

A SURVEY OF STUDIES OF
BROADCAST COVERAGE OF THE PRESIDENCY

by

Kenneth Kane

Since Warren G. Harding first spoke over a Presidential radio network in 1923, the nation's Chief Executives have utilized the broadcast media to announce, persuade and muster support.¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt raised persuasive broadcasting to an art with his "Fireside Chats," and brought Presidential press coverage (both print and broadcast) into the modern era with his appointment of Stephen Early as Press Secretary.² Early was the first aide whose primary responsibility was media relations. For nearly half a century, Presidents have broadcast direct appeals to their constituents, and have had their words analyzed and edited by electronic journalists.

The work of these reporters, and their relationship to the Chief Executive have been increasingly analyzed in recent years as well. Scholars, governmental officials and journalists themselves have all contributed to the discussion and study of broadcast coverage of the American Presidency.

PRESIDENTS AND THE PRESS

The broadcast media have made the Presidency even more a "Bully Pulpit" than Teddy Roosevelt imagined. With the growth of the electronic press, the fourth estate has also developed a larger, national audience. Because broadcasting

can provide instantaneous national coverage, former F.C.C. Chairman Newton Minow has said, "Far more than print, broadcasting is intimately connected with Presidential politics."³

Roper opinion polls have reported that television is the medium from which most Americans get most of their news.⁴ But Stevenson and White have argued that these polls have inflated the importance of television. They have claimed that Roper's methods are too vague, thereby invalidating the results.⁵ Without a detailed survey of just what viewers, listeners and readers choose to digest (sports, local news, comics, national news, ads, etc.), source comparisons are impossible to make. Still, television and radio are important sources of news about American government for the American people.

Some Chief Executives, particularly Nixon and Johnson in the recent past, have blamed their political demises on the press.⁶ Political scientist Thomas Cronin identifies "blaming the press" as a basic defense strategy of all modern Presidents.⁷ Another political scientist, William Spragens, says Presidents may blame the press, but in fact only the Chief Executive can provide the ammunition for their downfalls:

It is still Presidents themselves who make or break their own political reputations, despite the magnifying impact of the news media.⁸

Johnson's Press Secretary, George Reedy, has written that the White House press is essentially a messenger, rather than a creator of news. While reporters can rearrange and

interpret facts, their "ability to change facts is severely limited as long as any degree of competition [among the media] remains."⁹ Reedy has called the press the President's most effective link to reality--the only force within the White House which "cannot be softened by intermediary interpreters or deflected by sympathetic attendants."¹⁰ However, the broadcast press has certain internal constraints which tend to soften its message for the viewers/listeners.

PRESSURES ON THE BROADCAST PRESS

Foremost are the pressures of daily (or in the case of radio, hourly) deadlines, and the tendency toward short story treatments. In his study of television coverage of the 1976 election, Swanson blamed deadlines and one-to-two minute story length for the medium's reliance upon verbal imagery. Such labeling enhances viewer comprehension. But it simplifies a candidate's stand and denies the viewer the depth of meaning essential to informed voting.¹¹ Swanson also cited the networks' desire for large audiences, which is manifest in even-handed, bland coverage of all major Presidential candidates. Such balanced reporting insures that followers of a particular candidate will not become offended to the point of changing channels.

But Swanson called the most serious constraint to television's coverage the "Melodramatic Imperative."¹² He cited the pressures placed upon journalists to assure that their stories are both entertaining and informative. The Melodramatic Imperative suits this purpose at the expense of educating viewers about the candidates and issues. But

in his analysis, Swanson failed to identify the source of these pressures. Whether they come from the networks (in pursuit of ratings), or from the audience itself, is unclear. Various researchers attribute these pressures to different sources, so there is no concensus on this point.¹³

THE PRESS AND CAMPAIGNS

Most studies of television coverage of the President have focused, like Swanson's, on election campaigns. While this research provides some insights into the ways the medium treats the Chief Executive, it only explains coverage of the pursuit of the office. Myers, Newhouse and Garrett examined the subject of momentum, and seemed to confirm Swanson's conclusion that the networks care more about who is gaining or losing than who is ahead.¹⁴ But their study showed that the three networks reported momentum in different ways. Using content analysis, they found that CBS focused on momentum more than its competitors did. In CBS and NBC stories, such momentum statements were made by the candidates or their surrogates. At ABC however, reporters rather than political figures often told the audience who was gaining or losing. The researchers postulated that the audience can put such momentum statements into perspective when they come from politicians, whose job it is to boost one candidate or another. But coming from reporters, these statements could cause viewers to question the objectivity of the correspondent.¹⁵

EYEWITNESS vs. PRESS-GENERATED PERCEPTIONS

The classic study by Lang and Lang of MacArthur Day exemplifies the frustrated storyteller's lament, "I guess you had to be there!"¹⁶ They found that the television audience viewing the live broadcast of General Douglas MacArthur's visit to Chicago in 1952 was a tumultuous hero's welcome for the "old soldier." Along the parade route, however, according to the researchers' observers on the scene, the crowd was tepid. Both those assembled and those watching television saw MacArthur. But their perceptions of his visit, said Lang and Lang, hinged on whether they were on the street or in front of a TV.¹⁶

Their results were replicated in a Presidential context 22 years later in a flawed, yet interesting study by Kaid, Corgan and Clampitt.¹⁸ They found that those people attending a 1974 speech by President Ford knew more about it than did those who read, heard or saw accounts of the speech.¹⁹ The study concluded that the media left their audiences with different messages than Ford left with his. The conclusion drawn was at once obvious and subtle: journalists are interpreters rather than chroniclers. Little more can be generalized from the study, though, because of serious biases resulting from its methodology.²⁰

A serious problem with all of the studies cited is that none of the authors makes an attempt to clearly or operationally define "distortion." Without operationalizing this variable, neither reader nor researcher can identify it with confidence.²¹

PRESIDENTIAL PRESS CONFERENCES

Another subject of much interest, if not research, is the Presidential press conference. Reedy felt that the President firmly controls such sessions, especially those which are televised. Reporters amount to "supporting players rather than information seekers" and mere "props."²² Orr agreed that the press conference is a President's proceeding, but said that it is also a press event where reporters can critically confront the President.²³ Orr observed that the press plays an unofficial role as guardian of the public trust. So, journalists are both neutral observers and participants--adversaries to the government, yet allies to officials. Orr said the press goes to great lengths to maintain this "counterpoised situation."²⁴

Veteran White House correspondent Edward P. Morgan believed "the actual confrontation is important," but conceded that the President "is the master of the news conference."²⁵ Morgan's sentiments were echoed by McGuire in his survey of White House journalists and administration representatives, including former President Eisenhower. Those questioned agreed that the President sets the form and rules for such gatherings, but that the press has the right to confront him.²⁶

SUMMARY

Research of media coverage of the President has been surprisingly limited. Studies of television coverage have

en published in recent years involve coverage of campaigns and elections more than the President's duties once in office. The one exception to this pattern has been studies of Presidential press conferences.

Journalism often focuses, if not on things going wrong (as Spragens has suggested), then on the unusual. But for each good "newsday" there are numerous bad ones, when only routine matters occur. Coverage of the President is certainly no exception. Still it is the responsibility--and the practice--of the White House press to report the mundane as well as the unique. Perhaps in the future, researchers will follow the journalists' example, and will not restrict their observations of broadcast Presidential coverage to the quadrennial hoopla of the campaign trail. (After all, Presidential policy can be initiated only after Inauguration Day, not prior to Election Day.) Scholars should scrutinize the electronic media's daily coverage of the incidental, as well as the monumental, events which are the American Presidency.

NOTES

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¹Samuel L. Becker, "Presidential Power: The Influence of Broadcasting," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 47, (February 1961): 11.

²William E. Spragens, The Presidency and the Mass Media in the Age of Television, (Washington: University Press of America, 1979), p. 249.

³Newton N. Minnow, John B. Martin, and Lee M. Mitchell, Presidential Television, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 26.

⁴Robert Stevenson and Kathryn P. White, "The Cumulative Audience of Network Television News," Journalism Quarterly 57 (Autumn 1980): 477. Television overtook newspapers in the early 1960's. By the mid-1970's, 64% of those asked the question: "Where [do] you usually get most of your news about what's going on in the world today--from the newspapers or radio or television or magazines or talking with people or where?" answered television.

⁵Stevenson, 477-8. They criticized the question used in the poll. They claimed the question was improperly asked, inappropriate, ambiguous and could not be accurately answered.

⁶Nixon's parting shot at the press following his California gubernatorial defeat in 1962 was a classic example: "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore." _____.

⁷Rexford G. Tugwell and Thomas E. Cronin, The Presidency Reappraised, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), p. 180.

⁸Spragens, p. 28.

⁹George Reedy, The Twilight of the Presidency, (Cleveland: New American Library, 1970), p. 100.

¹⁰Reedy, p. 100.

¹¹David L. Swanson. "And That's the Way It Was? Television Covers the 1976 Presidential Campaign," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 63, (October 1977): 241. Another restricting force

is the half-hour format of the national news programs. As Steinberg learned in his affiliate station poll, there seems to be little chance of an expansion of the traditional early-evening network newscasts. Charles S. Steinberg, "Network Affiliate Opinions on Five Critical Issues Facing the Broadcaster and the Government," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62, (February 1976): 58.

¹²Swanson, 241. Swanson says the Melodramatic Imperative requires classification of "winner-types" and "loser-types" and focuses upon the "meta-campaign"--the tactics and strategies employed in the pursuit, not of victory, but of momentum. Gregg also noted a preponderance of momentum stories in his research. Richard B. Gregg, "The Rhetoric of Political News-casting," Central States Speech Journal, 28, (Winter 1977): 226.

¹³Smith noted a tendency for the public to desire a certain approach to the news, which stations and networks frequently deliver. But he has also identified an organizational pressure resulting in simplistic and pre-determined coverage of events: the network news departments' internal communications. In a study of election night and convention broadcasts on CBS, Smith and Arntson found that the more layers of organization through which a message has to pass, the greater chance that some bit of information would be lost, particularly if it updated or contradicted earlier research done by CBS news. Craig R. Smith, "Television News as Rhetoric," Western Journal of Speech Communication, 41, (Summer 1977): 151. Paul H. Arntson and Craig R. Smith, "News Distortion as a Function of Organizational Communication," Communication Monographs, 45, (November 1978): 371.

In their MacArthur Day study, Lang and Lang found that the television audience had a set of expectations (which were implanted because of press coverage) which turned out to be wrong. Still, television supported these misconceptions rather than challenged them. This research predates Swanson's study by a quarter of a century. Even so, Lang and Lang's conclusion operationalizes the Melodramatic Imperative quite well:

Newsmen, in planning the coverage of a public event, make certain assumptions about their medium, about what viewers expect, and about what will hold their attention. An industry that puts great stock in audience ratings wants to assure steady interest. So the MacArthur Day telecast was made to conform to the newsmen's notions of viewers' expectations. In line with the assumed pattern, the commentators steered clear of political issues and avoided offending any viewer. Viewers were expecting a dramatic occasion, so drama it had to be, even at the expense of reality.

¹⁴Renee A. Myers, Thomas L. Newhouse and Dennis E. Garrett, "Political Momentum: Television News Treatment," Communication Monographs, 45, (November 1978), p. 76.

¹⁵Myers, 368. It is conceivable that the day-in-day-out coverage of one candidate could cloud the perceptions of some reporters. Familiarity can breed admiration as easily as contempt on the campaign trail. Reporters do like a winner, after all--if for no other reason than the additional air time such "winner-types" often receive. Myers, Newhouse and Garrett did not differentiate between gain and loss statements made by reporters. It would have been interesting to see if correspondents made more positive than negative momentum statements. Such might be the case, to keep one's candidate and oneself on the air, particularly during primary campaigns. It is a hypothesis worth exploring.

¹⁶Lang and Lang, pp. 36-77.

¹⁷Lang and Lang, p. 51. "The video treatment of MacArthur Day preserved rather than upset previously held expectations... Viewers received no hint of any disappointment or let-down experienced by the crowd."

¹⁸Lynda Lee Kaid, Craig Corgan and Phil Clampitt, "Perceptions of a Political Campaign Event: Media vs. Personal Viewing," Journal of Broadcasting, 20, (Summer 1976): 304.

¹⁹But there was relatively little difference in perceptions among those not at the event who got their information from radio, television or newspapers. (The speech was made on behalf of Republican gubernatorial and senatorial candidates in Oklahoma.)

²⁰The study compared immediate recall of issues mentioned during the speech for those at the rally, with recall up to 72 hours after the speech for those in the media group. Those at the rally were primarily Republicans, while those contacted by phone (the media group) were more evenly distributed among Republicans, Democrats and independents. Both incongruities seriously reduce the validity of the results.

²¹Perhaps such a definition is impossible to pin down. Arntson and Smith found that the "newsworthiness" of an item determined whether it would be broadcast. The researchers found the definition of newsworthiness confusing. But CBS' description: that which is "important to history," "current or on-going," "exciting," "concise," or "capable of being broken into concise units" or something which "had impact" (Arntson, 376) would probably not be misunderstood by the network's journalists, or reporters in general. It may be

vague, but it is right. On the other hand, Spragens' explicit definition of news as "something that happens when things go wrong" (Spragens, p. 270) is too specific. It is right as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. Distortion may be easier to explain by example than to define, but the researchers should have made an attempt to conceptualize the term.

²²Reedy, pp. 162, 164.

²³C. Jack Orr, "Reporters Confront the President: Sustaining a Counterpoised Situation," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 66, (February 1980): 19-20.

²⁴Orr, 18. The author gives numerous examples of reporters' attempts to couch damaging questions to the President in deferential language; at once being courteous, yet challenging. But Orr contends that the counterpoised situation demands that reporters show respect. Otherwise, he implies they would play judge, prosecutor and jury. These correspondents are professionals--steeped in journalistic tradition and polished over the years by their own experience. This, not Orr's hypothesis, has taught them to look before they leap to their feet at a press conference to condemn the President without warrant.

²⁵Edward P. Morgan, Max Ways, Clark Mollenhoff, Peter Lisagor, Herbert G. Klein, The Presidency and the Press Conference, (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1971), pp. 43, 33.

²⁶Delbert McGuire, "Democracy's Confrontation: The Presidential Press Conference, II," Journalism Quarterly, 45, (Spring 1968), 32.