

# Study at University Disputes President on 'Distorted' Newscasts

By LES BROWN

Three teams of graduate students in broadcast journalism at the American University in Washington have found a charge by President Nixon that television news was "outrageous, vicious, distorted" to be generally without substantiation. The students' findings were based on a study of the two-week period before the President's attack was made last Oct. 26.

By a coincidence, the students had been taping the evening newscasts of all three networks, in their entirety from Oct. 15 to Oct. 26 for a research project in a graduate seminar conducted by Prof. Edward Bliss Jr. When Mr. Nixon made his charge against the networks, the original project—which had been to study the concluding lines of correspondents' reports for their susceptibility to editorializing—was expanded to an examination of whether the President's criticisms were valid.

## 'Clean Bill of Health'

Professor Bliss, who had supervised the students' content analysis of both the transcripts and video tapes of the newscasts, said that the incapable conclusion of their report was that it gave the networks "a clean bill of health." Although the students turned up a few instances of questionable editorial judgment, he said, they found "none of the distortions President Nixon was talking about."

In fact, Professor Bliss said, the study found the networks to have performed so objectively in their coverage of a period of unusual domestic and inter-

national crisis that the students were requested to ask the news executives at all three networks whether they had been given special instructions from their headquarters to be especially careful about any show of bias. All three networks answered that there were no special instructions and that the newsmen were performing in their usual way, Mr. Bliss said.

## Nixon Statement Backed

Several White House spokesmen, including Bruce Herschensohn, deputy special assistant to the President, said the Administration continued to stand by Mr. Nixon's statement on Oct. 26, which went: "I have never seen such outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting in 27 years of public life."

Mr. Herschensohn said he was putting together a list of specific charges that would document the President's broad indictment of news reporting on the networks. When completed, he said, the list would be turned over to the National News Council.

The council, a professional group formed a year ago to investigate important complaints against the news media, made an effort to explore the President's Oct. 26 charges but was unable, after several attempts, to secure from the White House specific identification of the broadcast items that prompted Mr. Nixon's attack.

The graduate students' report noted that the period covered in the survey was one in which "emotions were running high" in the country. Along with an outbreak of war in the Middle

East and a global alert of United States military forces, the two weeks encompassed the Saturday on which special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox and Deputy Attorney General William D. Ruckelshaus were dismissed and Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson resigned. There were also the subsequent calls for the President's resignation or impeachment by prominent labor and political figures.

Mr. Bliss, who once as a news editor for the Columbia Broadcasting System, assigned the 12 students to three teams, each concentrating on a single network. Exempted from their consideration were commentaries or news analyses, which by definition contained opinions.

All three study teams, checking written transcripts against the video tapes to determine whether there was editorial comment by voice inflection, passed favorable judgment on the networks, calling their reports fair, objective and balanced over-all.

The team covering C.B.S. News said in conclusion, "We went on a witch-hunt but found no witches."

That team did, however, criticize one straight news story, from among the 216 reported during the two-week period, which it considered unfair to Mr. Nixon. The item, delivered on Oct. 15 by Walter Cronkite, told of the President serving as host for dinner for former Sec-

retary of State William P. Rogers.

The objectionable detail cited by the study team was a reference to former Secretary of Commerce Maurice H. Stans, one of the invited guests, who was identified as "under Federal indictment in New York in the [Robert L.] Vesco case."

The study group noted that "by pointing out that Stans is under indictment, C.B.S. News was deliberately casting Nixon in an unfavorable light."