

WATERGATE SPURS JOURNALISM ON TV

Medium Regains Credibility, Broadcast Survey Finds

By LES BROWN

Watergate was a fountainhead for the enlivening of television journalism over the last year, restoring the credibility of the medium with much of the public and creating a new atmosphere for investigative reporting.

This is one broad conclusion of the just-issued annual report of the Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Survey in Broadcast Journalism, made in conjunction with the 1972-73 duPont-Columbia broadcast news awards.

The awards ceremony will be held at Columbia on Thursday.

Noting a marked improvement in local television news over the state of the art five years ago, the report observed that it was achieved against unfavorable odds, in a period when those wielding power over broadcasting — government, sponsors and management—gave the journalists "remarkably little encouragement to do their best."

Along with numerous Government attempts at interference and "carefully orchestrated threats" to broadcast news operations, station managements continued to intrude on news decisions and advertisers played their role by withholding support, the report said.

Wider Coverage

Yet television journalists at the local level, partly spurred by the impact of Watergate, ventured into such important subject areas as the energy crisis, pollution, land use, law and order, urban decay, minorities and the controversy around television journalism itself.

The report, written by Marvin G. Barrett, the survey and awards director, noted that five years ago—when Columbia University associated itself with the duPont Awards, then a quarter-century old—only one local television documentary was judged comparable to the networks' best efforts. This year, Mr. Barrett said, there were dozens that qualified.

A majority of the television stations in the country, however, were either not heard from or were reported on negatively by the survey's informants or the awards' jurors.

"The do-nothings outnumbered their betters five to one," the report stated, "and among them were some of the nation's most profitable broadcast operations."

Among the more than 200 news directors participating in the study, 72 per cent mentioned Watergate as a reason for new hope and self-respect among their newsmen, and 17 per cent reported finding a notable decrease in complaints of news bias, a trend they attributed directly to Watergate.

News Increases Locally

At the local level, 31 per cent of the stations reported increases in budget for newscasts during the year, 15 per cent received added funds for investigative reporting and 14 per cent for the production of documentaries.

In many instances, the allocation of funds for investigative reporting represented the station's first commitment to that kind of journalism, and the report asserted that the revival in general had been "encouraged by the example of Watergate."

Although essentially a print investigation, Watergate filled hours of broadcast time and "changed the relationship between broadcasters and government," the report stated.

"Watergate drastically reduced the effectiveness of the Administration's long-standing campaign against the networks. Although the President and his partisans eventually returned to the attack, it was from a severely compromised position and against an adversary whose morale had been dramatically improved," it said.

Watergate Influence Noted

The report also credits the Watergate episode with saving journalism in public television. There had been an attempt by the Administration to drive the government-funded television system out of news reporting and analysis.

But the public television network was first to commit itself to complete Watergate coverage, and it presented 51 days of the hearings live and more than 250 hours of prime-time programming on Watergate. This made the Watergate hearings the most visible event in broadcast history, according to the report, and gave public television its largest audiences to date.

Radio was given poor grades by the survey for its journalistic enterprise, although some exceptions were noted.

"The commercial networks, which did yeoman service in their coverage of Watergate and added a respectable number of late-night hours to consider important breaking stories, could bring themselves to put many serious or controversial documentaries in prime time, the real proof of television's dedication to informing its audience."