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# Narrow Focus on TV News

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

**NEWS FROM NOWHERE: Television and the News.** By Edward Jay Epstein. 321 pages. Random House. \$7.95.

The Nixon Administration's broadsides against television news have had at least one encouraging effect. Active and broad public attention is finally being generated about an important aspect of a mass medium that notoriously encourages passivity. While the quality of TV news remains a popular target for critics, professional and armchair, various polls continue to compile rising figures that find most Americans consider television to be both the main and most trusted source of their news.

Edward Jay Epstein, author of "Inquest," an investigative study of the Warren Commission, began "News From Nowhere" in 1968 as a doctoral dissertation at Harvard University, where three and a half years later he received a Ph.D. in political science. An edited version of the book was recently published in *The New Yorker* magazine.

The book's focus is narrow, much more so than the title, jacket copy and ads imply. Mr. Epstein deals only with the nightly half-hour editions of news on each of the three commercial networks. This excludes local news programming, plus the weekly news "magazines," and the periodic full-length documentaries, which are more likely to contain the investigative and other types of reporting that Mr. Epstein finds scarce.

### 'Certain Consistent Directions'

His central concern is "the effect of the processes of a news organization on the news product." He does not argue that TV news is determined entirely by factors in network organization, but he finds that "certain consistent directions in selecting, covering and reformulating events over long-term periods are clearly related to organizational needs."

Those needs span a broad range, from the "economic realities" of broadcasting and government regulation of the industry to program budgets and audience ratings. Mr. Epstein's thesis is certainly legitimate.

The best and most valuable sections of "News From Nowhere" deal with the economic and political factors involved in network news. The crux of the economic problem, using the assumptions of network executives, is that "while it might make economic sense for a newspaper to invest resources in increased news coverage on the assumption that it would produce exclusive and sensational stories which in turn would lead to higher newsstand circulation, it does not make economic sense for a network to maintain anything more than the minimum number of camera crews necessary to fill the available news-programming time. . . ."

Camera crews are expensive, and very few are maintained full-time to provide the TV audience with "national" coverage. Simply in terms of logistics, this severely limits the "geography" on news film coverage and is a key factor in charges of "Eastern Establishment" bias.

Mr. Epstein's analysis of the relationship between the networks, their affiliates and the Federal Communications Commission is excellent. On the one hand, as protector of the Fairness Doctrine, the F.C.C. might be blamed for the type of balanced "pro and con" presentations in which all sides of an issue are given equal weight in time and space, resulting in an impact of zero.

On the other hand, in requiring stations to carry a certain amount of national news, the F.C.C. almost guarantees clearances and, in effect, becomes a guardian angel for network news departments. Clay T. Whitehead has latched on to that role, and would like to put an end to all such requirements by the F.C.C.

Mr. Epstein's book, however, is not without flaws. Some are minor, in the category of misspelled names. Les Midgley of C.B.S. News turns up as Midggle, Edith Efron of TV Guide as Ephron. They're minor, but also do little to inspire confidence in the standards for Harvard dissertations. And, as in many dissertations, Mr. Epstein's style tends to the ponderous and repetitive.

The book's major flaw, however, is due to circumstances beyond Mr. Epstein's control. The author had relatively full access, for about four months in 1968, only to the news operations of the National Broadcasting Company. The Columbia Broadcasting System refused him permission to observe its operations on "a continuous basis," and the American Broadcasting Company, with a new executive producer of the evening news, was in a state of personnel flux.

### Unintentionally Misleading

While this inevitably narrows the book's focus further, Mr. Epstein explains that "similarities at all three networks greatly outweighed differences." But, however unintentionally, the general reader may still be misled on a number of details.

For one example, reference is made to the use of "canned" sound effects for silent news-film footage. The practice is attributed, correctly, to N.B.C. News, but without making clear that at C.B.S., as one spokesman delicately puts it, "anybody trying that would be hung by his heels from the top-floor window."

Finally, much of Mr. Epstein's thesis belabors, with somewhat sinister undertones, the obvious. No, network news is not truly a "mirror of reality." As all reporting involves selectivity, "reality" is a matter of degree and perspective. Yes, networks and organizations attract and promote certain types of individuals. So do underground newspapers. Organization journalists must confront at least some rules of the organization game, which might not include "advocacy journalism."

Mr. Epstein concludes on a modest point: "Not to change the news but to understand its limitations." From the predominant and already dated vantage point of network evening news in 1968 and 1969, he succeeds often enough but, over-all, only modestly.