

Agnew disputed on media

By Hans Binnendijk

Vice President Agnew has charged that television news is an unchecked power in our society, that it is controlled by a "dozen" announcers, commentators and executive producers, and that it has distorted the traditional rhythms of normality.

A study of CBS News conducted at the Edward R. Murrow Center of the

NEWS ANALYSIS

Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University has found these charges to be a dramatization of the facts.

• While most of the CBS correspondents might be termed "moderate doves," this position was not always reflected in the news reports.

• Surprisingly, there are many factors which limit the power of the "small and unelected elite" of which Vice President Agnew spoke.

• To some extent Gresham's law (that bad drives out good), does not apply to TV news, yet this is a phenomenon particular to the media rather than to the "unelected elite."

• The effect of televised news reporting is not what it might seem to be. Studies show that rather than having a persuading or opinion-forming role, news programs effectively polarize opinion into two camps which have been predetermined by other means.

The question of objectivity which so preoccupies Vice President Agnew is a matter of concern to broadcasters. Eric Sevareid has commented on this dilemma with relation to Vietnam. "How," he has asked, "do you report defeat and mistakes?" and, this, of course, is a good question.

The question of biased reporting was studied at

the Murrow Center by doing a random content analysis of three years of reports from the Evening News with Walter Cronkite.

A +3 to -3 rating system was used, with 3 reflecting a pro-administration policy and a -3 reflecting an extremely critical position. In 59 Vietnam reports, the average score was -.43, quite close to the zero mark which would reflect total objective reporting.

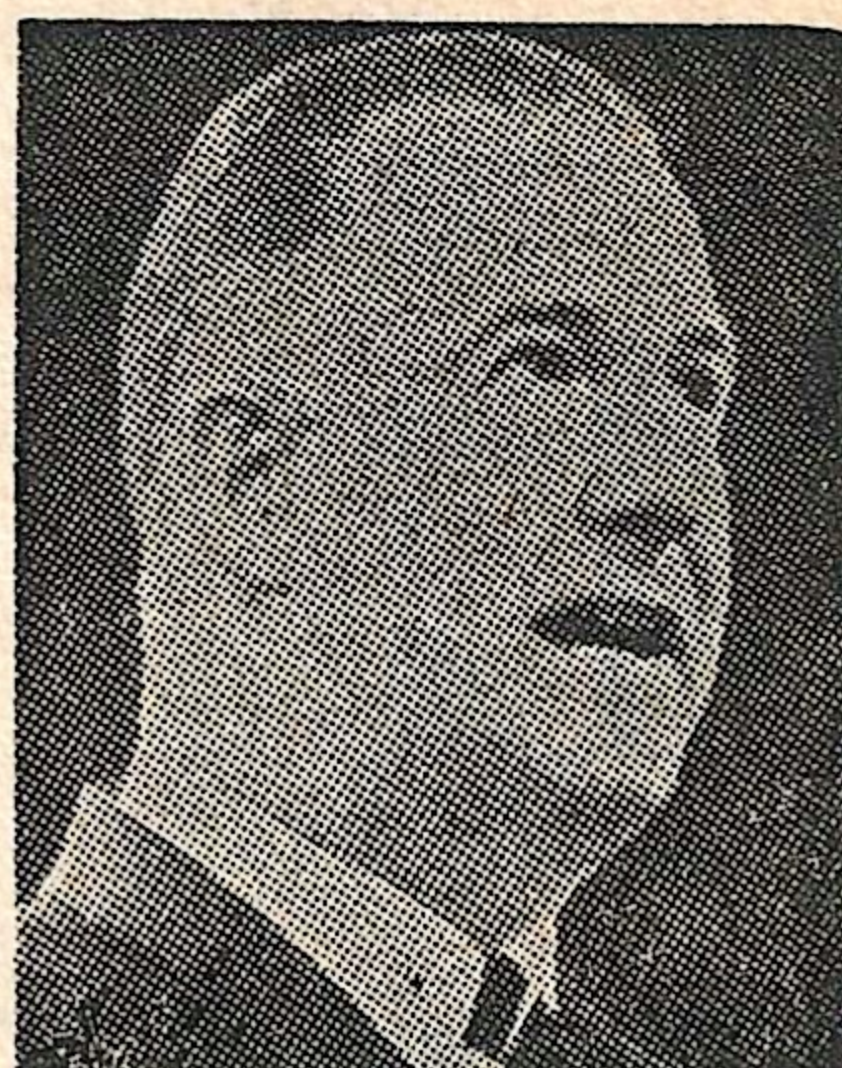
Five of the twelve broadcasts monitored showed an analysis more critical of the war than was U.S. public opinion at the time. Five were less critical and two reports were very similar to public opinion.

CBS proved to be the most captious during the Tet offensive early in 1968. The graph shows that CBS may have actually lead public opinion at this time. CBS news spent more time covering battle scenes than did the New York Times. Yet this reflects the differences in the nature of the two media and not the bias of the controllers of that media.

The results of eight studies on the effects of television news show that generally Crosby's law is true. It states "the more important the subject is, the less influence the guy with the mike has."

Generally an individual develops his opinion on an important topic by talking to members of his peer group. Opinion leaders in this group rely upon their educational background and upon newspapers much more than upon television.

The result is selective perception and reinforcement of pre-conceived notions. The individual will pick out of the news broadcast just what he wants to hear, regardless of its content.



AGNEW
... rebutted

On a nation-wide scale, this causes a polarizing effect. On the one hand Vice President Agnew rejects those portions of the news that he finds distasteful to his own political beliefs, while those same news

stories reinforce the positions of the war protesters.

Pro-war stories will thus be accepted by the administration and rejected by the New Left.

The very presence of TV news causes these two factions to reinforce their already formulated beliefs, and hence causes them to drift to extreme positions on the political spectrum.

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