TELEVISION

What's News at CBS?

It was in March of 1963, near the end of the longest newspaper strike in New York history, when I got the call from CBS News. "Television," I thought, "wave of the future . . . electronic journalism . . . all that *money*." The starting salary was $210 a week, but every time I wrote a sponsored network news broadcast I got a fee.

"What's the fee for?"

"That's your talent fee. But you only get them if you write sponsored network newscasts. If you write a local show, you get nothing."

"Why?"

"Don't try to understand it. Just enjoy it."

The fee breakdown was interesting. For example, at 12:23 p.m. and 3:24 p.m. Monday through Friday, CBS News presents three minutes of news sandwiched in between the soap operas. The writer earns a fee of $3.30 for each show. The producer, as befitting his higher station, gets $12.50 for each show. But the director, who is outranked by the producer and who makes no news decisions (but who gets almost as much base pay) pulls in $35 a show.

I was one of two writers assigned to a one-hour morning local news show broadcast in New York at 7 a.m.

"Nobody watches it," the other writer told me.

But after a while, I was ready for bigger things and was assigned to the 3:24 p.m. network show and the 30-minute early evening local news. Here, I was taught the bulletin procedure. A bulletin interrupts programming to bring listeners a headline summary of some vital development.

"What kind of things do we bulletin?"

"Well," my editor said, "let's say that city hall burned down. That would be a local bulletin. But if a plane carrying a hundred people crashed into city hall, that would be a network bulletin."

"Suppose there were only sixty people on the plane?"

"Still a network bulletin."

"How about twenty-five?"

"Well, if it crashed into city hall, it would make the net, but if it crashed at Idlewild, there'd be a question. If you were on when it happened, you could check with somebody."

"Who?"

"Oh, Ernie or me or whoever is on."

"Well, would *you* make it a network bulletin with 25 aboard?"

"That's a toughie. Let's hope it never happens."

I later learned that, in addition to numbers killed, there is sort of a national origins criterion, too. For network purposes, the death of 12 Americans on a bus in Ohio is as important as the death of 23 Frenchmen, 32 Mexicans, 93 Chinese Nationalists, or 234 Chinese Communists.

One day, a minor Greek Cypriot official (he was to the Greek Cypriot government what I was to CBS) went to a meeting in London. The purpose of the meeting was to get the Turks and the Greeks on Cyprus to stop shooting at each other. The Greek came out of the meeting and said that Greeks would fight for liberty on Cyprus, "even though it means a third World War." Reuters news service promptly moved a bulletin using the "third World War" quote.

AP and UPI didn't touch it and we, in the newsroom, wouldn't touch it, either.

Then, from one of the television monitors on the newsroom wall, the NBC News bulletined the Reuters bulletin.

A top CBS News executive was standing in the newsroom: "Where the hell is *our* bulletin?"

"Ah-uh, well, we passed it," said the news editor on duty.

"You passed it? Why the hell did you do that? Let's get that bulletin on the air."

So the news editor took the Reuters bulletin and rewrote it (CBS hates to read raw wire service copy over the air because that stuff went out in the '30s), and CBS News put the bulletin

on the network, about 12 minutes after NBC. The bulletin was preceded by the ominous "WE INTERRUPT THIS PROGRAM TO BRING YOU A BULLETIN FROM CBS NEWS" and my colleagues and I wondered what effect the "third World War" phrase had on our listeners.

"We've got to stay on the ball with these bulletins," the executive said, lighting a cigar.

Rule: Bulletins shouldn't interrupt commercials! The policy was spelled out last September 24 in a memo from CBS News executive Ralph Paskman to the staff:

"Commercials should not be stepped on by a bulletin except in those very rare instances where the urgency is so great that the bulletins must be broadcast without delay."

The role of writers at CBS News was summed up two months ago by a lady guide who was taking new CBS employees through the production center on West 57th Street. ". . . and this is the network newsroom," she told them. "Radio is on this side of the room and television is over there. These people here are writers. They take the news from those machines over there, copy it down on a piece of paper and give it to an announcer to read over the air."

Sometimes even writers who "copy" stories from the wires need to research things. Both the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite and the CBS Morning News with Mike Wallace have budgets for researchers. The two three-minute shows have none. Nor does the half-hour Saturday version of the Evening News or the 15-minute Sunday News. And the CBS News Library is closed on week ends. I worked the week-end shows for a year, and on a couple of occasions, when I thought the wire service stories were incomplete, I called the *Herald Tribune* library (open on week ends) and got the information from a kindly librarian.

During the week, the people who work on the three-minute shows can use the library, if they're fast runners. The CBS Newsroom is on the first floor of 524 W. 57th Street; the CBS News Library is on the fifth floor of 518 W. 57th Street. In between are several labyrinthine interconnecting corridors and the second slowest elevator ride in the world. A half-hour from air time, no writer likes to contemplate this trip. He can't telephone the library for quick information, because the library has no messengers. (CBS has messengers, but they are someplace else in the building.)

The thing we call CBS News is in reality a series of fiefdoms, each lorded over by a producer and a star. Each fiefdom has its own budget, its own problems, its own goals, its own style, its own loyalties, its own serfs. The biggest fiefdom in the CBS kingdom is the Evening News with Walter Cronkite. This 30-minute show employs an executive producer, 2 ordinary producers, 5 associate producers, a director, 2 associate directors, 3 writers and a platoon of girls Friday and other assorted helpers. Contrast this with the 15-minute Sunday News, which has a producer, a director, an associate director and a writer, period. Not one girl Friday. And whereas a great deal of film is shot exclusively for use on Cronkite, the Sunday News must content itself pretty much with what comes in over the normally slow week end.

What about the people who report the news for CBS? They are almost as dependent on the wire services and print media as are the writers. CBS News reporters and correspondents are assigned almost exclusively to covering spot news (tips on which come from the wires) or features (tips on which come from the wires, newspapers or magazines). In my nearly three years of service, I never saw one reporter assigned to a long-range investigative project. At CBS if it hasn't been in print, it isn't news.

In the April, 1965 issue of *Harper's*, Robert E. Kintner, then president of NBC, recalled the state of news broadcasting and broadcasters back in the 1930's when he was a Washington newspaperman: "Newspapermen in those days – and I was among them – regarded broadcasters as upstarts, whose ideas of legwork was to run out and buy all the newspapers so they could read the headlines over the air."

Times have changed. Broadcasters no longer need to run out to buy newspapers. The newsapers are brought to

them by copy boys. And anybody who earns $50,000, $75,000, $150,000 or more each year for reading rewritten wire copy over the air is not an upstart.

After my first year with CBS News, I decided to apply for a CBS Foundation News Fellowship. Eight such fellowships are awarded each year and there is a national competition for them. The purpose of the fellowships, according to CBS, is "to make it possible for a holder to select, from the wide curriculum of Columbia University, courses . . . which can contribute most advantageously to a broadening and strengthening of his background for continued work in news and public affairs." Each fellowship provides full tuition costs and a generous living stipend for a year of full-time study.

I told the review board that I wanted to study urban problems and I noted that CBS had yet to deal with most of the serious problems facing American cities. The review board agreed, awarded me a fellowship and off I went to Columbia for a year. Returning to the job last summer, I felt that CBS should get some benefit from my education, since it had paid the bills. So I sent extensive memoranda to four top CBS News executives (including Fred W. Friendly), suggesting ways in which CBS might begin to examine urban problems. Not a single memo was acknowledged. I called one executive who told me he thought there was merit in some of my proposals, but he wasn't sure when CBS would act. The network finally announced it would do "The Decline and Fall of the American City," featuring Louis Mumford. But the show was quietly dropped. At last report, the producer who was to do the show was with another network. Late in January, Mr. Friendly said that urban problems would be the next "big arena" for CBS News. "We're going to get into this obscene situation with both feet," he said. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Friendly quit CBS because it suspended its live coverage of the Senate hearings on Vietnam.

My last assignment for CBS News was to write a one-hour special dealing with the involvement of organized religion in the War on Poverty. It became apparent that many Protestants were fearful of accepting federal money to fight poverty because it threatened to alter the traditional separation of church and state in this country. I wrote several candid memos to the producer about what I had found, as well as a shooting script, at his request.

Then he told me that we had "hit a bump with the Protestants."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean some of them took exception to your focusing on this separation of church and state problem the way you did. They are very sensitive about it."

"How do they know what approach I am taking?" I asked. He told me. He had Xeroxed the memos and the shooting script and sent them to leaders of the three major faiths in New York who serve as "advisors" to the religion department of CBS News.

I asked the producer if he thought it was reasonable to ask the Protestants to be objective about an issue that so deeply divides them, and said that perhaps it might have been better to go ahead with the program without their prior approval.

"This is the way we have always done it," he said.

A new writer was assigned to the broadcast, which at last report, had shifted its focus to the *achievements* of organized religion in fighting poverty.

RICHARD SEVERO