

**PRESS & TELEVISION**

*How TV Covered  
The Vietnam War*

"The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media" by Daniel C. Hallin, in *The Journal of Politics* (Feb. 1984), Dept. of Political Science, Univ. of Fla., Gainesville, Fla. 32611.

American television journalists turned against the U.S. government during the 1960s, "lost" the war in Vietnam, and have been systematically undermining public trust in American institutions ever since.

That view enjoys wide currency today. But Hallin, a political scientist at the University of California at San Diego, found little support for it in a survey of 779 TV network news reports on the war broadcast between August 1965 and the January 1973 cease-fire.

Hallin did find marked changes in TV news coverage of the war after the Communists' surprise 1968 Tet Offensive—a costly military setback for Hanoi but a key victory in its psychological war with Washington. Before Tet, for example, positive TV news assessments of U.S. prospects in Vietnam outnumbered negative ones by 10 to 1; afterward, the ratio was roughly 1 to 1. But, overall, such editorializing by TV newsmen was rare: Only eight percent of the news stories that Hallin surveyed contained any discernable commentary at all.

There was also a shift in the *kinds* of stories that TV producers put on the screen. After Tet, morale problems among U.S. troops and dissent at home began to receive much more attention. In part, Hallin suggests, the television newscasts were simply "mirroring" fresh developments,



*The impact of Tet: A front-page editorial in the Washington Daily News described the "bold, massive" offensive as "a shocker."*

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not challenging Washington's policies. And in fact, TV reporters preparing stories on the Vietnam War (excluding antiwar protest in the United States) relied just as heavily on government spokesmen after Tet as they had earlier and rarely questioned their reliability.

Beyond mirroring changing events, Hallin contends, newsmen reflected the dissolution of consensus, particularly among national leaders, behind the U.S. war effort. As Max Frankel of the *New York Times* explained: "As protest moved from the left groups, the antiwar groups, into the pulpits, into the Senate . . . it naturally picked up coverage. . . . Because we're an Establishment institution, and whenever your natural constituency changes, then naturally you will too." Indeed, in Hallin's sample of TV news segments on domestic dissent after Tet, 49 percent of *all* criticisms of U.S. policy were attributed to public officials, chiefly U.S. senators and congressmen.

In sum, Hallin argues, television coverage of Vietnam changed not because newsmen were suddenly at odds with their government, but because the nation's political leadership itself was increasingly divided.

### *The Woes of The Black Press*

"The Black Press: A Victim of Its Own Crusade?" by Courtland Milloy, in *The Washington Journalism Review* (June 1984), 2233 Wisconsin Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007.

During much of its history, the greatest preoccupation of the black press was the fight for civil rights. Now, the economics of survival is foremost in the minds of black publishers.

"Since the first black newspapers appeared on the scene in 1827," reports *Washington Post* columnist Milloy, "more than 4,000 have been published. Only 300 exist today, with an estimated combined circulation of about six million." Only three cities (New York, Chicago, and Atlanta) sustain daily black newspapers; many notable black papers are weeklies or biweeklies, such as the weekly *New York Amsterdam News* (circulation: 90,000). The majority of the papers are "service publications" that feature local news and personalities and are given away free at supermarkets and drugstores.

The future of black newspapers is in doubt because their combined advertising revenues are slim—about \$3 million annually, or just 15 percent of all advertising dollars collected by the black communications media. Milloy explains: "It is the top 20 percent of the black population—white-collar blacks earning \$40,000 and up—that accounts for 45 percent of the total black income, and more than half of that segment shows little interest in black news publications." Advertisers look to black radio, magazines, and other media to reach these prime customers. (Thanks partly to the civil-rights gains that the black newspapers helped bring about, white-owned dailies now give much more coverage to blacks.)

Some black publishing executives believe there is still a need for a national black newspaper. The much-praised *National Leader*, a weekly