

The Kennedy Assassination and the American Public. Edited by
Bradley S. Greenberg & Edwin B. Parker. Stanford U.
Press, 1965.

~~What Day in Dallas~~ by Tom Wicker; Introduction: Communication in
Crisis - Wilbur Schramm

p. 19

The public reaction and the function of communication

Beyond passing the news on, and rushing to TV or radio, how did people react? Obviously there was a very deep, a very widespread emotional response. Less than half the people in the national sample could continue their usual activities (Sheatsley and Feldman, p.154). Some felt the need to be with persons they knew or loved; they hurried home or telephoned or visited friends or relatives. Others wanted to be by themselves; the more they admired the President, the more they felt this need.²¹ Television, under differing circumstances, might meet either of these needs; it could be either a solitary or a group activity.

²¹ According to Sheatsley and Feldman (p. 154), 51 per cent of Negroes said that they had wanted to be by themselves, but only 28 per cent of Southern whites so reported.

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But an important part of the answer to such question must lie in the performance and use of mass communication during the four days. It was extremely important to a shocked public to have such a large and continuing flow of information on the matter that concerned them. Incomplete and grudging information at a time of crisis breeds suspicion and rumor. Able press representatives have always known this. Thus when President Eisenhower had his heart attack, James Hagerty had the President's doctor explain the illness and the prognosis to newsmen and to the television audience; as a result fears and doubts were allayed, people took the illness in stride, and ground was laid for public confidence in the President's ability to carry on his duties and ultimately to serve a second term. The flow of news from Dallas also did something like this. As much as we may regret some of the things that happened in the Dallas police headquarters, still if it were not for the aggressive news coverage by the media and the frankness of officials we should probably ^{have} had greater anxiety and a slower integration.

The swift, full coverage undoubtedly grounded many rumors

before they could circulate. By speaking so fully and frankly of Oswald and the events in which he was involved, the media helped to reduce fears of a conspiracy and prepare people to believe the theory that a lone, disturbed man had done it. ...