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F.Y.I.

The Vice President unburdened himself of some more reflections about the news business the other day on a television talk show in Chicago and in the course of it he alarmed a lot of people with a suggestion that is either a little silly or a little sinister, depending on what he really has in mind. His latest idea is for "people in government" to examine television commentators "in depth" about their "opinions" and "beliefs" and "prejudices," on a sort of Meet the Press program in reverse, the theory being that this will somehow protect an unsuspecting public from slanted presentation of the news. Eric Sevareid, one of the commentators mentioned by Mr. Agnew, promptly delivered what struck us as a sensible and perceptive critique of the idea on his evening broadcast. So that you can judge for yourself, we are publishing excerpts from the Vice President's remarks and the transcript of Mr. Sevareid's response elsewhere on this page today.

But we would like to add, For Your Information, a few brief thoughts of our own about this business of bias or slant, or whatever you may choose to call it, in the news. Just to begin with, it exists; it is a problem if for no other reason than because extremely few people are free of prejudice. This includes newsmen; it also includes readers and viewers; people who claim to see a bias are usually seeing it out of some bias of their own, as Mr. Agnew ought to be the first to understand.

The question is what to do about it and, as Mr. Sevareid suggests, there are some checks and balances built into a free, competitive press, not the least of which is that the whole thing, the total product, is out there for inspection every day—which is not quite the way it works in government. So the customer can judge for himself. This is no guarantee, of course, that what appears is comprehensive, or accurate or objective, which is what seems to trouble Mr. Agnew, and the fact is, of course, that there can be no guarantee; all anybody can do is try to be right, and fair, and let the public judge, because there are no absolute standards or measurements which everybody would accept.

This, in a nutshell, is what's wrong with the Vice President's approach—the idea that he or anybody else in government should be entrusted with the role of arbiter of Truth, that he can identify biases and prejudices and rub them out, and leave us with some pure, unvarnished version of The News. To the extent that he proposes to do this by a sort of intellectual—or philosophical—saliva test, conducted in the format of a TV panel show, there is no great harm in the idea if he or others in government want to play newsman-for-a-day. But it is a little silly to think that there is any real protection for the innocent viewer to be found in this kind of Show Biz—if only because there is no insurance that a TV newscaster would be any more candid or forthright in the role of interviewee than a public official.

What is a little sinister about this, then, is not the idea itself but the thinking behind it, because the thinking leads in all logic to a far deeper interference by the government in the news business, a far more fundamental reversal of roles. This has the look, in other words, of the thin edge of a very dangerous wedge, when it is seen in the context of all the other things the Vice President has had to say about news monopolies, and elitist East Coast conspiracies and all the rest.

Mr. Agnew is not the first government official, of course, to cringe under the heat of public criticism, nor the first to look for ways to turn it down, off—or, better yet, around. But he is, perhaps, the first to display so powerful an impulse to move right up against, if not beyond, the bounds that have for so long protected freedom of expression in this country from interference or control by the government. In fairness, he is quick to protest—when questioned—that he is aware of the restraints imposed upon him by the Constitution in his chosen role as Inspector General of the media. But he does not give the impression that, left to his own devices, he would have much reverence for these restraints.

... And Eric Sevareid's Response

The following is a transcript from the Eric Sevareid CBS Evening News broadcast of Oct. 21.

The Vice President, Mr. Agnew, proposes that network commentators, like this one and brothers Smith and Reynolds down the street at ABC, "people of that type," he says, be publicly examined by government personnel. "The public has a right to know," he says, our opinions and prejudices.

The phrase, "people of that type" hurts a bit; we certainly don't think of Mr. Agnew as a type; we think he is an original.

What really hurts is the thought that maybe nobody's been listening all this time. If, after some 30 years of thousands of broadcasts, hundreds of articles and lectures and a few books, one's general cast of mind, warts and all, remains a mystery, then we're licked and we fail to see how a few more minutes of examination by government types would solve the supposed riddle.

Mr. Agnew wants to know where we stand. We stand—or rather sit—right here, in the full glare. At a disadvantage as against politicians; we can't cast one vote in committee, an opposite vote on the floor; can't say one thing in the North, an opposite thing in the South; we hold no tenure, four years or otherwise, and can be voted out with a twist of the dial.

We can't use invective and epithets, can't even dream of impugning the patriotism of leading citizens, can't reduce every complicated issue to yes or no, black or white and

would rather go to jail than do bodily injury to the marvelous English language.

We can't come down on this side or that side of each disputed public issue because we're trying to explain far more than advocate and because some issues don't have two sides; some have three, four or half a dozen and in these matters we're damned if we know the right answers. This may be why most of us look a bit frazzled while Mr. Agnew looks so serene.

Another reason may be that we have to think our own thoughts and write our own phrases. Unlike the Vice President, we don't possess a stable of ghost-writers. Come to think of it, if there are mysteries around, unseen spirits motivating the public dialogue, maybe that's the place that could use the glare of public scrutiny—that stable of anonymity.

Finally, at the risk of sounding a bit stuffy, we might say two things. One, that nobody in this business expects for a moment that the full truth of anything will be contained in any one account or commentary, but that through free reporting and discussion, as Mr. Walter Lippmann put it, the truth will emerge.

Second, that the central point about the free press is not that it be accurate, though it must try to be; not that it even be fair, though it must try to be that; but that it be free. And that means, in the first instance, freedom from any and all attempts by the power of government to coerce it or intimidate it or police it in any way.



ERIC SEVAREID

For the Record . . .

Mr. Agnew's Plan for "Examining" Newscasters . . .

The following excerpts are from an appearance by Vice President Agnew on *Kup's Show*, WMAQ-TV, in Chicago, on October 20, 1970

Q. I'd like to ask something about politics and TV. It was about a year ago in Des Moines that you made that speech attacking the TV commentators who came on after the President's Vietnam speech, and I remember you criticized one of them for even raising an eyebrow—and when you said that the President has a right to communicate with the people without having his thoughts characterized through the prejudices of hostile critics before they can even be digested. What I want to ask is: aren't you really saying there that these people have no right to analyze and interpret the President—which is generally thought to be one of the classic roles of the press?

A. I thought—that the analysis is all right as long as it's balanced. Now, what happened in that case was that there was nothing but hostile criticism revealed to the public after that speech. I've really asked for more analysis, not less. I'd like to see more conservative commentators or people who reflect an opposite point of view. And that leads me to an interesting question I'd like to ask you both. I had a letter the other day suggesting that it would be a big benefit to the public if some of the premier news commentators, for example those that have had extremely wide exposure such as yourself or the network commentators, were examined by a group of people in government to explore in depth your opinions, your prejudices, if you will, if you have some, so that in the future the people who watch you would have a chance to know what underlying philosophy you have. Editorial comment must creep into talk shows to some extent. . . . but I'm talking about the network commentators, people like Eric Sevareid and Howard K. Smith and people of that type. Don't you think it would be beneficial for the viewing audience to know what they believe, so that when they characterize certain things, that there be some understanding of what their underlying philosophy is . . .

Q. Wouldn't you, Mr. Vice President, be criticized for government interference in the right of free speech? Anytime that government steps into any kind of an activity like this where free speech, or the press or commentators . . . ?

A. No, I said people in government—public officials to examine these people—not in a sense of demanding an examination, but simply at their own free will—as I come here of my own free will to be questioned by you. Would you be willing to go on a program where some people in the Senate or the House questioned you? I mean simply an interesting probe into your convictions so that the people that watch Eric Sevareid, for

example, would know where he stands on the issues he talks about. Don't you think that would be valuable? . . .

Q. Well, would it be voluntary, or would you say we have a committee, and we want you to come down? That's not very voluntary . . .

A. Now, I've got to clear that up, because I can see you're headed in the wrong direction on it. All I mean was nobody demanded that I come on your show. I would expect that nobody could demand that you would go on



VICE PRESIDENT SPIRO T. AGNEW

the kind of show I'm talking about. But I would think that if it would serve a useful purpose that you would be willing to appear on such a show, privately, not a government sponsored show, where the interrogation would be reversed. That's all I'm saying.

Q. . . . I'm curious about this—do you think it would turn up anyone with any subversive connections?

A. Boy, you fellows can really jump over 18 hurdles when you get on this subject. All I'm talking about is the people who are watching that tube have a right to know what your opinions are, if you happen to be a man who is telling the news every night, because you can select what parts of the news you want to emphasize and by your language you can convey a point of view that is not an editorial and yet is colored by

your own viewpoints. Now, I think the people ought to know what those viewpoints are. That's all I am saying.

Q. Well, you said in that Des Moines speech that networks should somehow be made more responsive to the views of the nation. Now, how on earth do you determine what the views of the nation are?

A. I hope you get some letters—I got a lot after that program. Let me say this: on that show—I know from talking to network executives—that they were inundated with mail telling them what the people thought about that, and it practically put them up the wall—and things have improved to some extent since then.

Q. Was that your intention, Mr. Vice President?

A. Not at all. I simply am drawing attention to a basic deficiency in our free communications system . . .

Q. Well, you're not complaining then of the coverage you're getting in the press now?

A. No. I'm not complaining about the coverage at all, but what I am complaining about is editorial analysis in some areas which seems to be that there is something different about my rhetoric and everyone else's and I've tried to give some examples of that here this morning.

Q. But, certainly the press of the nation is largely Republican so this criticism in the editorial content must be minimal.

A. I have to disagree with that. The press of the nation, the press with real clout is far from being Republican. It's gathered and centered in the northeastern part of the United States, demonstrated by *Newsweek* magazine and other weeklies, by the two largest newspapers with the most services: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*. It's demonstrated through the activities in the wire services which are based in that part of the country and you can take the other press, the national press, and take the Eastern establishment out of it and in circulation you'll find that that small Eastern nucleus far outdoes the rest of the country.

Q. The paper with the largest circulation in the country is a firm supporter of the Nixon administration.

A. That's true. You're talking about the *New York Daily News*. The *New York Daily News* has supported the President, and we're very grateful for that support.

Q. The most influential paper on the West Coast is a strong Nixon supporter.

A. Which one is that?
Q. The *Los Angeles Times*.

A. I'd have to take exception.

Q. At any rate, you don't quarrel with their right to analyze, to interpret and criticize.

A. No, I hope you don't quarrel with my right to analyze, interpret and criticize them.

Q. I'm fascinated by your proposal which I think is the first time you've made—at

least the first time I've heard it— about having the commentators face some kind of a questioning. I wonder if you'd like to discuss that a little more because I think that's very interesting.

A. Yes, for example, we have some very widely followed shows — Meet the Press, Face the Nation, Issues and Answers — and talk shows such as yours. It would be very interesting to have a show—a panel type show where senators from either party, representatives, I suppose maybe a couple of governors—could sit down with someone who has a national reputation as a commentator, Frank Reynolds, someone like that, and just examine him in depth on where he stands personally on the issues he talks about every day.

Q. Well, doesn't he make that clear in his commentary?

A. I don't think he does, because he is allegedly reporting the news and not his own feelings.

Q. Oh, he does commentary too, though.

A. Well, when he gets into commentary, he gives, to some extent, his views, on limited issues, but he's never been really probed. Neither have any of these people ever been probed.

Q. Mr. Vice President, will you volunteer to be one of the interrogators on such a show, if one of the networks would set up such a show?

A. After November I'd be glad to do it. I'll be pretty busy until then.