

TV Views

SFChronicle JUL 28 1975

On Buying the News

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United Press

New York

ABC NEWS' rejection of Jack Anderson's interview with President Ford raises the question of whether or not a TV network should be criticized for not buying news from outside sources.



Anderson, a Pulitzer prize winner and columnist (Merry-Go-Round), offered ABC the opportunity of using the Ford interview. However, ABC, which employs Anderson for its "AM America" show, refused the video exclusive. Anderson's agent is reportedly

trying to sell the "conversation" to other buyers.

"There is no earthly reason to buy it," said William Sheehan, president of ABC news. "We have a large Washington bureau and doing interviews is one of the reasons why we are in existence."

Sheehan's comments would be echoed by his competitors at the other networks. Although the three network policy is firm, there have been exceptions, notably non-network material used after the fall of Vietnam. CBS bought an outside interview with Fidel Castro, but used only portions of it.

Now there are some people who find this policy anathema. It curtails the freedom of the press, they say. It's snobbery, they add.

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THESE POINTS are well taken, especially in the case of Anderson, an acknowledged professional. But overall the network policy toward using outside sources is correct and proper.

When a network airs a story — video or radio — it attests to the accuracy of the report. An artful editor can rearrange a scene or interview to look entirely different. A peaceful smile of a child might mean the Communists in South Vietnam are merciful conquerors. But the smile could be prompted by a gun pointing at the child off camera.

Last year, Shirley MacLaine tried to peddle her film on China to the networks, but her offer was rejected, leaving the actress complaining about the policy of not using outside material.

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AS IT TURNS OUT, one of the women who accompanied Miss MacLaine on the trip disclosed the actress rehearsed several scenes. Had NBC, ABC or CBS purchased the MacLaine film, they would have had to attest to the veracity of every frame of film. But above all the buyer would have had to attest to the integrity of Miss MacLaine as a journalist, a profession in which the actress has no credentials.

When TV news airs a dispatch, the integrity of the company and the men behind it are on the line. In a world filled with charlatans and propagandists, reporters must maintain the professional level of the product they produce. This is especially true of television news, the most powerful medium of information in the history of mankind.

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BILL BEUTEL, anchorman on ABC's failing morning show "AM America," is going the way of Stephanie Edwards, an unimpeachable industry source reported. Miss Edwards left the morning show earlier this year. An ABC spokesman denied the report. However, it is common knowledge that ABC chieftains are taking a long hard look at revamping the ailing show which has slipped into a poor third place behind NBC's "Today" and the "CBS Morning News."

In other news, another source said plans are being laid to move Peter Jennings of "AM" to New York. The source said Jennings, who is Washington-based, is not delighted with the idea and other employers are putting out feelers.

Terrence O'Flaherty is ill.