

named. Not only can we not evaluate their credentials without an identity, but we also must ignore the all-important question regarding the degree of their fear. Do such experts really exist? Reporters are often eager to flesh out their stories and give them credence, and sometimes they snap up offerings of people who claim that status to impress others. The opinions of experts should therefore not be given any special weight until you know how much weight they deserve.

One expert has been reported in a news story to "vehemently disagree" with the desirability of any covert action, specifically the assassination of terrorist leaders. "We have no business hiring our version of a Carlos, or matching terrorists car bomb for car bomb," said he. "Any retaliation ought to be done by legitimately constituted armed forces." But if the goal is to let terrorists and the governments that sponsor them know that justice will reach them one way or another, why limit our capacity to strike them unexpectedly? Why give them any advantage? An unambiguous message as to who did what and why it was done should always follow. This is enough to convey the message. Some "experts" obviously do not understand the basics of the situation. Their counsel is misleading. Intellectual credentials are not enough.

## 7. Liberty in New Hands: The Media

To a large extent, the fate of the West rests in the hands of its television executives, anchormen, and reporters. None of them have been elected by the public, and none are accountable to it, but by accident of timing and place they find themselves holding this precious trust, barely knowing that they do, or what to do with it. Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson were each in a similar position when the mantle of the presidency suddenly fell upon their shoulders. But unlike these two situations, the power of television has not yet been formally recognized, the duties and responsibilities of those operating the networks were never spelled out, and no precedent exists. Especially in the U.S.; liberty is at risk.

Advertising was recognized years ago as the "hidden persuader" of Western populations, but the power of television is a thousandfold greater. Long before the press had the wide circulation it enjoys today, journalism's great influence was acknowledged when it became known as the Fourth Estate, assigning it a

status equal to that of the Lords Spiritual, the Lords Temporal, and the Commons—the clergy, and nobility, and the bourgeoisie. But the printed word only affects the reading public, and it must be sifted through the brain. Responsible newspapers have always shaped public mores and policy by influencing a slowly expanding intelligentsia, an all-important but relatively small group. But the effect of television is direct and immediate, and its audiences are enormous.

Toddlers, senile people, and almost everybody in between reach for television at times, and some are practically addicted and watch it nearly all the time. In a sense these people are consumed by it, this being their central involvement. Television is directly absorbed, it reaches the heart immediately, and much of the time it strongly affects the physiology. Viewers often become glued even to average presentations and to commercials, not only when their powers of discrimination are poor. It does not require that the brain also become engaged. Television does not shape character, and it probably does not increase violence, but by numbing its viewers for hours on end it powerfully changes the way people behave and live. Like opium, the effect of television depends on the dose, and its power to lull the brain and to push thoughtfulness aside is similar in potency. Religion was never as powerful an agent for young and impressionable populations, even when Marx likened it to the narcotic.

Access to television and the successful use of it are coveted because of the tremendous results that can be obtained. Fifty or even a hundred million people can be simultaneously reached and physiologically affected at least for a moment. This is why a few seconds of exposure on national television in the U.S. can cost millions. Yet it sells not only products but also modes of being, styles of behavior, values, fashions, and loyalties. It defines what is humorous, clever, proper, and wise. In many little and big ways, people tend to unknowingly mimic what they see on television, and it thus sets standards for public and private relationships. This is how Bill Cosby has come to be considered such an expert on fatherhood and on growing old.

By its very nature, television promotes passivity and non-striving. Like an intravenous tube, it feeds automatically and nullifies the need to make the effort of sitting at a table and eating a nutritious meal. Without malice and without intention, it lowers the attentiveness and the alertness to everything else, and it sharply lessens the ability to think independently, to reason, to discriminate, and to judge. But it has a silver lining:

Television vastly expands the pool of facts, especially among the young.

In the U.S., where television is mostly in private hands and profit-motivated, programming and personalities are especially chosen to avoid anything that might annoy, offend, frighten, or otherwise displease the average viewer. No strong colors or opinions please; bland is in. Distraction and entertainment are the only goals. The common denominator is generally low, since the medium wants to cater to the largest possible audience. This is its weakness and what has made it so very powerful. Directly or at least indirectly, we are all affected by its dominant presence.

Even heads of government, senators, congressmen, industrialists, and others with considerable economic or political power are often clumsy in front of the camera, knowing that they are being seen and judged by a huge unknown audience whose reactions cannot be immediately gauged. Nonetheless they generally are very eager to have so much exposure. But in front of this audience it is even more difficult for most people to stand up for what is right. They cannot see how they come across. So in general politicians say mostly what is already acceptable, easy, popular, and pleasing. This is definitely not the place to try out new ideas, unless a leader has great human stature, much wisdom, and a great vision. The readiness to lead and the ability to inspire are often woefully inadequate in the first place, and the medium makes this bad situation even worse. Besides, the attention span of most viewers for serious talk has become rather short and is getting shorter. In the relative absence of political and moral leadership, television sets the country's tone.

Although especially true in the U.S., the future of the West as a whole is involved. As its leader and most powerful member, what happens to it affects all. Few people in or out of government have begun to comprehend the magnitude of the burden that rests on the shoulders of those who manage, produce, and report for television. They probably have much more to say about our common fate than the commanders of our armies. The Fourth Estate, and especially television, is increasingly subsuming the power of the other three branches of government, although as yet grossly unprepared to discharge this awesome responsibility.

The family used to be the guardian of the West's values. Here they were slowly inculcated. Schools can help consolidate such gains, but they cannot in themselves do the job, as we can see from the results. With the weakening of the ties that held fami-

lies together and the complete breakdown of many others, large numbers of the young have never been held long enough, or at all, in a consistent "crucible of no-choice." They have not learned to discipline themselves and are impulsive and irresponsible; they have not had enough of a home, and they live with the loyalties of vagabonds; they had no one to really talk to, and nobody to learn from—so they turned to television. This is where feelings can be felt, a little thinking imitated, teaching occurs, life is being lived. This is home. This is the new instiller of values. In a sense, television is the unwitting trustee of liberty. If it is to survive, television must become its guardian.

But even people who are much less dependent on television are influenced by it, sometimes greatly. We are all regularly being subjected to a continuous and not-so-subtle brainwashing. The exaggerated hysterical behavior in many commercials is supposed to be funny, but many young children imitate it anyway. They learn by watching. And what is normal human conversation like? Is it the way people talk about their new detergent with enthusiastic delight, or more like the extra happy chatter of the anchor teams on the morning shows, always smiling, overly familiar and folksy, so cute and so trivial?

Most reporters seem totally oblivious to the long-term effects of what they do, or what is at stake. Above all, they try to become more popular personally. Their reporting is sensational because it jolts the viewers, causing them momentary excitement, a proven if short-lived antidote to depression. But what happens to the thoughtfulness and humanity of people who constantly see others being asked questions like "How did you feel when your wife was kidnapped and your house burned down?" There are not requests for information but a manipulation of both the interviewee and the viewers. Yet such things are routinely shown as "news." Even some of TV's "analysis" is on that level.

For example, the U.S. government is the unhappy owner of literally mountains of nutritious and high-grade honey and cheese, stored in huge caverns and warehouses across the continent. Long-standing price supports for agricultural products cause endless overproduction. The program continues because of well-placed political pressure. Many farmers got rich from this wasteful giveaway. The government, which really is us, continues to buy vast quantities of these and other products at prices that are more than double what the consumer pays at retail outlets for imported products of the same quality. Consumers ob-

viously prefer to buy the much cheaper products that are equally good.

When price supports were finally about to be discontinued, farmers brought their trucks and tractors to Washington, clogged the streets, lobbied Congress, and aired their personal pain on national television. Eager reporters, delighted to find "live" human interest stories, rushed to interview them. Their faces and voices were understandably sad, angry, and really worried. Some wives cried in true anguish. A television crew was set up at a forced sale of a family farm, where good, honest, hardworking people were shown in trouble. This was definitely good copy, sure to elicit wide interest and sympathy.

TV viewers naturally respond to such pictures. Most people "feel for" those in hard times, and once their sympathy is engaged they forget to think and tend to overlook the merits of whatever issue is at stake. They will continue to buy imported cheese and honey as before, but many will nonetheless write to their congressmen urging them not to allow such heartless policies to become law. They forget that they are the ones who pay for the subsidies, even though indirectly, and they also forget that thousands of other such claims exist. Congressmen are usually eager to respond when the public is mobilized this way, not only because they are supposed to represent the people but also because they are concerned about getting re-elected. Yielding to the pressure of powerful lobbies becomes more respectable when grass-roots support is present. Even programs that are clearly irrational, expensive, harmful, and contrary to the public good are often continued.

Presidential addresses, like comments on the editorial page and unlike news, are consciously addressed to the viewer's thinking. Even people who are not very confident about evaluating opinions at least try to judge the merits of ideas that are presented to them as such. But they often swallow "news" uncritically as fact. This is how sentimental and politically unsophisticated reporters do so much insidious damage. They often have more influence than a president.

More responsible selection and editing of the news is obviously needed. Sometimes only money appears to be involved, but lives and the future of our civilization are directly at stake on other occasions, and yet the carelessness is the same. One of the three major U.S. television networks broke the news about the widening Walker spy scandal by quoting denials of guilt by the indignant-looking lawyer of Jerry A. Whitworth. How dare

they indict an innocent man? The FBI was wrong! The accused was eventually found guilty of passing key lists that allowed the Soviets to decode virtually all of the U.S. Navy's most sensitive messages over a period of many years, but none of the accusations were even mentioned that morning. Room was made only for the lawyer to besmirch the FBI. Is it not obvious to those who report and edit that what they do weakens their own societies?

News leaks of confidential information about the movements of the anti-terrorist Delta Force spoiled the chances of a possible rescue attempt of the TWA hostages in 1985. Pentagon officials complained at the time that the U.S. "is going to need an Official Secrets Act," but the making of policy was hampered in the meantime, and lives remained needlessly in jeopardy.

Did the U.S. television networks ask themselves what the likely effect would be of showing angry Iranian mobs repeatedly vilifying the hapless and helpless U.S. every evening for 444 consecutive days? The proclaimed intention was to not forget the hostages, but were terrorists everywhere encouraged or discouraged by such programming? Did the West's prestige and influence increase or decrease by playing up this event in such a fashion? What did it do to the self-image and sense of pride of U.S. citizens? Was it not all a thoughtless and self-serving exploitation of a national tragedy?

Why have no Iranian citizens ever been held hostage? Why have no Soviet planes ever been hijacked? Why can Cubans and Cambodians, Bulgarians and Russians, travel without fear but not Americans, West Europeans, or Japanese? Because the latter all live in democracies which subscribe to the civilized order; the others are part of the jungle and need not defend themselves from its agents. But in addition, free societies cannot now assure their citizens of personal safety. Their own public "opinion" prevents them from doing so effectively.

The power of television and films is such that even the most repressive totalitarian regimes have failed to completely shut out behavior and attitudes shaped by Western magazines, movies, and television. Border guards routinely confiscate copies of *Playboy* and other Western magazines from tourists entering the Soviet Union by train, but to no avail. Russian children are so eager to have chewing gum, blue jeans, and other popular Western items that they offer tourists fancy Red Army medals for them. In spite of the extreme brutalities of the Islamic revolution, youngsters in Teheran are still willing to risk public humiliation by revolutionary guards for wearing Western T-shirts and sneak-

ers. Rock music and punk hairdos have the power to penetrate even the barbed wire and the minefields of the Iron Curtain.

For the better educated, the press and radio play a relatively more important role. But even here the appeal to emotions is stronger than generally realized, and sometimes dangerous. A single photograph of a bleeding, burning, or panicky child in agony printed on the front page of a leading newspaper can have such a profound effect on so many readers that it eventually affects our political stances, even when it should not. One such picture helped turn the U.S. public sharply against the war in Vietnam. Many people have a few such images etched permanently in their mind.

Here is another example. National Public Radio (NPR) some time ago presented a nine-minute, forty-five-second segment on its popular "All Things Considered" program about the "out of control" U.S. border with Mexico. Over 1.5 million illegal immigrants are arrested yearly, but this is only a small fraction of those crossing the border. Most make it. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service arrests no more than one in three. The program described a carnival atmosphere on the Mexican side at dusk, with vendors selling beer and people joking, waiting for the illegal journey north to start. The in-depth analysis soon becomes an emotion-packed story strongly slanted against the INS. Many people are interviewed. The complaints of so-called immigrants' rights groups are the centerpiece of the presentations.

Illegal immigrants spoke with voices full of hurt and anger; it was difficult not to overidentify with them, especially since the reporter did so, and very blatantly. How dare "they" treat people this way? The arrested illegals did not get food and water quickly enough. Some complained bitterly about the harsh treatment administered by a few officers. Some were pushed, others rudely spoken to. The regional head of the INS admitted that such things do indeed occasionally happen when hundreds of thousands of desperate and sometimes angry human beings must be turned back against their will. Officers often have no choice but to act in self-defense. The most blatant incident was thoroughly investigated by six separate legal agencies, and no fault was found. "What do they want, a lynching?" asks an exasperated officer. The eager reporter was not mollified. Here is another case, and one more. "The border patrol is not accountable to local residents," she complained angrily and very righteously, "it is part of the Justice Department instead, and one congress-

man is already introducing legislation imposing criminal penalties for any violations."

No one pointed out during the long program that these complaints about possible violations of the law were all made by lawbreakers. Some INS officers may have lost their cool under the continual stress of an impossible job, but they were nonetheless our agents trying to enforce our laws. They were not the enemy. The radio program showed a lot of compassion for the illegals but none for the exhausted officers who were jeered daily, harassed and stoned on their jobs, and occasionally shot at. The INS men and women were made to look like villains.

The listeners were not reminded even once that all these "immigrants' rights" groups are organized to defy the law of the land, and that their sole purpose is to help lawbreakers. Such groups may be composed of very compassionate men and women, but they promote the law of the jungle and thus threaten the civilized order. Since their efforts are on behalf of human beings, they are automatically termed humanitarian, and hardly anyone notes that it is a form of organized crime.

Such gross and indiscriminate siding with everyone who suffers is typical of this and other programs. Almost automatically they are against those who exercise judgment or use the power inherent in their positions. And it is all publicly financed, part of an educational network with supposedly higher standards, and meaning to promote thoughtfulness, fairness, and justice.

The high value we assign to anything called "rights" is such that groups of this kind are commonly treated with great leniency and enjoy widespread support, even though their challenge to the civilized order is more serious than that of the Ku Klux Klan, the American Nazi, or the U.S. Communist Party. These three are dangerous and often vicious but insignificant in their numbers and influence; they do not have educators and ministers as their spokesmen; they are clearly part of the lunatic fringe. Not so the people who help others to break our laws.

Does such "reporting" not undermine the rule of law itself? Does it not promote the principle that anyone's "morality" has a superior claim on loyalty higher than the basic tenets that hold civilized societies together? What happens to societies that are subjected to such "reporting" day in and day out, year after year?

The reporting and editing of news must not remain the haphazard and thoughtless business that is now. Those helping to shape public opinion must always remember that feelings are extremely powerful, and that free societies are rather fragile. So