
PRESS & TELEVISION

*TV and the
Elections*

"Political Campaigns: TV Power Is a Myth" by Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure, in *Psychology Today* (July 1976), P.O. Box 2990, Boulder, Colo. 80302.

Patterson and McClure puncture some fashionable assumptions about television's influence in American elections. The authors, both political scientists at Syracuse University, analyzed every televised political commercial and network weekday evening newscast during the 1972 Nixon-McGovern contest. They also interviewed more than 600 voters—at the start, midway, and end of the campaign to determine television's impact. Conclusions: In 1972, the networks ignored major issues and the candidates' personal qualifications for the Presidency, devoting most of their film coverage to campaign hoopla.

For example, during the last two months of the campaign ABC, CBS, and NBC each devoted a cumulative total of about five minutes of evening news time to facts about George McGovern's leadership and personal experience, good or bad. And as a three-network average, only 3 percent of the available news minutes were given to the two candidates' highly dissimilar stands on such matters as inflation, welfare, and Vietnam.

In contrast, paid political commercials did convey information to voters on issues, sometimes to the detriment of the sponsoring candidate. But the authors conclude that most voters are immune to political TV advertising aimed solely at "image-building." Those already committed to a candidate because of party affiliation or ideology cannot be converted through television. And, most voters who are undecided 60 days before election day ultimately base their choice on long perceived self-interest, rather than late exposure to a media blitz.

*The Newspapers'
Suburban Problem*

"The Bad News in Store for the *New York Times*" by Chris Welles, in *New York* (Apr. 12, 1976), 755 Second Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

Economic analysis of the press is rare. Welles, a *New York* contributing editor, notes the eroding markets of metropolitan newspapers (the public's broadest source of news) and singles out the prestigious *New York Times*, which faces "inescapable long-term contraction."

Even more than other big city papers, the once-complacent *Times* has suffered from the steady exodus of middle-class readers, retail advertisers, and corporate employers to the suburbs. During 1970-75, the paper's advertising lineage dropped from 77 million to 69 million; daily

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circulation from 908,500 to 828,000; net pre-tax income from \$19.7 million to \$4.6 million. Although the *Times* is read in 27 percent of Manhattan's households, it now reaches only 12 percent of the homes in the suburbs, where growing local media have wooed away many former *Times* loyalists. Moreover, many major national advertisers, like General Foods, have switched to television, further weakening the *Times*—and other urban newspapers.

The New York Times Company's profitable subsidiaries—magazines, radio stations, and Florida newspapers—account for 76 percent of its profits, and keep the corporation going; overall profits are expected to rise this year. New suburban editions are underway. Over the long haul, Welles sees “repackaging” the *Times* as a nationally distributed, elite paper, competing with the rich *Wall Street Journal* and the news magazines, as a possible, albeit risky, solution. But for all good urban papers, he indicates, the shift of the “economic center of gravity from city to suburbs” remains an unpublicized, long-range threat to the nation's quality news coverage.

No News Is Good News?

“California 1974: The Browning of Campaign Coverage” by Mary Ellen Leary, in *Columbia Journalism Review* (July–Aug. 1976), 601 Journalism Bldg., Columbia University, New York, N.Y. 10027.

California television stations virtually ignored the 1974 gubernatorial contest between Democrat Edmund G. Brown, Jr. and his underdog Republican challenger, Houston Flournoy. Political reporter Leary discloses that six major television stations in four principal metropolitan areas of California devoted just 2 percent (6 out of 257 hours) of their total news time from September 4 to the November 5 election to the campaign, and one-third of that coverage was provided by one station (KNBC–Los Angeles).

Broadcasters happily went along with Brown's decision to avoid television exposure and close questioning on sensitive campaign issues (the death penalty, victimless crime, marijuana). Brown reluctantly agreed to debate Flournoy, but only on condition that the two sign a formal agreement limiting broadcast coverage of their joint appearances. The agreement stipulated no full-length broadcast of the first debate. Four of the other five debates could be shown in full only in one area and only on a single, designated station. As a result, only one debate was shown statewide and the others were telecast by smaller stations in areas outside major population centers. Radio reproduction was prohibited and television news reports were limited to “normal news coverage” (two-minute excerpts, at most).

Why did no commercial broadcaster protest? Because California television managers abhor political stories as inherently dull and bad for ratings, Leary charges; television distorted the campaign and served to erode, rather than support, the democratic process.