



The Riots on TV

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Last summer Sen. Hugh Scott (R-Pa.) felt television had so sensationalized the pictorial coverage of urban violence that he called on networks "to draw up a code to be followed in reporting riots" in order to guard against inciting still greater violence.

"A more balanced presentation," he said, "would counteract the alarming effects on the law-abiding Negro and the white community of statements by such individuals as H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael." Frank Stanton, president of CBS, made an effective answer but, regardless of television's performance last year, it cannot be charged with irresponsibility and distortion in its reporting of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and the national crisis which ensued. Quite the contrary.

Not only the networks, but many of the larger independent television stations, have been rendering a great public service. Their cameras have unflinchingly reported the outbreaks in various cities, but at the same time they have kept the eruptions in perspective and, above all, they have broadcast (almost on the hour) the appeals of the most esteemed national leaders (both black and white) against vengeful violence.

Despite this there has been rioting but, considering the profound provocation, it could have been far worse. Attorney General Clark points out that the deaths are few and the property damage in the national capital is a "very small fraction of that in Detroit or Watts."

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Over 99.99 per cent of the American people, regardless of color, kept their heads, shunned violence, and gave peaceful vent to their sorrow and indignation. Some of the credit for this must go to the country's communications media, including the daily newspapers, for there was a consistent and conscious effort in nearly all quarters to resist sensationalism on the one hand and dampen down hysteria on the other.

The total communications system in the U. S.

has now reached such saturation proportions, and its impact is so intimate and direct, that we are close to a species of direct democracy, with virtually everybody participating simultaneously and equally in matters of great import, whether it is the retirement of President Johnson or the killing of Dr. King.

Newspapers are a much older medium than television and text tends to be less inflammatory than pictures, so we expect the dailies to be more comprehensive and balanced than the tube. But television has now proved that it can (without a fixed code) measure up to its responsibilities and be a positive stabilizing force as well.

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It has been said too often that a picture is better than 1,000 words. Not necessarily. The camera doesn't deliberately lie, but it often exaggerates. During the riots television provided a sober, illuminating commentary that kept the violence in perspective and did much to overcome the inevitable rash of rumors and alarms.

Militant leaders like Stokely Carmichael were given adequate but not breathless exposure. For every extremist there were a dozen Negro moderates on both television and radio counseling against violence and vindictiveness.

We heard the moving words of Dr. King's widow and father. We heard the touching words of another widow, Mrs. John F. Kennedy. Negro leaders like Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young spoke up for nonviolence, as did the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Dr. King's successor. Celebrities like Harry Belafonte and singer James Brown talked forthrightly to their millions of fans. The President made frequent and eloquent use of the screen. The telecasts of Sen. Brooke on Face the Nation and Attorney General Clark on Meet the Press were factual, sensible, reassuring.

The U. S. is certain to face many more emergencies. The performance of the nation's communications system raises the hope that we may be able to cope with future crises without mass panic.