Charles B. Seib WXPost APR 26 1975

Should the Media Buy News?

The CBS television network paid H.R. Haldeman, President Nixon's chief of staff in happier times, a sizable sum—$25,000 is the lowest estimate—for submitting to an interview that was broadcast in two one-hour segments late last month. Since then, there has been much discussion centering on this question: Should the media buy conversations with public figures, particularly public figures who have been found guilty of crimes?

Traditionally, newspaper editors have recoiled from paying news sources with a moral horror that is a little puzzling in a business where, for example, the stolen document is not unacceptable—provided your own staffer did not do the stealing.

On the other hand, the exclusive magazine article and the celebrity book have long been staples in the world of big time media spending. The bosses of CBS, in defending the deal with Haldeman, put it in that category. They weren't buying news, they say, although they hoped the broadcasts would be newsy; they were buying a "memoir."

The network is defensive about the Haldeman purchase. There are assurances that it was carefully considered and was admittedly a "close call" and that the whole subject is under review. Nevertheless, we probably can expect more of the same all through the media.

In terms of dollars, the Haldeman interview appears to have been one of television's great bargains. The highest figure mentioned in the speculation about what he was paid is $100,000 for what boiled down to two hours of viewing. I am told by a network official that an hour-long shoot-'em-up can cost as much as $300,000 to make. Perhaps Haldeman didn't have the pulling power of Mannix or Columbo. But by any measure the interview was an inexpensive way to fill air time, and with material that could be billed as straight from the den of iniquity.

Assuming that I am right in feeling that for economic reasons, if for no other, we are in for more such "memoirs" on television, and perhaps their counterparts in the print media, I would like to make a Modest Proposal for the Protection of the Public. Let it be required that the purchased interviews be preceded by this information:

1. The price paid to the subject and exactly what it covered—the "discussion" prior to the interview (there was reported to be 44 hours of this in the Haldeman case), the length of the interview itself, home movies (as in the Haldeman case) or other trimmings. If family members—or the dog—come extra, the audience should be told that, too.

2. The restrictions, if any, on the interviewer. Were some questions or areas ruled out of bounds in advance?

3. The way in which the interview was edited for viewing (or publication). Did the subject take part in the process? Could he insist that certain passages be retained in the edited version?

CBS News Photo

"The Haldeman-Wallace interview appears to have been a bargain."

The News Business

(I am assured by a CBS executive that Haldeman put no limitations on the questioning and that he did not take part in the editing. CBS steadfastly refuses to tell how much Haldeman was paid or to comment on the amounts that have been mentioned.)

But even if these or similar ground rules were adopted, the purchased interview would continue to have certain inherent problems. In theory, a tough interviewer (and Mike Wallace, who did the Haldeman job, has a reputation as one of the toughest) can dig deep. But experience, certainly confirmed in this instance, has shown that television interviews, particularly of highly placed or highly paid subjects, tend to come out bland, dull and even fawning.

The writer is an associate editor of The Washington Post, serving as an internal "ombudsman." From time to time he also writes a column on the media.

At times the transcript of the Haldeman interview resembles the less coherent moments in those memorable little talks in the Oval Office. Try this as an example of high-level communication:

WALLACE: Mr. Haldeman, why did the White House need the plumbers—Gordon Liddy, Howard Hunt, Anthony Ulasewicz, Jack Caulfield, Donald Segretti—all of what John Mitchell described as "the White House horrors"? Why did you need them?

HALDEMAN: Well, you're bug—bungling—bun—bundling into a—a bag a lot of different apples and oranges and carrots.

WALLACE: But they all—they all worked for, in, around, on the payroll of the White House.

HALDEMAN: I—I don't—Well, let's see, maybe they all did.

WALLACE: They all did.

HALDEMAN: No, Liddy never worked—yes he did—

WALLACE: Yes, he did. He was in the plumbers.

HALDEMAN:—he worked for the plumbers. You're right. You're right. Okay, let's take them one at a time. The—One of the problems we've got here is that all those things keep getting jungled—jumbled into the—this bag and—and then added to Watergate, and it all comes out as—as a—as an integral whole, which it is not. It was not at the time.

WALLACE: Well, these all worked for the White House. They were all on the payroll of the White House. They were all engaged in gumshoeing or wiretapping or—Some of them have gone to jail. Why did the White House need that—

HALDEMAN: Well, let's—let's—

WALLACE:—with your accomplishments?

HALDEMAN: Let's take them bit by bit. Why—why it needed the plumbers—

WALLACE: Was for leaks?

HALDEMAN:—has—has been covered ad nauseam, I guess—

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And so on.

Well, dullness is not entirely unknown to television, or the print media either, and the viewer and the reader always have the option of turning off, literally or figuratively. But there is another element of the superstar interview that raises a more serious question—the element of monumental

self-service. This runs through both installments of the Haldeman interview and reaches its purest form in the closing minutes of the second one:

WALLACE: Mr. Haldeman, Dean confessed. Krogh confessed. Colson made a bargain with the prosecutor. Magruder. All of these fellows who worked either for you or with you. Has it never occurred to you to do the same?

HALDEMAN: I have to assume, Mike, that each of those people felt he was guilty of what he confessed of. If I felt I were guilty of any crime for which I have been charged, or any other crime, I'd confess to the guilt of that.

WALLACE: It has never occurred to you that it might be wise at this moment to take your losses, get it over with and start a new life?

HALDEMAN: Yes. It has occurred to me. If there were, in fact, a charge to which I was guilty, I could in good conscience plead guilty to it. And there is an enormous temptation to do that and to want to take the guilty plea under the kinds of pressures that have been put on us . . . But on the basis of living with yourself, you've got to be able to, I at least, I can't speak for anyone else, I've got to be able to know that I'm in a truthful and honest position. And a plea of guilty would not be truthful or honest on my part and so I can't do it.

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The Modest Proposal I outlined is meant seriously (although I have no illusions that it or a less drastic proposal by the National News Council will be adopted), but in view of the above I can't resist the temptation to make a facetious amendment:

Let there be established a National Memoir Council to preview purchased interviews and make sure the public interest is protected. If the council finds clear-cut evidence of self-service by the person interviewed, it shall order a rebate, to be reported at the beginning of the broadcast or article. In the Haldeman instance, it might have gone like this:

"Mr. Haldeman received $50,000 (or whatever it was) for his presence, conversation and home movies, but he was obliged to refund $7,500 for the self-serving protestation of innocence you will hear in the closing minutes of the second broadcast."

Perhaps provision could even have been made for a beep at the appropriate moment, so the viewer could give the volume control a twist and, in effect, share in the rebate.