

# SEE IT THEN: Notes on Television Journalism

by Robert Drew

Television this year will break the one billion dollar mark in advertising sales. In 1956, the National Broadcasting Company predicts, television will do almost two billion dollars worth of business. John Crosby, TV columnist for the New York *Herald Tribune*, was a little sceptical of the NBC estimate. "Golly!" he said. "That sounds big to me. NBC's predictions in the past have all turned out to be wrong, but they've been wrong on the *low* side."

Vincent S. Jones, director of the news and editorial office of the Gannett Newspapers, who is studying the impact of TV on journalism, thinks that the impact is considerable and growing. "We have been hopelessly outdistanced in speed by radio and TV, in depth and quality by the magazines, and we have lost both prestige and glamour," he said. "The race for reader time means just one thing: One of the media will emerge as the dominant and indispensable item. So far it has been the newspaper. But it cannot remain in that position without some drastic changes."

Just what changes newspapers might be forced to make will depend on the character TV develops for itself. Perhaps the basic question about TV is this question of character. Will TV become knowing and articulate about the real world, or will it merely become beguiling and fanciful?

The question of the character of TV is largely a journalistic question, and it will be answered to a great extent by what TV does with its journalistic arm. I recently spent some time with network journalists discussing questions about TV and its journalism.

Is the character of TV pretty well fixed in its present form, or might it change significantly in the next decade? Is it possible for TV, which is basically an entertainment medium, to develop a bold and critical journalism of its

own? Will the total effect of TV be to divert our minds with soporific fantasies, or to make us more aware of our own real problems?

There were these questions and others, and there were the discussions from which the following notes are excerpted, but there were no answers. Glimpsers of answers will proceed at their own peril.

The definition of TV journalism properly ought to include everything from a news bulletin to a national convention. I have made certain assumptions in order to narrow the definition down to those areas where significant character changes might be brewing. I have assumed that panel discussions and live reporting of conventions, parades, and hearings will continue to develop characteristics they have already displayed. I have assumed that the nature of TV is not limited to this static and public kind of reporting, that it has a capacity for mobile reporting on real life in the un-public situations that make up most of what is important about the news. The definition turns out to be—"Constructed stories on real people, situations, and events." This means approximately the kind of story the newspaper reporter goes after, using as a tool in this case a movie camera instead of a typewriter.

It includes three categories of shows:

—The 15 minute daily news summary: NBC's John Cameron Swayze; ABC's John Daley; CBS' Douglas Edwards.

—The 30 minute weekly news documentary that penetrates, develops, and makes sense out of specific stories: *See It Now*, Ed Murrow, CBS; *The American Week*, Eric Sevareid, CBS; *Background*, Joseph Harsch, NBC.

—The non-news documentary on contemporary life that

(continued on Page 34)

## NiemanReports

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## SEE IT THEN

(continued from Page 2).

develops methods of TV reporting: *The Search*, CBS; NBC's *Telementaries*.

Of these, the daily news summary is the constant, predictable factor in the future character of TV. It does not pretend to interpret or make particular sense out of what it reports. Speed is an important criterion, and it must be brief, factual, and descriptive. It is popular, well sponsored, and solidly built into the scheme of TV.

The weekly news-related documentary is the real heart of the question about TV journalism. It is here that TV will, or will not, make felt its full power as a journalistic medium.

Unlike the daily summary, which is a combination of the old radiocast and newsreel, the news documentary is a new form in itself. It is only a few years old, but it already has a modern grandfather. He is Ed Murrow, whose *See It Now* has for the past three years put TV's most powerful reporting on film. Murrow's work has changed the tune of even the most pessimistic and persistent critics of TV.

Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, said, "I was one of the early hatchet boys on TV. The thing that surprises me now is that there is so much that is so good. One hour of Murrow is worth a day and a night of anything else."

Charles Siepmann, one of the most astute critics of TV, predicted pessimistically in 1950 that . . . "TV will probably conform rapidly to a few . . . stereotyped conventions. . . . It will be technically ingenious and inventive, but artistically poor. . . . Except for rare occasions, and for some time to come, its true scope as a medium of expression will not be realized." But a few weeks ago Siepmann was full of enthusiasm for one part of TV.

"Ed Murrow's work has been extraordinary," he said. "His great insight is a conception of the news, not as externals, not as, say, bringing some far off place into your living room, but in terms of seeing into people's minds."

Siepmann described two shows Murrow did on the race problem in South Africa. "You see before your eyes what could never be explained to you in words," he said. "These reports made you feel what it is like to be a savage out of the bush up against the city. In one scene the blacks danced a wild bush dance in the middle of the city slums. The show ended with an interview between Howard K. Smith and the tough, tight-lipped prime minister. The prime minister had agreed reluctantly to answer three questions. Smith asked his three questions at the start of the interview, and then, before the prime minister could answer, he asked a fourth. What happened

next was one of the most eloquent expressions of fascism I've ever seen. The minister said nothing. He clamped his jaws shut. He raised both hands in rage, and held them out flat against the camera."

Murrow has touched a nerve. He has revealed truth not only in his subjects, but in the nature of TV itself. He has liberated TV journalism from its public and static role. He enters the private worlds of private people and reports reality in a way that it has never been reported. What he does is unique to TV, but it draws on a wide range of traditions: the documentary film, the radio documentary, the non-fiction magazine report, and even realistic and naturalistic literature. Its method is to *show* the reader instead of telling. Its result is to make sense out of the news by giving the viewer the information and the stimulation to make sense out of it for himself. In essence, Murrow's new form gives the viewer *a sense of having experienced* the news.

Murrow has established a bridgehead for a new form of journalism, but he has failed to win what is considered in TV to be a mass audience. The quality of his show, for all its magnificent peaks, is inconsistent. It has attracted respectable numbers of people who either like the Murrow personality or who are basically interested in the news. But it does not seem to have evangelized among those millions of general viewers who might be won to an interest in the news by journalistic development of TV's unique powers. *See It Now* costs more than the sponsor will pay for it, and it must be subsidized by CBS.

People who know Murrow's problem feel that he has the idea-power to develop his form, increase his audience, and break out of his bridgehead. Such an advance by Murrow would create a broader financial base for TV journalism, train more people to an interest in his kind of reporting, and stimulate more journalistic projects. But Murrow's idea-power is being blocked by mechanical limitations and by the limitations of the photo-reporting talent he is able to put into the field.

The journalist in the field is limited by time, equipment, and budget, but he is also embarrassed by riches. Here, at last, all the methods of communication are synthesized. They are so many, and their relationships are so complex, that a mere human journalist has great difficulty using them all properly. Perhaps the deepest frustration of the TV journalist is a feeling that his journalism has distinct overtones of an art, and that this potential artfulness may remain an obvious, goading possibility without being realized in actual reporting. Because of the difficulties, it may be years before the full possibilities of combining a sense of reality with a sense of drama through the interplay of all the elements—images, movement, sound, words, music, and characterization—are developed.

The reality in Murrow's reporting is often stilted. His reporters intrude themselves into stories, deliver speeches, and shatter carefully-built effects. The great parts of his photography are some times overbalanced by stretches of dull film.

"If what Murrow is doing has an art to it," said Norman Cousins, "I think it is not so much in the film as in Murrow's handling of it in the studio."

"The trouble with journalistic shows," said Penn Kimball, former N.Y. *Times* man who now produces for *Omnibus*, is that they've got skilled, interpretive craftsmen in the studio, and relatively weak craftsmen in the field. A new kind of journalist is called for, maybe not the photographer himself, but a sort of news-gatherer who knows both the craft and the news. The networks send former newsreel photographers out to do serious, thoughtful stories on difficult situations. That's like assigning an ordinary city room news photographer to do a *Life* essay on Albert Schweitzer. If you can't get enough talent out on the story, you can't make it good enough to pull in a big enough audience to pay for making it better."

Though Murrow has built up the tightest, smartest production group in the business, it may be that the real block to his break-through is this problem of getting enough of the right kind of talent out on his stories.

Robert Saudek, head of the Ford Foundation's Radio-TV Workshop and producer of *Omnibus*, tried out a new idea for getting talent out on stories this season. He persuaded E. B. White of *The New Yorker*, and Russell Lynes, editor of *Harper's*, to write, produce, and narrate documentaries for *Omnibus*. Saudek gave each writer a subject, backstopped him with an experienced movie-maker, and turned him loose. E. B. White's story on a Maine Lobsterman, which was produced with Arthur Zegart, turned out to be austere, honest, and distinguished by a literary narration. Russell Lynes' story on a traveling road show in Missouri, produced with Richard Leacock, was extremely moving and distinguished by an infusion of literary power into the film itself.

Saudek's experiment proved that outside talents can be made effective in motion picture reporting. But it seems unlikely that a new form of journalism will grow up on talents periodically borrowed from other fields. The general questions about TV may reduce themselves finally to the question of whether TV can raise up its own, indigenous talents. And the final answer may be found in the fortunes of Arthur Zegart, a sort of prototype of a new kind of journalist.

I first bumped into Arthur Zegart through my TV set. I was watching a *Search* story on San Quentin

prison that started off well, got better, and became great. As the titles flashed by at the end of the show I noticed that the writer was Arthur Zegart, the director was Arthur Zegart, and the supervisor was Arthur Zegart.

When I met Arthur Zegart in person he was sitting in a board room with a moviola and a movie-writer named Jim Munves. Zegart is an intense, black-eyed director-producer in his mid-thirties. Munves, a former *New Yorker* writer, is just breaking into films.

"The problem," said Munves, "is that while devices for communication multiply, people seem to communicate less. This isn't necessary. We've got the means. All we have to do is present things in a way that is human, direct, and real."

"The great thing about Zegart," said Munves, "is the technique he has worked out for reporting reality on film."

Zegart and Munves work for "Information Productions," a film company headed by two former newsreel executives, Al Butterfield and Tom Wolff. The company handles production crew assignments for *See It Now*, and it produces films for *The Search*. "Can Butterfield and Wolff do what Zegart does?"

"No," said Munves. "They're managers. But the great thing about them is that they know its good when Zegart does it. It's amazing how few people who are supposed to know what's good, really know. You can't think of a network as a coherent thing like a newspaper. On a paper there is an editor who used to be a reporter and knows all about the business. On a network the top guy may be an ad salesman. He can't understand all the technical stuff, so he has assistants who claim to know. They can get away with murder on journalism. It's like having an ad salesman editing the *New York Times*."

Zegart got up and paced around the moviola.

"Zegart's no genius," said Munves. "With a little training anybody could do it, couldn't they, Art?"

Zegart sat down. "No, by God," he said. "I have to disagree. There are lots of guys who could do it, but they'd have to be good reporters and have picture sense. By accident I had some experiences that trained me. I produced documentary films with the Air Force in England during the war, and later with the U.N. The luckiest accident was that I was always a bastard operation. I had to do everything myself: get my own ideas for films, write scripts, take the pictures, and edit the film."

"To Zegart there are two kinds of people in the world," said Munves. "Those who will communicate and those who won't. He can tell which are which. He has found out that you can get people used to cameras. If you use his technique, you can get real people being themselves and saying what they think. But reality by itself isn't

enough. It has to be treated so that it means something."

"Say you want to do a story on problems of old age, and you decide to show the problems of the mother-in-law living with her married daughter. First you would find the right family, then live with them for a couple of weeks until you knew their tensions and problems. Then you would find ways of showing them."

"We're getting too specific," said Zegart. "If I were doing old age I might just go down to the bus station and look at old people for a few days."

"But we're in this family now," said Munves. "Say the daughter and her husband have a party for their friends. Is the mother-in-law invited? Is she talked to or offered a drink? Does she sit in the corner, or stay in her room? Whatever happens will reveal something."

"The thing is," said Zegart, "you would have to win their complete confidence. My basic job is a missionary job. I had to go into San Quentin and get the officials to give me permission to walk out in the yard alone with the prisoners. The prisoners were hostile and suspicious. Being Ed Murrow wouldn't help you to walk into 4,000 prisoners and learn anything. In effect, I had to go in and say to the prisoners, 'We're trying to do something different from anything you've ever seen, different from anything you've ever imagined. You'll have to put yourselves in my hands and trust me.' If they would do that, I could get reality."

"No outsider had ever walked out in the yard alone with the prisoners. They turned away from me and wouldn't talk. But I walked around and spotted guys I knew *could* talk. While I was casing them, they were casing me. In the second week, I got into a couple of conversations, and finally I got some prisoners to talk to me in a room. Then I set up a tape recorder to get them used to machinery."

Zegart recorded 13 hours of conversation. The first hour began this way:

Zegart: Don't let this machine bother you. Just forget about it. No, don't watch that wheel spin around.

Prisoner: I just like to watch the wheel spin around.

Zegart: OK, but try to forget it. You guys know I can get the warden's pitch. I can get the pitch of some guys inside here who like to say all the right things. But I've been around and I know when I'm being conned. I don't want to be conned. I want the point of view of guys who know what goes on inside this prison.

The prisoners protested that if they said what they thought, they wouldn't get paroled. Zegart insisted that

they had to trust him. They accused him of spying for the warden. Finally they spilled out their feeling. They let Zegart walk out of their cells with violent and incriminating conversations on his tape machine.

In the second week Zegart was watching prisoners talk to the parole officer when he spotted one who *could* communicate. He was due for another talk the following week. "That guy will walk in here and plead for his parole, even if we load the place with machinery and lights," said Zegart.

Prison Officials were sceptical.

After six weeks of casing, Zegart wrote a script and got it approved by CBS. The story was shot in two weeks. "No one has devised the equipment for work like this," said Zegart. "It's like trying to conduct modern war wearing medieval armour. We had to put up a Hollywood set with lights, a 300 lb. camera, cameramen, soundmen, and electricians, all in a small prison office."

The prisoner walked in to talk to the parole officer. Zegart talked to him. The prisoner looked at the lights and camera. Then he sat down and began a bitter, passionate plea for parole, oblivious of the machinery.

Zegart edited the film in New York. The result was one of the most powerful films of the *Search* series. Its high points were 8 minutes of real reality, the inner reality of prisoners up against the prison, against society, and against themselves. In one sequence, prisoner voices sounded over a picture of a cell block. They talked intensely about loneliness, love, and the perverse impulses that had returned them to prison time after time.

Zegart's dream is to get a series of films assigned to him that he can produce his own way, in his own time. Under the right conditions he feels that he can pack a power into reporting that is "something you have never seen, different from anything you've ever imagined." These films would be a break-through. They would bring mass audiences to real reporting.

Zegart is desperately hopeful that this new form will rise, and desperately unsure that it will. "TV looks like a desert to me," he said. "There are a couple of oases in it, Murrow and the *Search*, but they could blow away."

After five hours of talking to Zegart, I found out that his wife had just gotten home from the hospital that day with their first baby. "I was going to stay home today to help her," he said, "but talking about this kind of reporting is important."

Television may well find other approaches to reality reporting. Zegart is practically alone in his particular point of view. To him "Reality" means the revelation of subtle, psychological relationships. To many other TV reporters it means simply the true, physical surface look of a situa-

tion. But any approach to reality reporting that makes a break through big enough to alter the character of TV journalism, will probably have to include two of Zegart's conspicuous qualities: The vision that finds in drab reality the glowing center of significance and excitement, and some sort of moral equivalent to his overriding zeal and dedication.

Whether or not Zegart and others like him are able to work out their ideas depends on how much backing they get from the networks. There are evidences that the networks are not ready to focus down on the news documentary. NBC's President, Pat Weaver, has been pushing his "Responsibility Concept," which aims to diffuse cultural and informational inserts throughout all NBC's programs. *Variety* reported last month that this is due to include such things as getting a Heifetz or a Rubenstein to appear on *Howdy Doody*. But, in a recent memorandum, Weaver assured his staff that: "Of course, [we will continue] to do separate public affairs, news, and informational programs."

An indication of NBC's interest in the news documentary is its slowness to follow CBS's lead. It waited two years after Murrow's *See it Now*, appeared before it produced its own news documentary, *Background*. Then it appeared only three times a month. In *Background* as in *See it Now*, talent was concentrated at the top. Editorial direction under Ted Mills and Reuven Frank was excellent, but the show was put on film not by an elite group like Murrow's, but by regular daily news cameramen. "Despite all this, we were breathing on Murrow's rating only four months after we started," said Douglas Wood, assistant producer. "Then we got knocked out of our time by *Captain Gallant of the Foreign Legion*, starring Buster Crabbe."

One reason why the networks have not pushed the sense-making film report harder is that they have been absorbed in the prodigious and richly rewarding job of trying to better the daily news show. Davidson Taylor, Vice President in charge of Public Affairs for NBC, said, "The Camel-Plymouth show (John Cameron Swayze) is the most profitable single show on the network." It takes in about 6 million dollars a year. Almost all of NBC's vast news and stringer organization exists to supply it.

The networks have a strikingly unanimous feeling about the daily show and about the major criticism that has been leveled against it; namely that it tends to report news on which pictures are available instead of news in order of its importance. Davidson Taylor at NBC said, "Our show is on top because we have more 'hard' news in it. John Daley at ABC said, "Our rating has doubled in the past year because we give more 'hard' news than any other

network." Elmer Lower at CBS said, "The Douglas Edwards show is best because we use more 'hard' news."

Even at CBS, which has pioneered in the news documentary, the daily show far overshadows the weekly. Ernie Liser, producer of Eric Sevareid's *American Week*, calls his show a "luxury." Elmer Lower said, "The term TV journalism may be exalted. Our big problem is the daily news show."

It may be, however, that progress on the news-documentary is being made in another field, the non-news documentary. NBC's *Victory at Sea* was a monumental film history editing job by Henry Salomon. CBS is undertaking a similar series, *Conquest of the Air*. CBS's Irving Gitlin has produced *The Search*, an erratic but powerful series of 26 films on contemporary research being done by U.S. colleges. NBC's Reuven Frank produced a film on Nazi War Criminals, *Road to Spandau*. Henry Salomon produced a one hour film on atomic energy, *Three, Two, One, Zero*. Salomon is now working on a vast history of the 20th century, *Project 20*, which may be years in the making. These projects probably represent a true urge to enlighten the public. They may also represent a hedge by broadcasters against agitation by educational broadcasters. Perhaps one of the most significant things about them is their potential for developing talents and techniques that could be applied to a new journalism.

To summarize, the character of TV does not seem to be fixed in its present form. It has a potential, which it may or may not develop, for extending its journalistic range from the present "public" kind of reporting, to a penetrating, "private" kind of reporting. Murrow's *See It Now*, and Harsch's *Background* have demonstrated glimpses of a unique and enormous journalistic power in the form of the sense-making reality report. There seems to be little doubt that if these glimpses were turned into a steady flow, it would transcend previous forms of journalism in impact and attractiveness. Such a development would significantly alter the character of TV, which, in turn, will ultimately determine changes that might be called for in newspapers.

There are things TV can do better than newspapers, but the real battle will not be between the printed and the electronic press. The real battle will be between those influences in both that inform, and those that merely entertain.

The more successful TV is in journalism, the more interest it will create in what newspapers have to say. The more successful newspapers are in informing, the more demanding viewers will be of Television. Interest in the real world is something that can be more easily stimulated than satiated. TV is better at stimulating, and printed media are better at satiating.

The larger question is this: Will TV sabotage newspapers by taking away dollars and readers, and then sabotage the sense of its readers by substituting soporifics for information? TV is proud of its brief, daily smatter of facts. It is pious about the public service shows, which it puts on when the great audience isn't looking. But journalists must not be deceived. Television is a huge, voracious, expanding entertainment industry. Its informational efforts may be a sop to the government, its own pretenses, and a few individual consciences like Ed Murrow's. Until TV turns its big guns—top time, budgets, and resources—to creating informational, sense-making shows good enough to pull in mass audiences, the national mind is being sabotaged.

In terms of journalism's traditional function—creating an informed national intelligence—Television is an enemy. But the enemy is divided within and its character is still being formed. Newspapers have more in common with TV journalism, than TV journalism has in common with entertainment TV.

Journalism must define its friends and its enemies, form coalitions, and act in its own behalf: The behalf of the mind, the democracy, and that half of the world it leads.

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Robert Drew, on a Nieman Fellowship from *Life Magazine*, has been working experimentally with new patterns in television news.

## Nieman Scrapbook

### The Spanish View Of a Free Press Suggests '1984'

by Weldon James

(Who recently returned from a visit  
to Spain)

When several Spanish newspapermen came to Louisville last year, on an American tour sponsored by the State Department, they puzzled every local newspaperman who talked with them. They were as pleasant and likeable as could be—but when the talk touched on freedom of the press there was absolutely no meeting of minds.

The visiting Spaniards either went completely blank, or, as in one case, implied that radio and press censorship in Franco's Spain was chiefly a voluntary exercise of "good taste."

Last month in Madrid I discovered how false this implication was. And why our fellow journalists were so inarticulate: They had grown up and worked under the most shackled press this side of the Iron Curtain. Under a civil war-time 1938 law still on the books (and weighted with new extensions by administrative decree), it is a press not only censored but directed—told what not to publish, told what it must publish.

The penalties for non-compliance are

heavy enough to sharpen anyone's exercise of probable "good taste." Last year they included removal of one editor by the government for publishing "news and editorials contrary to official policy," and a sharp reduction in one paper's newsprint quota for failure to publish a directed editorial praising the government's official slate of candidates for municipal office.

A natural result of all this is that one Spanish newspaper looks and reads almost exactly like any other Spanish newspaper—and that the Spanish reader, if not completely indifferent, seldom really believes anything he reads.

That could be a good thing. For, aside from the "official line" in Spain itself, the news of the outside world is likewise bent to conform to the Franco Government's ideas of what is good for "the national common welfare." Offensive items simply do not appear. What does appear inevitably, once Franco has made a speech of any international import, is press-agency tripe from Washington, London, Paris, etc., quoting "authoritative circles" on how the keen interest evoked by El Caudillo's discourse emphasizes anew Spain's "increased prestige and leadership in the world." And so on.

American and other foreign newspapers and magazines come into Spain nowadays—but only when they contain no material deemed dangerous to "the national common welfare." The New York

*Times*, for instance, was banned 17 times in 1954. The United Press sells its wire service to the Spanish press, and the Associated Press sell it newsphoto service—but their editors know that if they don't pre-censor copy and photos to the official Spanish taste, a Spanish censor will do it for them.

On outgoing news the story is a little different. A "hot" cable will reach the Minister of Information's desk within an hour after an American correspondent has filed it, and he may be called in for remonstrance or a little corrective discussion—under the threat, exercised several times in the past but not recently, that he may be invited to leave the country. Mail copy, however, is not censored, and a good bit of the non-complimentary coverage of Spanish events goes out in this way, usually to be published without attribution to the sender in Spain.

You'd think this system would satisfy even the czars of *Pravda* or *Izvestia*. You might think, indeed, that since Franco has been "liberalizing" his dictatorship in recent years (he allowed the first post-war municipal elections in 1948, more in 1954), and since his power seems unchallenged, that press controls might be a little liberalized too.

You'd be wrong on both counts. When I was in Madrid last month Minister of Information Gabriel Arias Salgado, one Spaniard without any sense of humor, proved it. He made a 10,000-word speech