

TV: Show-Business Aspects of News Programs

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

Few things upset television news executives more than having a news broadcast referred to as a "news show." They feel that the label lacks dignity, that it smacks too strongly of show business. There is only one difficulty: TV news, no matter how lofty its pronounced aims, is rarely able to escape the clutches of show business considerations.

Although tightly organized within, the world of TV news is not immune to manipulation by outsiders with sophisticated knowledge of its basic techniques. Most public figures now know how to look their best for the cameras, how to schedule press conferences for maximum potential exposure, how to tailor their remarks to the time requirements of TV editing. The most recent and instructive example was provided by H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, formerly of the White House and the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, in his "Conversations with Mike Wallace."

For the privilege of stanchly arguing his innocence on an invaluable national forum, Mr. Haldeman was paid at least \$50,000 by CBS News. Included in the deal were about 25 hours of Haldeman home movies, from which CBS finally excerpted about four minutes for the second hour of conversation. One shot showed Henry A. Kissinger being served a hamburger. The rest was Mr. Haldeman, quite predictably and at times quite effectively, on the offensive about the purity of his intentions.

The normally astute Mr. Wallace found himself trapped. Reactions to his "performance" run along two lines: He wasn't tough enough, allowing Mr. Haldeman off the hook too easily,

or he was too tough, his sighs and tones of skepticism creating a sympathy vote for Mr. Haldeman against the "nasty" press. Mr. Haldeman, projecting his new warm, boyish image, could hardly lose. Meantime, CBS News was being reduced to the use of "coming attractions" on the first hour, showing "teasers" from the second hour, in the manner of a third-rate movie of the week.

Perhaps it just a matter of images, which can be dangerously superficial things. Much has been written, for instance, about the expert advice President Ford has been getting on his TV appearances. But few Presidential TV appearances have been more curious and ineffectual than the one delivered last Saturday evening as Mr. Ford announced his decision to sign the new tax bill.

In what appeared as a somewhat imperious gesture toward his mass audience, Mr. Ford signed the bill with the declaration that it "now becomes law." This was followed by an explanation of his concern over the rising deficit in the Federal budget. The figures were uncomplicated—an estimate that was originally \$52-billion, is now \$60-billion and could go as high as \$100-billion.

But the President was obliged to stand up and announce, "Maybe I can show you better on this chart." Off to the side of the set, there was a chart with three columns, about as obvious and helpful as those tables in some commercials for aspirin. Mr. Ford pointed to the \$60-billion column and said, "I am drawing the line right here," and, sure enough, he drew a line right there. The unfortunate impression was that of a Presidential show-and-tell demonstration for all the kiddies in television land.

Show business has its limitations. So does the typical TV news show under present standards and practices

Given the basic entertainment/advertising nature of the medium, the limitations perhaps are—and probably

will remain—inevitable. On a daily schedule, the half-hour of network evening news is a more sophisticated equivalent of the newsreel that used to accompany the double bill at movie theaters.

Outside of that half-hour, TV news "specials" are forced to scramble for meager portions of prime time, usually slots that should have minimal effects on over-all entertainment ratings and, therefore, on network revenues. The result is that many producers, even the most talented, are satisfied if they can get one documentary on the air over the course of a year.

Within this general context, TV news has acquired and encouraged its internal show business pressures. Formats are developed, complete with anchormen and on-camera reporters who must project the "right" images. In case of ratings distress, the anchormen and reporters are likely to be dumped before the format is.

Like the entertainment side of television, news is produced by committee. The successful format quickly becomes rigid formula. An occasional "personal essay" may be possible—NBC's Robert Northshield on the Navajo Indians, CBS's Andrew

Rooney on Washington bureaucracy — but it is little more than an aberration in the strict tradition of group journalism.

Sameness is cultivated. On any edition of the evening news, most film footage comes out looking like stock footage (Vietnamese refugees walking toward the camera, Vietnamese refugees walking away from the camera). On any given network, one documentary "looks" remarkably like any other.

Intensely personal, and serious, contributions are discouraged. Peter Davis, who was "put on ice" by CBS following the controversy over his "The Selling of the Pentagon," had to go outside television to make "Hearts and Minds," an attempt to come to terms with the American disaster of the Vietnam war. It would never fit into the format of a CBS Reports. That is a major fault in TV news, a fault making it all the more difficult for the form to advance beyond the level of "news shows."