

TV: A Look at the Press

Two Programs Scrutinize Journalism, Its Problems and Responsibilities

NYT 5/19/67
By JACK GOULD

THE subject of the press and its operating procedures chanced to be the theme of two hours of televised discussion last night. The first hour was "News in Perspective," produced by National Educational Television and The New York Times; the second was a trans-Atlantic exchange on the rights of a free press and the importance of the individual's right to a fair trial. Journalism is obviously coming in for a share of scrutiny; to judge by last night's programs, the consequences should be stimulating and fruitful.

"News in Perspective" starred James Reston, associate editor of The Times; Tom Wicker, the newspaper's Washington columnist; Douglass Cater, special assistant to the President and a former reporter, and Lester Markel, associate editor of The Times, who is also moderator of the series.

To pluck the central theme from a discussion involving a group such as this inevitably invites the hazards of oversimplification, but there was substantial unanimity on the need for the press to develop reporting in depth and to maintain accuracy and perspective despite pressures for easy-to-read opening paragraphs and succinct headlines.

Within its 60 minutes, the program ranged over a variety of topics, including the value of scoops; the virtues and abuses of the background press conference, where a news source is not explicitly identified; the relationship between the Government and the press, and public-opinion samplings. For shadings of difference in viewpoints tune in The Times on TV.

Mr. Markel says that he did not believe a Pulitzer Prize should be awarded to a reporter merely because he scored a scoop. Mr. Cater criticized "scoop happy" reporters and urged more rounded reporting in depth. Mr. Wicker said that journalism required new techniques to study the causes and meaning of events and de-

cried excessive emphasis on hard leads primarily intended to sustain a headline.

Mr. Reston said that the press had to "tunnel under" current events if it were not to become a billboard for faites accompli. He also chided reporters who complain about the inaccessibility of Washington news; channels of communication to officials are open for the journalist willing to work, he said.

The discussion also, in effect, cautioned against assumptions that either Government or public opinion is monolithic. Mr. Cater voiced concern over stories that intended to imply a higher degree of authoritative confirmation by Government than was warranted. Neither Mr. Reston nor Mr. Wicker was concerned over polls indicating that the majority of Americans could not identify the Vietcong. Mr. Reston spoke of a "distracted generation" beset by many complex concerns, while Wicker said that opinion was determined by many diverse groups of varying areas of specialized knowledge and interest.

The virtues of Mr. Markel's hour were in bringing the realities of newspaper behavior into the open and in avoiding the more common approach of putting journalism above criticism or taking refuge in the cry of a free press. The minor disadvantage was that the program encompassed so many aspects of the journalistic world that not all could be adequately explored. Some time soon, the press might be regularly reviewed by TV as broadcasting is by the press. An interesting follow-up to last night's hour would be the views of the press of a panel that has never been part of it.

"Free Press, Free Trial" was the title of the American Broadcasting Company's offering in a new series called "Summer Focus." It brought together journalists, lawyers and judges in London and New York. The taped program, interconnected earlier by satellite relay, gave a generally absorbing review of the long and familiar debate

over protecting press rights and the individual's right to an unprejudiced trial.

The main argument, of course, was on whether publicity before trial, barred in Britain, jeopardizes a defendant's constitutional guarantee of a trial free from prejudice. On this side of the Atlantic, Arthur B. Hanson, general counsel to the American Newspaper Publishers Association, and Justice Bernard Meyer of the New York State Supreme Court, among others, differed on how a workable understanding to achieve both objectives could be reached.

From London, Dame Rebecca West and Lord Patrick Devlin, a retired Lord Chief Justice, outlined the rules in Britain and cited some instances where abuses arise. Dame Rebecca was especially interesting in conveying the environment of a trial where people may reveal themselves as different from what they were before.

The questions of Frank Reynolds, the moderator, were at times awkwardly phrased, but the technical handling of the trans-Atlantic broadcast was extremely smooth. A viewer was hardly conscious that an ocean separated the panelists; they appeared to be grouped around one table.