

8/8/67



Radio and Television

Hill Will Study Radio and Riot

By Lawrence Laurent

CONGRESS HAS been threatening to investigate whether television and radio contribute to the riots that have scarred this hot summer.

The current issue of Television Digest reports that Rep. Harley Staggers (D-W.Va.), chairman of the House Commerce Committee, favors hearings on two main charges. These are that "TV coverage of statements by the Stokely Carmichaels and H. Rap Browns contributes to riots" and "early coverage of disturbances helps them grow into full-scale riots."

At the other end of the scale was yesterday morning's newscast by Paul Harvey of ABC Radio. Harvey quoted Brown and with his usual, unfortunate theatrical assnity he explained why he broadcast such news. Harvey's reason: "To prevent them from sneaking up on us."

A different kind of explanation came yesterday from a network spokesman. Speaking of riot coverage he said: "We're damned if we cover them and damned if we ignore them."

I don't know what a congressional investigation might conclude but I have just returned from a six-week stay at the University of Detroit. I was in Detroit during the outburst of burning and looting and three of Detroit's TV stations—WJBK-TV, WWJ-TV and WXYZ-TV—have my gratitude.

I came to admire in particular WXYZ-TV, which is owned and operated by the American Broadcasting Co. The coverage was a model of restraint.

The station declined to report the riot for about ten hours after it began. Even then, reporters were under orders from program manager Dean McCarthy to avoid the term "riot" and—in particular—to stay away from the sensational rumors that were sweeping through the city.

Coverage, as a result, was informative and never inflammatory.

On-the-air reporters did sweat heavily to avoid the term "riot." They said it was a "civil disturbance" and it was "civil disobedience" and the looting was taking place in "the troubled area."

When I left Detroit on Sat-

urday some of my neighbors were complaining that national networks had "overplayed" the story. This is an expected reaction in a huge city, for a citizen in one of the neat, elm-shaded suburbs who knew about the riots only through mass media.

In the area that was hit hardest, however, the destruction would have been impossible to exaggerate.

One of my students did claim that one of the hard "rock" radio stations did continue playing the recording of "Burn, Baby, Burn" during the rioting. He couldn't remember which station and telephone calls to a dozen stations failed to confirm his report. The student insisted he wasn't trying to make a joke and since his family's small business had been destroyed I was inclined to believe him.

NBC News announced yesterday that the first of its Friday night news specials (Sept. 15) will be an "Analysis of Riots." A unit, headed by producer Fred Freed and reporter Frank McGee, arrived in Detroit yesterday and plans to be there for three weeks.

This news team will probably ignore the role played by radio and television, for mass media rarely examines its own work. My own feelings through the long four days was one of gratitude for the continuous flow of calmly presented information.

I suspect that some lives were saved and that some hysterical panic was prevented.