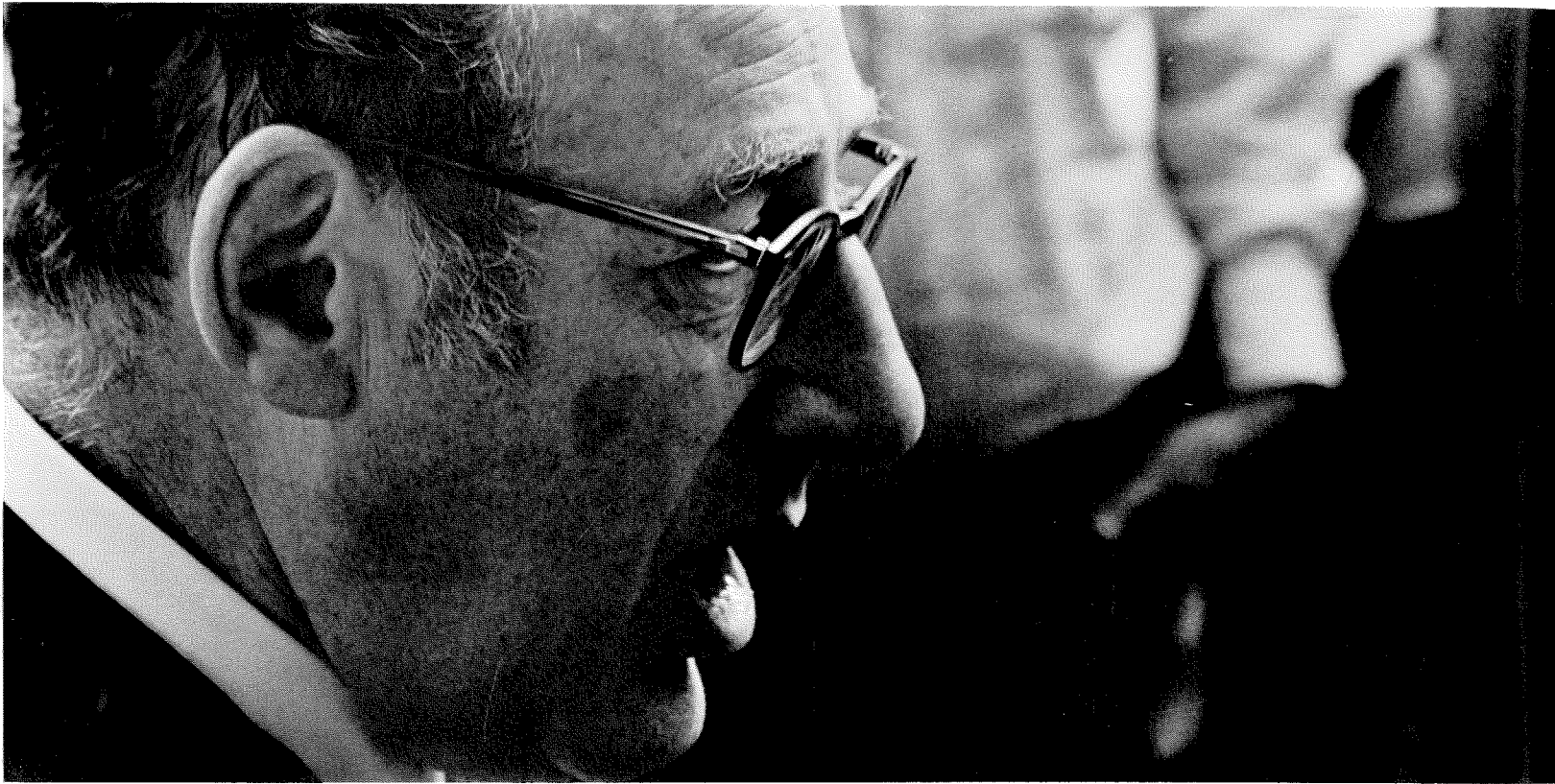


“Mr. Agnew and I share the view that television journalism leaves something to be desired. We are apparently in profound disagreement on our crying need for more, not less, interpretive reporting.”



Fred Friendly

When Spiro Agnew launched his surprise attack on the television networks in a Des Moines speech on November 13, he recalled how “Several years ago Fred Friendly, one of the pioneers of network news, wrote that its missing ingredients were conviction, controversy, and point of view.” Now, Agnew said sharply, “the networks have compensated with a vengeance.”

Friendly disagreed—publicly—in a talk sponsored by the YMCA at Caltech on November 21. Friendly served as

president of CBS News from 1964 to 1966. (He resigned after the network insisted on showing a fifth-run “I Love Lucy” episode instead of a Senate Vietnam hearing.) A partner of Edward R. Murrow’s for 12 years, Friendly is now the Edward R. Murrow Professor of Broadcast Journalism at Columbia University. He is also television consultant to the Ford Foundation. His talk on “Some Second Sober Thoughts on Vice President Agnew” was given while he was on the Caltech campus as a member of the Institute’s new visiting committee for humanities and social sciences. It stands as one of the most reasonable, and reasoned, of the many responses to the Agnew statement.

SOME SECOND SOBER THOUGHTS ON VICE PRESIDENT AGNEW

by Fred Friendly

In defending Vice President Agnew, one of the most fair-minded men in the United States Senate said, "It is the pig that is caught under the fence that squeals." The analogy may be partly accurate, but the question is who is stuck under the fence—the broadcast journalist or the Administration. Long ago, when broadcasting was fighting for its right to be responsible, Edward R. Murrow (then under attack) spoke words which might be paraphrased today: When the record is finally written, it will answer the question, who helped the American people better understand the dilemma of Vietnam—the Administration or the American journalist? History will, of course, decide that question. But I would suspect that in the recent struggle between the news media and the last two Administrations, the record has been with the journalists.

The American people are worried about Vietnam, race, and youth—the three crucial stories of our time. What the Vice President of the United States is attempting to do is create doubts in the minds of the American public about the motivation and background of those charged with the responsibility of trying to understand and explain these complicated and sensitive controversies.

When Mr. Agnew asks, "Are we demanding enough of our television news presentations?" he is certainly asking a question that others, including many inside the profession, have asked for a generation. For some the Vice President's questions seem to be about raised eyebrows, caustic remarks, and too much news analysis. For me it was really a speech about too little analysis. In fact, the Vice President may have provided a most valuable service in his Des Moines speech. He sharpened an issue that has been diffuse for too long, inviting us all to consider once again the state of broadcast journalism.

Mr. Agnew and I share the view that television journalism leaves something to be desired. We both fear the concentration of great power in a few individuals in the broadcasting industry. But we are apparently in profound disagreement not only on the nature of the networks' coverage of the President's Vietnam address but, even more importantly, on our crying need for more, not less, interpretive reporting. We require bolder, not blander,

illumination of the issues which divide men of reason.

Where Mr. Agnew went astray, in my view, was in his suggestion that the media ought somehow to be a conduit for the views of the government, or merely a reflector of public opinion. He was not the first, nor the last, high official to equate fairness and the possession of great power with the obligation of conformity.

The Vice President forgot history when he criticized ABC's journalistic enterprise in arranging for Ambassador Harriman to participate in the broadcast that followed Mr. Nixon's speech of November 3. I don't think President Kennedy rejoiced in having Senator Homer Capehart (R-Ind.) critique his Berlin crisis speech of 1961, or having Ladd Plumley, president of the National Chamber of Commerce, pursue him after his controversial 1962 speech on the state of the economy. How many times after a major address did President Johnson have to listen to the cutting remarks of Minority Leaders Dirksen and Ford? It was all part of the democratic process. After all, President Nixon had had prime time on all three networks, and a small measure of counterfire from the loyal opposition was hardly stacking the deck. Perhaps ABC should not be faulted for inviting Ambassador Harriman, an experienced negotiator with the Hanoi government, but rather for not asking him enough hard questions.

The Vice President doubts that President Kennedy, during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, had his words "chewed over by a roundtable of critics" immediately following his address to the nation. Would the Vice President believe Sander Vanocur, Ray Scherer, Frank McGee, David Schoenbrun, Roger Mudd, George Herman, Richard C. Hottelet, and Douglas Edwards? The date on that is October 22, 1962. The Vice President did not mention the Bay of Pigs, but certainly he must remember the news analysis and the GOP counterbriefings that followed. President Kennedy, who earlier had called upon broadcasters for self-censorship of the story in the national interest, later told the managing editors of *The New York Times* that revelation of the Bay of Pigs plan might have saved the nation "a colossal mistake."

A generation ago the most savage denunciations

“It took broadcasting several years during the McCarthy period to learn that merely holding up a mirror could be deceptive.”

ainst news analysis involved Senator Joseph McCarthy. In an inflammatory speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, in 1950 he declared there were 205 Communists in the State Department. Good news analysis, in fact good reporting, would have required that the journalist not just hold his mirror up to that startling event but that he report that the Senator had not one scrap of evidence to substantiate so extravagant a claim. It took broadcasting several years during the McCarthy period to learn that merely holding up a mirror to a riot or peace march today can be deceptive. It took the shame of the McCarthy period and the courage of an Ed Murrow to elevate broadcast journalism to a point where it could give responsible insights to issues such as those raised by the junior senator from Wisconsin.

For generations editors and students of journalism have tried to define news analysis and interpretive reporting. The late Ed Klauber, one of the architects of broadcast news standards, provided the most durable description. I have always kept it in my wallet, and I provide copies to all my students at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism:

What news analysts are entitled to do and should do is to elucidate and illuminate the news out of common knowledge, or special knowledge possessed by them or made available to them by this organization through its sources. They should point out the facts on both sides, show contradictions with the known record, and so on. They should bear in mind that in a democracy it is important that people not only should know but should understand, and it is the analyst's function to help the listener to understand, to weigh, and to judge, but not to do the judging for him.

If the Vice President would test the brief analyses of

November 3 against Mr. Klauber's criteria, I think he might agree that the correspondents did not cross the line in any attempt to make up the viewer's mind on a course of action. Mr. Agnew felt that the response to the President on November 3 was instant analysis. But it seems fair to remind the Vice President that the Administration had provided correspondents with advance copies of the speech for study earlier that evening, and there had been a persuasive White House briefing on the content. While the comments of the correspondents were clearly appropriate, my own personal opinion is that only those of Severeid and Marvin Kalb were probing and thoughtful. Kalb conceivably erred in not quoting pertinent paragraphs from the Ho Chi Minh letter which he believed were subject to different interpretation from that of the President.

Part of our Vietnam dilemma is that during the fateful August of 1964, when the Tonkin Gulf Resolution escalated the war, there was little senatorial debate worthy of the name, and there was a dramatic shortage of news analysis. If I am inclined to give the networks an A for effort and a B for performance the night of November 3, 1969, let me tell you that I give CBS News and myself a D for effort and performance on the night of August 4, 1964, when President Johnson, in his Tonkin Gulf speech, asked for a blank check on Vietnam.

In spite of the pleas of our Washington bureau, I made the decision to leave the air two minutes after the President concluded his remarks. I shall always believe that if journalism had done its job properly that night and in the days following, America might have been spared some of the agony that followed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. I am not saying that we should have, in any way, opposed the President's recommendations. But, to quote Klauber's doctrine of news analysis, if we had "out of common knowledge or special knowledge . . . pointed out the facts on both sides, shown contradictions with the known record . . ." we might have explained that after bombers would come bases; and after bases, troops to protect those bases; and after that, hundreds of thousands of more troops. Perhaps it is part of the record

“Here we are in 1969, with one leg on the moon and the other on earth, knee-deep in garbage. That’s going to require some news analysis.”

to note that Ed Murrow, who understood the value of interpretive journalism from his years as a practitioner and from his experience as director of the U.S. Information Agency, called minutes after the Johnson speech to castigate me and CBS for not providing essential analysis of the meaning of the event.

One key aspect of the Vice President’s speech did strike me as relating to the public interest as distinguished from the Administration’s political interest. This was his concern over the geographic and corporate concentration of power in broadcasting. Here he had the right target but a misdirected aim. His criticism of broadcasters for centralization and conformity better describes the commercial system and its single-minded interest in maximum ratings and profits.

To some extent, it may be true that geography—and working out of New York and Washington—affects the views of Dan Rather of Wharton, Texas; Howard K. Smith of Ferriday, Louisiana; Chet Huntley of Cardwell, Montana; David Brinkley of Wilmington, North Carolina; Bill Lawrence of Lincoln, Nebraska; and Eric Sevareid of Velva, North Dakota. But I, for one, simply do not buy the Vice President’s view that these responsible decision-makers in news broadcasting and the professionals who work with them are single-minded in their views or unchecked in their performance. There is an independent, sometimes awkward, complex of network executives, station managers, producers, and reporters whose joint production is the news we see. These represent a geographic, ethnic, and political profile nearly as far ranging as American society itself, with the tragic exception of blacks. The heads of the three major network news bureaus find their constituencies and their critics among the station managers they serve, the correspondents they employ, sponsors they lose, and in the wider public they please and occasionally disappoint. The news program emerges from a complicated system of argument, conflict, and compromise.

Beyond that, the record suggests that the best professionals recognize and acknowledge their limitations. Walter Cronkite was the first to admit that he erred in some of his reporting at the 1968 Democratic Convention. It was David Brinkley, admitting that no reporter could always be objective but only strive for fairness, who gave the Vice President a high-visibility target. In his commentary on November 3 Mr. Sevareid clearly noted that his views were “only the horseback opinion of one man, and I could be wrong.”

Yet, if the Vice President’s aim was wild, his target of concentrated power is valid and endures. The “truth” of commercial broadcasting is that it maximizes audiences by maximizing profits. This system minimizes the presentation of hard news and analysis, leading the broadcast journalists into occasional oversimplification in the interest of time and overdramatization in the interest of impact.

If such distorting tendencies do exist, and I believe they sometimes do, the proper measure is not to subject the performance of professional journalists to governmental direction or to majority approval. Rather, the task for government is to apply its leadership and authority to expand and diversify the broadcasting system and environment in which professional journalists work.

I do not see these public actions as inconsistent with or disruptive of the protections of the First Amendment. When Congress passed the Communications Act enabling the FCC to restrict a limited number of frequencies and channels to a limited number of license holders, everyone’s freedom was slightly qualified because everyone cannot simultaneously broadcast over the same television channel. The Communications Act insisted that license holders operate their franchise “in the public interest, convenience, and necessity.” By every definition I have ever heard, that includes responsible news coverage. Selling cancer-giving cigarettes and not providing enough news and public affairs programming is certainly ample reason for reconsidering a station’s license, and doing so has nothing to do with the First Amendment. The FCC would be fulfilling long-standing national policy by demanding more,

not less, public service broadcasting from the commercial systems, as well as by accelerating development of a publicly supported noncommercial alternative.

The Vice President quotes Walter Lippmann to make a case that the networks have hidden behind the First Amendment. He does not add that Mr. Lippman's point was that this demonstrated the necessity for just such a competitive, alternate system, which most commercial broadcasters today support. Mr. Lippmann has also said that "the theory of a free press is that the truth will emerge from free reporting and free discussion, not that it will be presented perfectly and instantly in any one account." Public television, with national interconnection due in part to a new ruling by the FCC, now has a chance to make that free reporting and free discussion 25 percent more widespread and more effective.

In the days since the Vice President's speech, I have been jarred by the strange coalition of Americans who find an assortment of reasons for identifying with parts of the Vice President's remarks. The mobilizers for peace don't like the way the peace march was covered or, as they put it, left uncovered. My Democratic friends point to the Humphrey defeat which they say happened at the hands of the television cameras in Chicago. My journalism students at Columbia feel that time after time the broadcasters of my generation misjudge the youth movement and the black movement. In the end I have had to plead for the students to believe in the integrity of a Cronkite, a Smith, a Brinkley, and in the professionalism of their producers—men like Les Midgley of CBS, Av Westin of ABC, and Wally Westfeldt of NBC. My defense was only partly successful, and this was an audience generally quite hostile to the main thrust of the Agnew attack. With sadness, I have painfully learned that the reservoir of goodwill that broadcast journalists could once rely on in time of crisis has now been partially dissipated.

Perhaps if the public knew that the broadcast newsman was fighting for longer news programs, fewer commercials, more investigative reporting, there might be a broader sense of identity.

The broadcast journalist knows how little news analysis appears on the air. Five or eight minutes after a major Presidential address is not interpretive journalism as much as it is time to be filled to the nearest half-hour or to the nearest commercial. He also knows that a half-hour minus six commercials is just not enough air time to present and analyze the news properly. Perhaps the

broadcast newsman of today can no longer afford the luxury of abdicating his role in a decision-making process that now so clearly affects his profession and his standards. He is a far better newsman than the public ever sees, and he has far more power to change the system than he and the public imagine.

For a long time the broadcasting companies have relied on the prestige of their news organizations to enhance their own corporate prestige, in fact, their very survival. The reputation of these newsmen is now at stake. They need to do their best, not their worst. They need to be seen at their most courageous, not to slip into timidity. This is not a time for public relations experts, although there will be a frantic search for a corporate line which will once again be asked to salvage the good name of broadcasting.

Television's battles will not be fought or won on the polemics of corporate handouts, First Amendment platitudes, or full-page ads. They will be won by what is on the air, and they will be lost by what is *not* on the air. It is later than we think, and we all have Mr. Agnew to thank for reminding us of that.

Here we stand, with the image orthicon tube, the wired city, and the satellite—the greatest tools of communication that civilization has ever known—while the second highest officeholder in the land implies that we should use them less. Here we are in 1969, Mr. Vice President, with one leg on the moon and the other on earth, knee-deep in garbage. That's going to require some news analysis.

What the Vice President says is that he wants editorials (which network news divisions don't use) labeled for what they are. Certainly it is general custom to label news analysis and comment when it is taking place, and omission of that even under the pressure of time is a mistake. But Mr. Agnew ought to label his speech for what it was. Did he want to encourage responsible journalism, or did he wish to silence it?

Perhaps the journalist and the party in power are always destined to be on the outs. President Eisenhower was pretty sore with television news until he left office, when he became a big fan. President Kennedy was reading and watching more and enjoying it less. President Johnson watched three sets and knew how to talk back to three talking heads at once, and the Nixon Administration has let us know where it stands and what kind of climate it wants to create. It is my theory that when the message from Des Moines or the White House itself is always a valentine or a garland of flowers, television and radio will have failed their purpose.