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TV Bias Doesn't Matter

IT SEEMS THAT television network news programs are going to be flogged for another four years. This will be a waste of energy, since the programs do not matter very much. In fact, the flogging constitutes an unwitting, undeserved and disturbing tribute to the power of the networks.

It is my thesis that there has been too much talk about the biases of the network programs and too little thought about the real, demonstrable influence of the programs. It is obvious to me that there is bias in net-

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work news. People explain it and even justify it in various ways, but few people deny that it exists. But does the bias matter? Has it affected public policy?

IF BIAS is mild and sporadic, then obviously it does not matter much. If it is severe and persistent, then some significant things may happen. There may be changes in public attitudes, leading to changes in public policy, that would satisfy the biases of the networks. But this has not occurred — and that is my point.

Those—this writer included—who believe network bias has been severe usually cite coverage of the two principal domestic and foreign problems of the second half of the '60s: the disturbances on campuses and in black neighborhoods, and the war in Vietnam. But how has this bias changed the world?

The networks did give more coverage to a succession of black and student militants that the militation merited. And the militants were portrayed sympathetically. But so what? After excessive, and excessively cordial network coverage, student militants were the most despised social group in America. Today the black neighborhoods are almost as calm as the campuses and Mario Savio, Mark Rudd and Eldridge Cleaver have joined Joe Pyne as washed up television "personalities" of the '60s.

No doubt some disruptions occurred because television cameras were there to cover them, and other disturbances were worse than they would have been if the cameras had not been present.

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But with regard to our domestic tranquility in the '60s, television was an epiphenomenon. The networks' sins were almost as inconsequential as they are infuriating.

The same is true with regard to Vietnam. Obviously much of the coverage of the war, especially that done by correspondents in Saigon, has been advocacy journalism. But, again, what has the advocacy accomplished? Did it inhibit the war effort in some measurable way?

Bear in mind that an inconvenience—such as an increase in non-compliance with the Selective Service System—is not the same thing as an inhibi-

tion. Is there some military action the U.S. might have taken had television coverage been less hostile to the war?

Even if one could demonstrate that television has determined public opinion about the Vietnam war, one would still have to demonstrate precisely how this television-dominated public opinion inhibited the war. Would there have been more bombing if television reporting about the war had been less hostile? A shortage of targets was more important than a shortage of public support in limiting the bombing. In fact, there is no reason to believe that public opinion would not have tolerated—or even supported—more vigorous bombing, including the bombing of dikes and civilian populations, at any time since 1965. It was a problem with the budget, combined with strong doubts within the government about the effectiveness of more troops, that caused President Johnson to rule against a substantial increase in American troop strength in Vietnam after the 1968 Tet offensive.

BUT IF SUCH details are not convincing, try this. Imagine it is January 1965, a month before the Feb. 7 Viet Cong attack on the U.S. Air Force bar-

racks at Pleiku and the U.S. air offensive against the North. The nation has just made a difficult passage through the post-assassination period. The 1964 election has just saved the nation from Goldwater and thus from the twin

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scourges of domestic discord and an excessively militant foreign policy. Now, suppose in January 1965, someone said to you: "The United States is about to embark on a land war in Asia that will still be going on eight years, two presidential elections, 48,000 lives, hundreds of billion of dollars and record deficits later. Any thoughtful American, presented with that scenario would have said, 'You're daft. The American people will not stand for it. If we know anything at all about politics we know that a democracy cannot fight a protracted limited war, least of all with conscripts. Public opinion would crack."

But public opinion did not crack. Hence the networks can not be blamed for cracking it. Public support for the war was eroded, but it hardly makes sense to blame this erosion on the networks. It really does not matter how you cover an expensive and bloody 10 year land war in Asia: a lot of people are going to get fed up. In Vietnam the costs mounted higher and the stakes seemed to diminish in the presence of something advertised as an East-West detente. The American people can get fed up with a lot of things, from welfare costs to forced busing, without any help from the networks. Regarding Vietnam, the wonder is that the American people still were not nearly as exasperated as the networks would have liked them to be.

And that is why so much of the current argument about the networks has such an odd ring. Those attacking the networks are blaming them for things that did not happen, things the networks are powerless to cause to happen. And the networks are too vain to own up to the fact that they do not have the influence that the critics attribute to them.

So the argument, if one may call it that, has the critics unwittingly flattering the networks and the networks unwilling to plead impotence, pleading innocence instead.