

Spiro T Agnew, "Television News Coverage," a speech delivered on November 13, 1969, in Des Moines, Iowa

Tonight I want to discuss the importance of the television news medium to the American people. No nation depends more on the intelligent judgment of its citizens. No medium has a more profound influence over public opinion. Nowhere in our system are there fewer checks on vast power. So, nowhere should there be more conscientious responsibility exercised than by the news media. The question is, "Are we demanding enough of our television news presentations?" "And are the men of this medium demanding enough of themselves?"

Monday night a week ago, President Nixon delivered the most important address of his Administration, one of the most important of our decade. His subject was Vietnam. My hope, as his at that time, was to rally the American people to see the conflict through to a lasting and just peace in the Pacific. For 32 minutes, he reasoned with a nation that has suffered almost a third of a million casualties in the longest war in its history.

When the President completed his address -- an address, incidentally, that he spent weeks in the preparation of -- his words and policies were subjected to instant analysis and querulous criticism. The audience of 70 million Americans gathered to hear the President of the United States was inherited by a small band of network commentators and self-appointed analysts, the majority of whom expressed in one way or another their hostility to what he had to say.

It was obvious that their minds were made up in advance. Those who recall the fumbling and groping that followed President Johnson's dramatic disclosure of his intention not to seek another term have seen these men in a genuine state of nonpreparedness. This was not it.

One commentator twice contradicted the President's statement about the exchange of correspondence with Ho Chi Minh. Another challenged the President's abilities as a politician. A third asserted that the President was following a Pentagon line. Others, by the expressions on their faces, the tone of their questions, and the sarcasm of their responses, made clear their sharp disapproval.

[...]

Now every American has a right to disagree with the President of the United States and to express publicly that disagreement. But the President of the United States has a right to communicate directly with the people who elected him, and the people of this country have the right to make up their own minds and form their own opinions about a Presidential address without having a President's words and thoughts characterized through the prejudices of hostile critics before they can even be digested.

When Winston Churchill rallied public opinion to stay the course against Hitler's Germany, he didn't have to contend with a gaggle of commentators raising doubts about whether he was reading public opinion right, or whether Britain had the stamina to see the war through. When President Kennedy rallied the nation in the Cuban missile crisis, his address to the people was not chewed over by a roundtable of critics who disparaged the course of action he'd asked America to follow.

The purpose of my remarks tonight is to focus your attention on this little group of men who not only enjoy a right of instant rebuttal to every Presidential address, but, more importantly, wield a free hand in selecting, presenting, and interpreting the great issues in our nation. First, let's define that power.

At least 40 million Americans every night, it's estimated, watch the network news. Seven million of them view A.B.C., the remainder being divided between N.B.C. and C.B.S. According to Harris polls and other studies, for millions of Americans the networks are the sole source of national and world news. In Will Roger's observation, what you knew was what you read in the newspaper. Today for growing millions of Americans, it's what they see and hear on their television sets.

Now how is this network news determined? A small group of men, numbering perhaps no more than a dozen anchormen, commentators, and executive producers, settle upon the 20 minutes or so of film and commentary that's to reach the public. This selection is made from the 90 to 180 minutes that may be available. Their powers of choice are broad.

They decide what 40 to 50 million Americans will learn of the day's events in the nation and in the world. We cannot measure this power and influence by the traditional democratic standards, for these men can create national issues overnight. They can make or break by their coverage and commentary a moratorium on the war. They can elevate men from obscurity to national prominence within a week. They can reward some politicians with national exposure and ignore others.

For millions of Americans the network reporter who covers a continuing issue -- like the ABM or civil rights -- becomes, in effect, the presiding judge in a national trial by jury.

[...]

Now what do Americans know of the men who wield this power? Of the men who produce and direct the network news, the nation knows practically nothing. Of the commentators, most Americans know little other than that they reflect an urbane and assured presence seemingly well-informed on every important matter. We do know that to a man these commentators and producers live and work in the

60 geographical and intellectual confines of Washington, D.C., or New York City, the latter of which
James Reston terms the most unrepresentative community in the entire United States.
Both communities bask in their own provincialism, their own parochialism.
[...]

The views of the majority of this fraternity do not -- and I repeat, not -- represent the views of America.
65 That is why such a great gulf existed between how the nation received the President's address and how
the networks reviewed it. Not only did the country receive the President's speech more warmly than
the networks, but so also did the Congress of the United States.
Yesterday, the President was notified that 300 individual Congressmen and 50 Senators of both
parties had endorsed his efforts for peace. As with other American institutions, perhaps it is time that
70 the networks were made more responsive to the views of the nation and more responsible to the
people they serve.

Now I want to make myself perfectly clear. I'm not asking for Government censorship or any other
kind of censorship. I am asking whether a form of censorship already exists when the news that 40
million Americans receive each night is determined by a handful of men responsible only to their
75 corporate employers and is filtered through a handful of commentators who admit to their own set of
biases.

The question I'm raising here tonight should have been raised by others long ago. They should have
been raised by those Americans who have traditionally considered the preservation of freedom of
speech and freedom of the press their special provinces of responsibility. They should have been raised
80 by those Americans who share the view of the late Justice Learned Hand that right conclusions are
more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues than through any kind of authoritative
selection. Advocates for the networks have claimed a First Amendment right to the same unlimited
freedoms held by the great newspapers of America.

But the situations are not identical. Where The New York Times reaches 800,000 people, N.B.C.
reaches 20 times that number on its evening news. [The average weekday circulation of the Times in
85 October was 1,012,367; the average Sunday circulation was 1,523,558.] Nor can the tremendous impact
of seeing television film and hearing commentary be compared with reading the printed page.
A decade ago, before the network news acquired such dominance over public opinion, Walter Lippman
spoke to the issue. He said there's an essential and radical difference between television and printing.
[...]

90 Now a virtual monopoly of a whole medium of communication is not something that democratic
people should blindly ignore. And we are not going to cut off our television sets and listen to the
phonograph just because the airways belong to the networks. They don't. They belong to the people. As
Justice Byron wrote in his landmark opinion six months ago, "It's the right of the viewers and
listeners, not the right of the broadcasters, which is paramount."

95 Now it's argued that this power presents no danger in the hands of those who have used it responsibly.
But as to whether or not the networks have abused the power they enjoy, let us call as our first witness,
former Vice President Humphrey and the city of Chicago. According to Theodore White, television's
intercutting of the film from the streets of Chicago with the "current proceedings on the floor of the
convention created the most striking and false political picture of 1968 -- the nomination of a man for
100 the American Presidency by the brutality and violence of merciless police."
[...]

Gresham's Law seems to be operating in the network news. Bad news drives out good news. The
irrational is more controversial than the rational. Concurrence can no longer compete with dissent.
[...]

105 A single, dramatic piece of the mosaic becomes in the minds of millions the entire picture. The
American who relies upon television for his news might conclude that the majority of American
students are embittered radicals; that the majority of black Americans feel no regard for their country;
that violence and lawlessness are the rule rather than the exception on the American campus.
We know that none of these conclusions is true.
[...]

110 Tonight I've raised questions. I've made no attempt to suggest the answers. The answers must come
from the media men. They are challenged to turn their critical powers on themselves, to direct their
energy, their talent, and their conviction toward improving the quality and objectivity of news
presentation.
[...]

115 It's time we questioned it in the hands of a small unelected elite. The great networks have
dominated America's airwaves for decades. The people are entitled a full accounting their stewardship