

# And that's the way it is

*A few days after announcing his impending retirement as anchorman of the CBS Evening News, Walter Cronkite sat down with Osborn Elliott, dean of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism and former editor-in-chief of Newsweek, to talk about, among other things, broadcast journalism's past, present, and future. Here, excerpted from their two-hour conversation, are Mr. Cronkite's views on some of the topics they discussed.*

## **On TV reporters who are in the business for the wrong reason:**

There is a great body of people coming out of so-called "communications schools" who really don't seem to me to be qualified to be practicing journalists today. They've learned the techniques of broadcasting. But I have a great concern about their motivation. I'm afraid that they're being lured into thinking of this as a glamorous business—and perhaps by the money. They really want more to be personalities, stars if you will, than journalists. I don't think they've got that gut drive which is required for all good journalists . . . [that] feeling that this truth needs to be known.

## **On the superficiality of TV journalism, and what can be done about it:**

TV crews are assigned three or four stories a day—they dash into a story at the last minute. They can get all that they can use in a minute or a minute-and-a-half stand-up piece in a few minutes' time, barely checking for the who, what, where, when, and why, and seldom do they seem to cover even all the five W's. They never have an opportunity to organize a story down to the twentieth and twenty-third paragraph. You don't really recognize how to do a lead, how to get the best out of a story until you have to write the thing down to the very last paragraph. So I wonder about these people. I wonder what reporting in the next generation is going to be like. I think that we could solve this problem overnight if we got back to requiring print experience before going into television.

## **On the sins of consultants who tamper with the news:**

A lot of what's wrong at the local level has to do with the consultants who have tried to jack up television ratings by hyping the news. I've seen recommendations from consultants that say no story should run over thirty seconds, film clips should run twenty seconds if possible, the first film story has to be hit within the first thirty seconds of the broadcast, and all this sort of thing. This is, of course, absolute balderdash. When it gets down to a consultant dictating how the news is

handled, what is news in the community, and who are the types of personalities that should be on the air, I think it's really dangerous.

## **On the sins of local TV news:**

There's no question that the majority of local stations do a pretty poor job. They specialize on the easy visual, the fire; any old jackknifed trailer-truck makes a good story for them, whether anybody's hurt or not. Whereas they should be spending some time—a lot of time—sitting in City Hall, the county court house, the PTA, the school board, things like that. But those stories take a degree of journalism proficiency which a lot of the local stations don't have; and they are probably not the most audience-grabbing of all news stories.

## **On the sad and sedentary life of an anchorman:**

The idea of an anchorman being glamorous is a mistaken concept that should be corrected. My gosh, if you're stuck on that desk you're not available for all that good street reporting and all that good dashing around the world. That, I think, is where the glamour is, but maybe that's just because I'm an old-fashioned reporter.

## **On Abscam, and the ethics of the leak and the plant:**

I think in the case of Abscam it was more of a plant than a leak; there is some difference. I think a plant is a case where the leaker deliberately seeks out the press with forethought and intent to gain the maximum publicity on the story for one reason or another. A leak is after a story is already developing and people, perhaps inadvertently, let out facts through the pressure of very good reporting. Abscam smells to me much more like a plant. But, whatever, I think it's a despicable thing in our democracy when that very first assumption, that you're innocent until proven guilty, is denied.

## **On grand jury leaks:**

I've always felt that a grand jury leak is a rather horrible thing. Once it's known someone has been investigated by a grand jury, they're forever smeared. My policy as a managing editor is that if grand jury information is being leaked, I would have my reporter get everything possible—report it just as if it was going in the newspaper—and I'd put it in a file in my desk. Then, if the competition broke the story, I would follow up with what we know.

## **On what TV learned from covering the protests of the sixties:**

The first thing we learned was to make our presence as





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unostentatious as possible—to avoid the lights if we could and to keep the cameras as hidden as we possibly could, to make our presence as invisible as we could possibly make it. We also learned, although the lesson has not been universally accepted, that a riot on one street corner does not mean that a whole city is in flames.

### **On Tom Wolfe's book, *The Right Stuff*, and how the media treated the astronauts:**

To an extent we missed a story. But that wasn't really so much our fault as it was the fault of the space administration and the astronauts' exclusive contract with *Life* magazine. *Life* missed its own story and we were frozen out. They were telling only the happy side. All of us who were covering the story did know the peccadilloes of the astronauts and their life on Cape Kennedy to a certain extent. But I think there was some justification for not exploring their personal lives. I think that when a congressman gets so drunk he can't perform his services to the public, then it should be exposed. But I don't think this was affecting the astronauts' work and I don't think it was fair game at the time.

### **On the assassination of John Kennedy:**

I wonder how much has been hidden that we don't know. I do know that I interviewed the late President Johnson, and he said to me that he had some feeling that it might have been a conspiracy, and then he asked that that be stricken—and we did, under some

duress, strike that. I've always thought that there was a second person involved in the thing, but not in the manner of a grand conspiracy. But I still don't believe, despite the House committee's investigation, the multiple gun theory. We did a long investigation of it ourselves. We spent almost a million dollars, and we could not establish that second gun thing—the man-on-the-knoll idea. But I wonder now, with the CIA plot to assassinate Castro, about the possibilities of setting up something of this kind for whatever international purpose. I'm not as happy as I once was with the Warren Commission Report.

### **On covering political campaigns:**

All of us have been the beneficiaries of a new form of political journalism that Teddy White brought to us. He was the one who began digging into the mechanics of campaigning. I think we—particularly the writing press, but television as well—swung over to looking at the mechanics, at the organization of the campaign, the campaign managers, the media managers, the pollsters. We were dealing almost exclusively with that, rather than paying attention to the candidates and what they stood for, and what they were saying. We're kind of coming back now from this big pendulum swing.

### **On coping with overcommunication:**

With instant communication today—these 1,200-word-a-minute printers or whatever they are—we can't even absorb it on the desk of the *CBS Evening News*, let alone re-form it in twenty-four minutes for the public. We've got a pile of AP and UPI copy in that office that defies reading. But I think that with cable and retrieval systems and so forth, we're going to be able to present a lot more information to the public than we ever have before: they'll go to one channel for all the financial news, and another channel for all the consumer news.

### **On the question of whether TV news caters to the middlebrow mind and tastes:**

Yes, if you appreciate that that means raising the level of the mass to middlebrow. But those whose ceiling would be higher anyway are likely to go elsewhere. *Harper's* and *Atlantic* will still be published. There is no indication that the ceiling is being lowered, but the floor has been raised.

### **On the question of whether any newsperson is worth eight million dollars over five years:**

Compared to a rock-and-roll singer? Yes. Compared to a teacher? No. ■