	16	22	7	14	6	22	23
35-44	71	12	15	25	10	14	7	27	16
45-54	75	13	13	29	10	19	7	29	14
55-64	75	16	10	30	11	25	14	30	14
65 +	69	13	7	29	9	36	17	34	15
College graduates	79	17	27	27	12	11	8	26	16
High school graduates	69	11	11	26	8	19	9	26	38
No high school	53	6	4	14	7	33	12	29	15
Professional/Technical*	78	16	26	27	10	10	7	24	11
Managers/Administrators	75	18	24	32	13	11	7	26	8
Clerical/Sales	70	12	14	25	9	11	7	23	15
Craftsmen/Foremen	67	11	10	21	10	13	6	25	8
Others employed*	63	10	9	20	6	19	8	23	19
Not employed*	65	10	10	26	8	30	12	31	39
Cities (500,000+)	66	12	13	17	16	20	8	28	15
Suburban	70	13	15	25	11	18	8	26	43
Rural	63	9	9	27	3	23	12	24	26

*"Professional/Technical" includes accountants, engineers, lawyers, librarians, teachers, artists, and entertainers, etc. "Others employed" includes skilled workers, farmers, service workers, and laborers. "Not employed" includes housewives, retirees.

**Network affiliate late evening news program.

Source: Simmons Market Research Bureau Inc., 1981.

cited TV, 44 percent newspapers, 18 percent radio, five percent magazines, and five percent "another person."

From all this, it seems clear that most people now *think* that they get most of their news from TV. As we shall see, this is almost certainly not true, even though Presidents, Senators, and other politicians (to say nothing of TV journalists and TV critics)

have come to act on the assumption that it *is* true.

Those in the business of figuring out “audience exposure” to advertising messages have developed a number of surveys that give a far clearer picture of what sources Americans draw on for news and information. Simmons Market Research Bureau, based in Manhattan, does annual studies on “exposure” of Americans to various media.

Some 1981 Simmons data:*

¶ More than two-thirds of U.S. adults (68 percent) read at least part of some newspaper every day. Twelve percent of all adults read two or more newspapers a day.

¶ Fewer than one-third of U.S. adults watch TV news, local or national, on a given day.

¶ About 31 percent of adults read *Time* or *Newsweek* or *U.S. News & World Report*. (One-fourth of all adults read *Reader's Digest*.)

¶ About 18 percent of adult Americans listen to one of the nation's 90 all-news radio stations as often as once a week, with the peak listening period being early in the morning.

Did TV Lose the War?

Other data suggest that TV is far from a dominant source of news. The number of American adults watching the three week-day network evening newscasts on a given night is very large (50 million), as is the audience for *Dallas* (47 million). But the audience for TV news fluctuates. It is far more fickle than the audience for newspapers or magazines. Slightly more than half of the nation's TV households watch one of the network evening news programs at least once in the course of a month. But only *one percent* of all 78.3 million American TV households watches CBS's Dan Rather as often as four or five nights a week, and Rather presides over the nation's most popular network evening news show. The average for households that watch his program at all is five broadcasts per month.

In short, the widely accepted notion that Mr. Rather and his rivals each command a vast, devoted nightly following seems far-fetched.

A related assumption, tenaciously held by both television's critics and its champions, is that the visual impact of TV nightly news “turned the American people against the Vietnam war”

*The 1981 Simmons report is based on more than 15,000 interviews, but uses smaller samples for certain segments of the 40 volumes of data. The Simmons material is used here with permission.

AND THAT'S THE WAY IT IS

In The Right Place at the Right Time (1982), Public Broadcasting System's Canadian-born Robert MacNeil looks back at his globe-trotting days with the BBC and NBC and explains what is distinctive about TV reporting:

In most of the stories television cares to cover there is always "the right bit," the most violent, the most bloody, the most pathetic, the most tragic, the most wonderful, the most awful moment. Getting the effective "bit" [on film] is what television news is all about. It is the bit you always recognize when you've got it and which you will go through just about anything to get because it means success and missing it consistently means you'd better look for a job other than a TV correspondent.

And to what purpose are thousands of men and women scrambling over the earth, sometimes at great risk, to get that bit? So that millions of people may be distracted for a moment from their own domestic concerns to witness another human being in great distress? To feel what? A moment of compassion? A second of titillation? A wisp of vicarious fear?

Does it not ultimately blunt and cheapen all those natural feelings to have them so often artificially stimulated? Does it not make human pity itself a banality? Does that not force competitive television producers to turn the screw a trifle harder each time to make the sensation fresher, to unbanalize it? Yes.

And what is the ultimate purpose of all this activity? The television journalists, like journalists everywhere, want to tell stories. The networks want to sell deodorant.

And that's the way it is.

and, later, pushed Richard M. Nixon out of the White House. Yet there is no empirical evidence that TV news "shapes" mass public opinion—or that any news medium does.*

What "the news" probably influences is not *how* we think but what we think and talk *about*. But few subjects get much media attention for very long. When they do, politicians and other opinion-leaders may feel impelled to react. Even here, direct links between "news coverage" per se and the evolution of political decisions are not easy to establish.

Overall, the evening TV news audience is disproportion-

*See John E. Mueller's *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (Wiley, 1973). Critic Michael Arlen reminded us in the Aug. 16, 1982 *New Yorker* that "what a television viewer of the Vietnam war [usually] saw . . . was a nightly, stylized, generally distanced overview of a disjointed conflict which was composed mainly of scenes of helicopters landing, tall grasses blowing in the helicopter wind, American soldiers fanning out across a hillside . . . with now and then (on the soundtrack) a far-off ping or two, and now and then (as a visual grand finale) a column of dark billowing smoke a half a mile away, invariably described as a burning Viet Cong ammo dump."

ately older (especially over 65), female (53 percent), and less well educated than are newspaper readers or the population as a whole. Two types of Americans emerge as the keenest viewers of TV news. One happens to see a lot of TV news largely because he watches a lot of television: The news is only a small part of his daily fare. This viewer is somewhat more likely to have had only a high school education, to be in a clerical, sales, or service job, and to live in the South. The other, far less common TV news watcher, is the younger, better-educated American adult, a heavy *reader* of news, who watches a lot of news and information but not much else on TV.

Few newspapers or magazines reap the profits of TV's three network evening news programs (\$28 million in 1980 for CBS alone), and no print journalist matches the celebrity or the salaries of the self-assured, well-coifed men and women of television. Yet there is, as Simmons and others make clear, no sign that "video"—in its various forms—is about to eliminate its less exciting print competitors as sources of information. News as entertainment, as spectacle, as distraction—that was, to varying degrees, the role of the "yellow" press in the early 1900s, of *Life* and *Look* during the '40s and '50s, and of the *New York Post* in 1982. Here TV, already the distraction of the very young and the very old, has achieved pre-eminence. TV news is another show, and not a very habit-forming one at that.

What seems obvious is that most American adults get the "news" from many sources. And judging from the "exposure" data, most of what they get every day still comes from newspapers. This is not difficult to understand. Except for the illiterate, newspapers are easy and efficient: Scores of items can be scanned, selected, put aside, retrieved, pored over, even reread. This process occurs at the reader's convenience, anytime, anyplace. It takes far less time than the 60 to 90 minutes it takes to sit through the bits and pieces of the evening's local and national TV news shows, or to scan and select information from a computer. Barring a collapse in literacy or curiosity, or a total neglect of their responsibilities on the part of publishers, or a permanent walkout by the nation's newspaper delivery boys, Americans who want "the news" will probably continue to rely primarily on print for decades to come.