

Right 'chemistry'

By Lawrence Laurent



Martin Agronsky (foreground) with a company (from left) of Hugh Sidey, James J. Kilpatrick, Peter Lisagor and Carl Rowan.

Without using a single gimmick or a single visual trick, a program called "Agronsky and Company" has managed to do the impossible. With little more than good information, informed opinion and intellectual conflict, the program dominates its 7 p.m., Saturday, (Channel 9) time period.

And from its more favored position in the schedule, "Agronsky and Company" manages to draw audiences bigger than those attending such network programs as "Face the Nation" and "Meet the Press."

Channel 9's research director, Ms. Teddy Reynolds, using the A.C. Nielsen Co.'s most recent audience survey of Washington, estimates that the Saturday "Agronsky" telecasts reach a total audience of 234,000 viewers. The estimate for the Sunday morning (10:30 a.m.) re-run audience is 38,000 viewers. The total is 272,000 viewers.

Such figures guarantee, Ms. Reynolds said, that "Agronsky and Company" is Washington's most viewed local public affairs program. In that May, 1974 report by Nielsen, the program had a rating of 13, meaning that 13 per cent of all TV sets in the metropolitan area were tuned to it; and a 32 per cent share of those who were watching TV between 7 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., Saturday.

The program is further evidence, also, of the mistaken notion of TV executives that a program must hit quickly or it will never be a success. The Agronsky program is more than five years old and its biggest success came about two years ago. Ms. Reynolds recalls: "Two years ago, we hoped for ratings of 8s and 9s. About a year ago, the ratings went to double numbers and the growth was taking place while people were supposed to be getting tired of Watergate and Washington news stories.

The ratings growth is not easily explained.

Agronsky is doing what he has always done, following convictions such as "there is drama in truth" and "facts are interesting to the public." He has held these convictions in a journalistic career that reaches back to 1936.

The growth, however, may come closer to paralleling the settling of the regular panel. The regulars are Hugh Sidey of Time magazine, syndicated columnist James Jackson Kilpatrick, Peter Lisagor of the Chicago Daily News and syndicated columnist Carl Rowan. If one of the regulars is on an out-of-town assignment, the place will be filled from a back-up group that includes Crosby Noyes of the Washington Star-News, or Elizabeth Drew of the Atlantic Monthly or syndicated columnists Joseph Kraft or George Will. If a main subject is economic the place may go to Hobart Rowen of The Washington Post.

"We looked," said Agronsky, "for the most knowledgeable reporters we could find, but they had to be reporters who could talk knowledgeably and entertainingly." The distinction may be subtle, but is very real. Many of the nation's finest print reporters are tongue-tied and inarticulate when away from their typewriters.

Here, one finds the quiet philosopher named Hugh Sidey. His conclusions are tentative, hesitant in the manner of a thoughtful man groping toward a consensus solution. Lisagor is a different kind of person. He's a reporter, who moves frequently on the biggest stories and his most frequent contribution to a discussion begins: ". . . told me" or "Here is exactly what he said." Mostly, Lisagor keeps hidden a store of outrageous, off-color jokes that make him one of Washington's most appreciated (privately) newspapermen.

Kilpatrick and Rowan are the most frequent sparring partners. Each is from

a border state (Kilpatrick from Oklahoma; Rowan from Tennessee); each knew the pangs of poverty during childhood, and each came to Washington and national prominence after doing splendid work on newspapers in the hinterlands. And while the political shorthand in the terms "liberal" and "conservative" tends to be meaningless in translation, much of the public identifies Rowan as "liberal" and Kilpatrick as "conservative." By whatever terms the two do have genuine differences of views and each is able to call down a legion of angels to help carry his argument.

Agronsky says: "We are pleased by straight talk. We don't want punches pulled. We want each to say what he thinks. For the viewers, what they say provides insights into the business of running the country."

To the surprise of some viewers, the panelists never carry grudges away from the video tape session. "No," says Agronsky, "one guy says what he has to say; the other says what he has to say and that is the end of it. We're not kids. We are professionals."

As professionals, the participants for "Agronsky and Company" have no rehearsal. "In the beginning," Agronsky recalls, "we used to talk about it before the taping began. We found, however, that we were doing our best work at the rehearsal; after a guy has made a good point in a warm-up, he doesn't want to repeat himself during the program."

Now, Agronsky advises producer Nancy Turck what topics will come up during the taping. She passes the information along to the panelists.

The top-rated local public affairs program in town is only one of Martin Agronsky's activities. For nearly three years, he has been seen five nights a week on the stations of the Eastern Educational Network (Channel 26) with his "Evening Edition" (7:30 p.m., Monday through Friday). He also expects to produce a major documentary series for next season, providing a "hindsight look at the major events of history."

In his 38 years as a reporter (37 of the years in broadcasting with—in order—NBC, ABC, NBC, CBS and public broadcasting) Agronsky has earned the major prizes of his profession. He holds a National Headliners award, an Alfred I. duPont award and a George Foster Peabody award.

But he now holds the best of the broadcasting business—a deeply probing newscast on public television, a top-rated panel show on Channel 9 and the prospect of a major documentary series for the nation's educational stations. This is a good time of life for Martin Agronsky. ■

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