

Agnew on the Media

Part 6/11/73

An Interview With David S. Broder

In an April speech at Harding College in Arkansas, Vice President Agnew said, "The government and the media must put aside their visceral reactions and engage in a productive, intelligent discussion of their differences."

Washington Post staff writer David S. Broder contacted the Vice Presi-

dent's office and suggested that a conversation on some of the issues of press-government relationships which Mr. Agnew had raised over the years might usefully be aired. The following transcript, edited from a one-hour conversation, represents the substance of the Agnew-Broder talk.

Q: *I thought perhaps a useful starting question would be to ask you about a statement in your Harding College speech about the opinion-making media. Making the point that the administration wants to be fair to them, you say, "We do not think they have yet diversified their undertakings sufficiently to fairly report the activities of government to the American people." What do you mean by that statement, and how do you see this process of diversification possibly coming about?*

A: Well, what I meant was that there seem to be general thrust lines that develop in the opinion-making media. And at the point that the thrust line develops, the information-gathering process seems to adhere to that particular area of inquiry. Many other areas of inquiry just don't seem to come out.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. There are many, many important matters of community development going on right now. There are matters of the "new federalism" going on, general revenue sharing is being tested, and we're trying to complete the legislation on special revenue sharing. And yet, with the exception of certain people who've turned to this as a line of special reporting, these matters do not really get the kind of positioning in principal organs or ongoing attention on television needed to make people realize how important they are.

I'll give you another example. It relates to the practice of extrapolating one attention-

getting segment and excluding the substance of the prepared remarks of a governmental official.

Yesterday I talked to the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce on an economic theme. Economic speeches are very deadly, so before I started out I tried to put them at ease with a little levity. And the levity went something like this: "Before I left Washington the President asked me to say a few kind words about John Connally. And I will—but not today."

Now, that was all there was to it. That got a nice laugh and they relaxed. I turned on CBS radio last night and this is the way my economic speech was handled: "Well, today it was politics as usual for Vice President Agnew, who had the following to say . . ." and on came what I just told you. Not a word about the forum, not a word about the subject of the speech. Well, surely you can say if you use that kind of material, you've got to expect that's what they're going to publish. But is it really? Does it have to be that way? Is the humor more important than the substance of the speech?

As far as television's concerned, there is almost—well, I won't say blanket unanimity, but there is what you might call consensus with regard to public events and how they should be construed. I don't think you'd find John Chancellor disagreeing essentially with Walter Cronkite, or with Harry Reasoner, for example, on what's important to talk about.

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And on the talk shows you have basically the same thing going on. You may say you have a liberal and a conservative on the Agronsky show. But what you really have is a Washington-oriented enclave focusing in on what's been reported in Washington, instead of moving out and diversifying their discussion. I can tune in that program and almost tell you what's going to be discussed that week.

Q: *Do you think that's because the basic agenda for most newspapers are the AP and the UPI budget summaries which come out every morning and every afternoon saying, "These are our major stories for the next cycle"?*

A: I suppose that's got something to do with it.

Q: *But does that reflect anything other than news judgment as to what are major stories?*

A: No, but what is news judgment and who decides on news judgment?

Q: *Well, would you make the same criticism that you've made of the anchormen of, say, the news editors of Associated Press and United Press International? I think the same observation could be made: that if you took it over a period of a week, 80 or 85 per cent of the stories that one wire service said were main stories would also be main stories on the other wire.*

A: Yes, I would. I think that that applies to the wire services, it applies to the weekly news magazines, it applies to the large metropolitan dailies that maintain independent wire services and facilities and make their own news judgments.

Q: *When you referred to these people reflecting one point of view about one theme, where do you think that uniformity comes from? Do you think it's imposed from the top of their organization, or do you think it's because of the way these men are recruited, or what?*

A: I think it's the fact that they're members of a fraternity. Like any other businessmen, they talk to each other more than they talk to people in other undertakings. And, institutionally, I think most of them are recruited from schools of journalism where the judgment process follows what's taking place in the then-existing principal media. And I think there's a philosophical compatibility among most people who work for the large news organs that naturally brings them to

similar conclusions.

Q: *Now, you have put stress always on getting more diversity into that group. How do you think that's possible? Do you have any sort of a strategy?*

A: One of the steps that's been taken, of course, is the use of op-ed pages and contributing writers and commentators. Guests on programs. But it isn't entirely effective. And I blame the ineffectiveness not so much on the lack of attempts of the media to do what they can to help, but on the very small number of people with other ideas who are available and willing to make the contributions. That's a problem. I'm sure that The Post, The Times would print whatever was submitted, particularly if it were provocative and well-written, but I don't think they get too much of this kind of material sent to them. Now there must be some reason for that. I don't know what that reason is. I really don't.

But I'm hopeful that it's beginning to change. I see the first evidence of it in my contacts with college youth: not as doctrinaire as formerly, not as willing to accept a simple position and take off with that, but more questioning of every opinion now. And much more ready to hear another opinion than they might have been in the past.

Q: *But in your answer to the question, you've moved off of the front page and on to the editorial page.*

A: Sorry. Let's talk about the front page. For example, I happen to believe that when a subject becomes very hot, such as Watergate is right now, the problem isn't the fact that it consumes 10 or 11 pages of a news magazine, it isn't the fact that it consumes several pages of the newspaper. It's that much of what it presented on it is repetitious. There isn't the effort to diversify the account.

Let's go to economics. If stats come out, and they show inflation is up, you'll find a tremendous amount of commentary on inflation, but almost a total neglect of the record-setting pace of the GNP growth, of unemployment's decline, of the assimilation into the job market of a great amount of people formerly employed in undertakings related to the Vietnam war. And all of the accompanying things that go with a boom economy that are good seem to be overlooked in the fear about inflation.

Now inflation, of course, is a very real hazard. But the commentary right now about the economy I don't think justifies what you might call a dismal view. Surely we've got inflation that's too high, but so does every industrialized nation in the world. And ours is relatively low compared to theirs.

We are taking steps to dampen the economy and we have made certain projections and inflation's going to subside in the third and fourth quarters of this year. One of the reasons we have this inflation is, of course, the pace of growth in the economy. One of the reasons we have another thing that is generally characterized as bad, which is the growth of cor-

porate profits, is because we've got this tremendous growth in the economy. It isn't that individual companies are pricing their products higher—because they're faced with guidelines—but because they're producing more, and consequently the profits are more.

The comparisons between wages and profits really aren't fairly made. On the one hand, you have the profits coming out of the growth of the business, accelerating at a high rate, and on the other hand you have wages of the individual not changing that quickly because there are more and more individuals to distribute the increased total of wages among.

We're still looking for some way to present this in perspective. But here, when you pick up a newspaper like *The Post*, the headlines at least and the principally positioned stories

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would relate to what could be called alarming economic developments—inflation, too much profits, something that carries through the thesis that the little guy is not being taken care of but that the corporate people are being rewarded beyond their legitimate expectation—and nothing to indicate that this growth of the economy makes it possible for us to project that in fiscal 1976 we may have no budgetary deficit, in spite of increases of maybe almost \$20 billion a year in spending.

Q: *I find it ironic that most of your criticisms have been directed at what you call "the opinion-making media." Those are, by and large, media which are in a competitive situation. You haven't said very much about the much more frequent situation around this country where you have literally monopoly ownership.*

A: I suppose this is an escape answer in a sense, but I don't read those newspapers every day. And maybe that's why I don't criticize them more. I'm living in a place where what I characterize as the opinion-making media come to me every day in the form of news summary, my own reading of *The Post*, *The Times* and *The Sun*, *Time* and *Newsweek*—and some attention to the networks.

Q: *You suggested at the University of Virginia that either there should be no unattributed accusations printed against government officials or that they should be substantiated—I think this was your line—by evidence that's admissible in a criminal charge. Do you really think that it would be possible to do investigative reporting of the kind that characterized the Watergate reporting?*

A: I have to say that investigative reporting is certainly beneficial as far as informing the public is concerned. I don't think that in-

vestigative reporting really ever breaks many things loose. It wasn't the newspaper reports that broke the Watergate matter loose, it was [District Judge John] Sirica's handling of the defendants' sentencing that broke that information loose. Because if the defendants had not changed their attitudes at that time the information wouldn't have been available to be leaked. Looking at investigative reporting at its best, I think it's gathering bits and pieces of information that can lead to a discernible opinion that's intelligible to the public. And I praise that highly. Investigative reporting that provides the incentive for a grand jury to begin an investigation I praise highly. I don't believe that investigative reporters moving out in advance of an acting grand jury or trying to project to the public hearsay of what is essentially a secret proceeding—secret to safeguard the constitutional rights of others—is good investigative reporting. And I find a lot of fault with the fact that inaccuracies do occur and that the public mind can be very much positioned by broad-brush accusations.

Guilt by association: I think one of the news magazines had a whole page of pictures of principals in the Watergate. Now some of these people were implicated to a very great extent, to the point of having been indicted. Others may never be—or may be completely cleared. But they shouldn't all be set up as a rogues gallery, as though they were all in the same status at the moment.

I have a heck of a time trying to figure out how you protect confidentiality of sources—how you protect the newsman's right to go and investigate and report to the public without revealing his sources, and at the same time how you protect people who might be unintentionally destroyed by it. It's entirely possible that people who are later going to be found innocent will have their reputations damaged to a tremendous extent by what takes place in the course of an investigation. So I came out with an idea. How would it work if the reporter, in the course of gathering his story, were totally protected with an absolute privilege—even if he were writing matters that criticized the judgment of his subject—so long as he did not accuse him of any immoral or illegal conduct? But at the point the reporter singles out an individual and writes—from not his own knowledge but the knowledge of some other person who has given him the information—a person that he's not willing to identify—that this man has done something illegal or immoral that would affect the man's personal reputation—at that point somehow there has to be a way that the man accused can protect himself, provided the reporter publishes it, by coming back and saying, "All right, now, someone has accused me of being a crook. Who says so?" If the accused can't do that, how does he protect himself?

I find it's very difficult to formulate what I think's a fair position. Because I do understand that there has to be some sort of privi-

lege that runs to an investigative reporter. But at some point we must stop the character assassination that can occur through carelessness or through design on the part of the reporter. I don't know just how you do that. I think that one of the principal gains that could come out of our free discussions of this matter would be to try to evolve some system to do that. Now, forgetting about immoral or illegal conduct entirely, just think about expertise in a job and the judgments that a man makes in the



MacIntosh in the Dayton Journal Herald

course of his political career—how he can be second-guessed by spectres. If someone writes a story that an undisclosed source said something, a high White House source, or any of the other characterizations, a long-time statehouse observer, a longtime State Department expert of ambassadorial rank, or whatever the case may be—you never do find out who those people are. The public doesn't know what degree of credibility or expertise to assign to them because it's all left in the hands of the reporter to indicate how believable they are by the way he adjectively presents them in his article.

Q: So is it your opinion that there is not sufficient remedy for this problem in two things: one, libel suits and, secondly, the question of the damage to the reputation of a newspaper which makes these charges and is unable to back them up?

A: I don't think there is sufficient recourse in either one of those things. First, with regard to people in the public sphere, libel suits have become laughable. There is no way to collect in a libel suit because of recent court decisions. We don't have the British system, which is very rigid. And I'm not

prepared to say which way that ought to go. I'd much rather see more careful reporting than see a rash of libel suits come up. But maybe this is the only way to keep the freedom of investigation and require the care that's necessary. Perhaps it's worth talking about.

The other point you raised I don't believe really is a factor. Because people read a newspaper casually, and today's newspaper is gone, it's discarded. I doubt if anybody except people such as myself ever read newspapers carefully or pull out something or refer back to something. The average person reads it as a casual source of general information. He couldn't separate in his own mind which newspaper he read something in or whether he heard it on television or heard it on his car radio. He only knows that he heard certain things. So I don't think a newspaper's reputation is damaged by stories that it makes errors in.

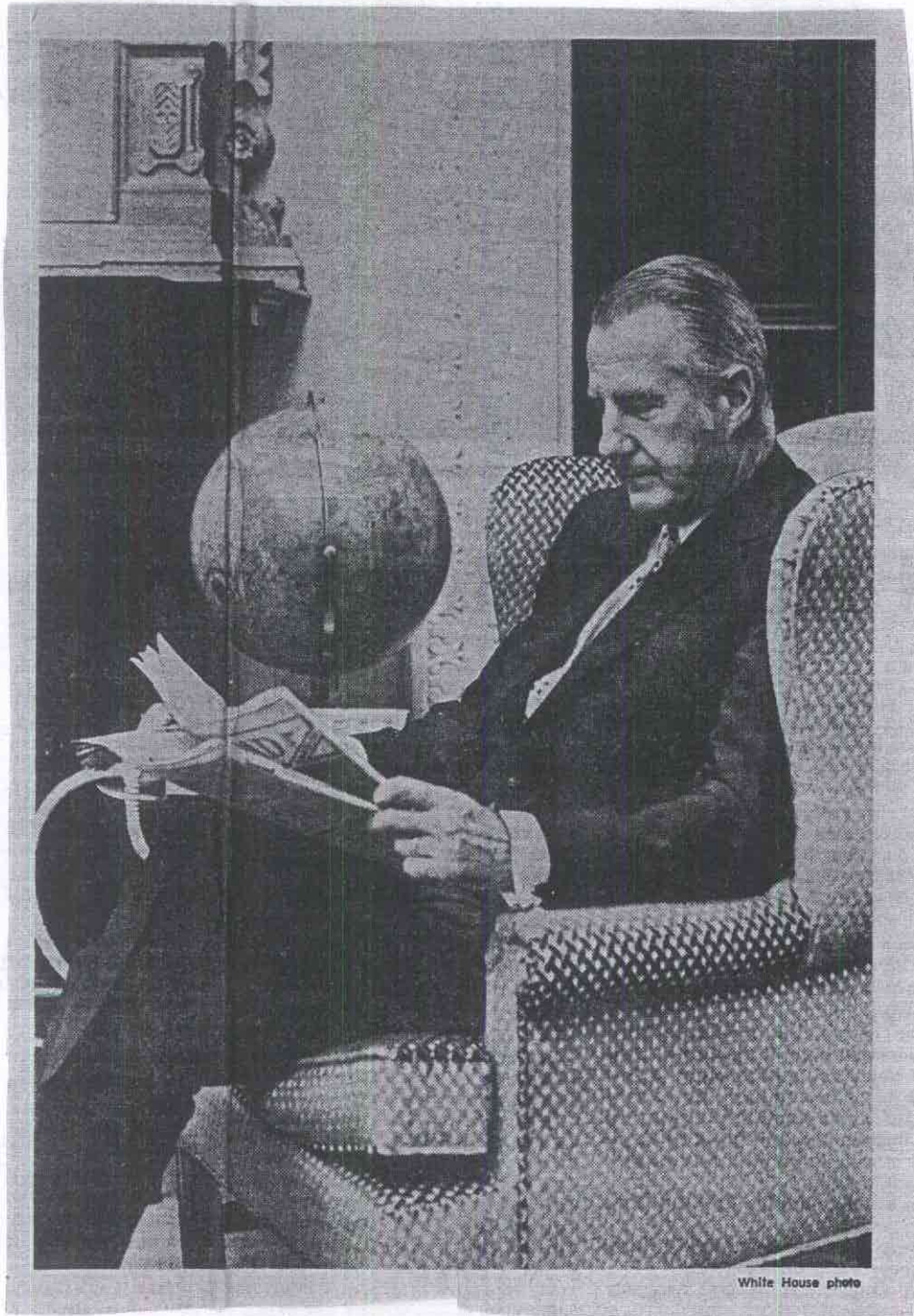
For example, I don't think that most of the error is ever presented as error to the public. There's a correction printed occasionally, sometimes not. I've had little things that from time to time I wanted to correct. I don't even try anymore, and I think probably they shouldn't be corrected from my standpoint, we shouldn't even try to correct because it just brings it up all over again.

Q: In the Harding College speech you suggested that the "advocacy journalists," as you phrased it, in recent years have tended to be antigovernment. Do you think of this as a problem that is particularly directed against this administration, or are you concerned about a general problem of skepticism of all government officials in all branches of government at all times?

A: I think it's a general posture against the power of the government. The fear that power is being misused. And the social consciousness that things are not perfect. Not even equitable. And the feeling that the government should be able to correct that. It's the old attitude that most young people have, and I had when I was young, that if I could just get in there I could straighten it all out. The complexities of the competing positions are not discerned by somebody outside of the government—not as well as they are when you actually have to get in and devise the policy. Consequently, I think this causes an orientation sort of hostile to the failures of the government to realize utopian perspectives.

Q: Do you regard this incipient national press council as in any way being helpful in dealing with these issues that you've raised?

A: Well, I think some press councils have been successful. The Minnesota one apparently has been successful. On the other



White House photo

hand, I feel ambivalent about whether a press council is of necessity the answer. There are dangers in a press council. Clearly, a press council takes away a lot of independence of the organ, independence that perhaps they are constitutionally entitled to. It's a question of how much power it exerts. There's a question of who is the press council—I mean, if the paper's biased it's possible for a press council to be biased. There's no way to assure that it is a good press council.

But I do think that the idea of a review for fairness in reporting is a good idea. How to bring it about, whether it's through a press council, whether it's through individual awareness of the dangers inherent in drifting unconsciously into a biased position, whatever. I think that we have come some distance in creating a greater sensitivity on the part of the media to the fact that they can, without even wanting to, drift into opinion patterns that are biased.

Q: *When you got into this subject several years ago your main concern seemed to be that television commentary was in effect jamming the President's message to the American people. Do you still see a real problem of the President as one political actor getting his views across to the American people?*

A: Not as much. I think there's been a greater restraint in commentary, a much greater effort to report the totality of a message than to reconstruct it. But it still has certain inherent dangers. This business of instant analysis: Certainly there should be analysis, and commentary, and opinion about what takes place. But there's something insidious about having any speaker, a President, for example, give a message to an audience in its totality, and then having someone come on right behind him and tell the people who just heard the message what was said.

First of all, it performs not a purpose of enlightenment, because the listeners already have the whole message. They've just absorbed it. The analysis has a way of emphasizing certain things and certain possible conclusions to be reached from those points that are being reiterated, and it can to some extent affect the viewpoint of the recipients. I don't think it should happen that way. Now, the following day if somebody comes on and says "Now, this is how I feel about what the President said," that's different.

Q: *But isn't the same audience that has just heard the President able to apply the same intelligence in evaluating any comments that they hear after the President? I don't see why it's harder for them to see through the commentary, if you will, than for them to analyze the evidence that the President has presented.*

A: Well, I'll tell you why. In my opinion, a person who comes into a living room every night with regularity as a news com-

mentator, a network commentator, becomes a very highly respected and regarded individual, particularly if he's as personable and as decent and nice as most of the people who appear on U.S. television.

There's a credibility that flows to these people on the simple basis that the average listener says, "Well, he has no axe to grind, why shouldn't he be telling me the truth?" There's an avuncular image, a benign image, that revolves around a commentator. He is apolitical in their eyes, and he has a much firmer basis for being objective than someone who is in a position of political responsibility who is trying to explain why he took certain moves or why he didn't take certain moves.

Consequently, you can't conclude that, to the average viewer, the analysis is regarded with the same degree of suspicion as the subject of the analysis. You look at a President and say, "Well, he has his administration's viewpoint, he's trying to justify what he's done." But these people (the commentators) don't have anything to justify. In the viewer's mind, they have no reason to go one way or another. Consequently, they are in a much more formidable position to react pro or con to what's said.

Q: *Would you have a similar objection or would you feel differently if the television networks, say, simply brought on other politicians representing different points of view than the President? So the people would be contrasting the views of one politician, the President, with that of other politicians?*

A: I think that would help. And some of the networks have tried to do this, sometimes successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully. But there is a danger in that also because these are flash opinions based on immediate reactions without any chance to stop and think through the speech or look back on it or examine it or check it against available fact. And when you put somebody on television, he has to say something. The last thing he wants to say is, "I don't know anything about it." And consequently he may not be as careful or accurate or intelligent about his commentary as he might if he had time to think about it a little bit.

Q: *Are you concerned at all about the question of access to the public for politicians other than the President, representing other points of view?*

A: Well, the question of access for well-known people is not a problem. If I want to go on, I can go on. If a senator wants to get on, he can probably get on. But access for people who are not established personalities is a problem. It's difficult. A young person who wants to begin a political career has a very difficult time getting his opinions aired or printed, particularly if he has no office

from which to speak.

Q: *In view of your stress again on diversity of opinion, what is your view of the actions of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting on public affairs programming?*

A: I'm going to be candid and say that I have not looked at enough public broadcasting to have a firm opinion about it. And I really should have inspected it a lot more carefully.

One thing I did see recently distressed me a great deal. I saw it on one of the commercial channels, but it was a rebroadcast of a public affairs program filmed by public broadcasting in New York. And it appeared on a program called "Camera Three," I think, that shows here on Sunday morning in Washington.

[Agnew apparently was referring to a "Camera Three" show produced for the CBS station in New York and shown here on Channel 9 last February. It was an edited film of a conversation between the Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing and Joseph Chaikin, founder of an experimental theater group in New York.]

There were two people sitting in a conversation in the yoga position and very unconventional attire, which probably did not attract my sympathetic interest at the moment. And for half an hour they were involved in relating their personal experiences. And one of them, just to give you an idea, was saying why his mother had an impact on his life. His father had not been very kind to her and never gave her anything for her birthday, except one time when he carefully packaged a beautifully wrapped gift and presented it to her on her birthday. And then he began through his own facial expressions to try and show what her reactions were when she opened up the box and it turned out to be a three-months' supply of his father's toenail clippings.

And I kept watching it. I said to myself, "There has to be some point to this. This is being shown, it's being rebroadcast. It was filmed on educational television. There's got to be some point to it." I wasn't able to figure out what the point was. It was so distressing to me from the standpoint of a waste of good time that I tried to get a copy of it and I couldn't.

So again you have the question of media judgment about what you use public television for. To me, it is not justifiable that the taxpayers have to pay for the filming of something of this type. And in trying to decide

whether it has any redeeming social significance, I couldn't come up with it.

I think also that we tend too much to go to the professional in looking for diversity. If we're looking for a conservative we go hunt up James J. Kilpatrick or William Buckley. Because they're known. They may not be reflective of contemporary conservatism in the sense that perhaps a young intellectual out of the Hudson Institute would be.

Q: *So in these terms it doesn't cause you any qualms when the funding is taken away from a program like Buckley's or like "Washington Week in Review" or Bill Moyers or Liz Drew? Does that seem to you to be consonant with the general theory of diversity which you've laid out?*

A: Well, the question then becomes whether the public dollar should be spent in the propagation of political viewpoints, and again that's a difficult subject. I don't feel qualified at this point to make the judgments on public television. Of course, I do want diversity, and I'd like to see us use every way to get it.

Q: *Let me ask you just one final thing: Do you have in general, as part of your theory about the relationships between government and media, any thought about the desirability or obligation of public officials to have press conferences? Particularly public officials like the President, who have really automatic access to media on occasions that they choose to make full statements of their own views on a particular subject?*

A: Well, you run into a problem with press conferences, and I'm not talking about the President particularly. You go into a press conference that lasts an hour, and you cover maybe 20 subjects. And you can pretty well predict that the report on that press conference will be on two, at the most three, of those subjects. And particularly in a continuing encounter with the press, as in a campaign. As you move from city to city, responses to questions in one city are brought up by the traveling press in another city, and a dialogue develops that has nothing to do with the subject matter in your campaign speech at that place, or with the interests of the people in that place. Press conferences often frustrate and infuriate public people when they're trying to get a balanced report of what's on their mind and all they get is the *cause celebre* of the moment with some new angle or some new interpretation to a response or some alleged conflict or nuance between a previous response and that one.