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THE COMMAND POST POINT OF VIEW IN THE
LOCAL MASS COMMUNICATION SYSTEM*

E.L. Quarantelli

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The American mass communication system is one of the most complex and largest in the world. One major component of this system -- news processing -- is primarily made up of approximately 1,800 daily newspapers, 7,000 radio stations, and 900 television outlets, as well as the two major wire services which have over 4,200 subscribers each. Administratively many of these organizations are linked to one another in various ways, and the bulk of nonlocal news is provided by the wire services. Nevertheless, most of the papers and stations, insofar as local community news is concerned, depend on their own resources and personnel.

The importance of local news is suggested by the fact that it constitutes the bulk of what is exposed to the average reader and listener. For example, in the 50 largest television markets in the United States, 75 percent of the television news programs are locally produced. "Across the country Americans, on the average, view or listen to twice as much locally-produced news as they do that originated by the networks. Minute-for-minute many local television news shows outrate their network equivalents in their own markets. Local television news obviously plays a major role in informing the people of the United States and molding their opinions" (Seifert, 1970: 103).

How do the local media outlets report local news stories? If expressed professional ideals and the dominant journalistic ideology (Merrill and Lowenstein, 1971: 228-241) are to be believed, the news is presented in an objective fashion and in a balanced way so that all relevant viewpoints are allowed expression (on some matters there are even legal norms supporting the balanced position). Taken at face value, the mass media outlets are depicted in many ways as being only transmission belts reflecting whatever is going on in the society at large. The mirror notion of news reporting is echoed in the familiar cliche of reporters that "we don't make the news, we just report it." Or as an editor of the New York Times said: "You can't write a terribly exciting story about a boring football game... That... has nothing to do with ideology; it's simply that the newspapers -- this one included -- hold up a mirror to the world. If what they see is a boring picture, I'm afraid that what the readers get is a boring story quite often" (Baker and Ball, 1969: 43).

In the face of objections that the mirroring does not occur, a typical reaction is exemplified by the remarks of a famous reporter responding to criticisms by a syndicate columnist of the usual stories on current urban affairs:

> Like some confused laymen, he fails to distinguish between commentators and the great majority of us involved in the arduous business of reporting factual news.

He then stated the standard mirror image notion of reporting:

> Factual reporting is quite a different matter. If done right, it is as delicately technical and clinical and impersonal as an operation removing an appendix. A reporter's job is to serve as a proxy for the reader -- to observe what a reasonable man would see, hear and smell at the scene of a happening... (Hill, 1968).

crisis perspective assumed by local mass communicators and the structural factors affecting the assumption of such a perspective.[3]

The Pattern

Local mass media groups are rather selective in their reporting of major community crises. There is no mirroring across-the-board of local crises, be they of a consensus or dissensus kind as exemplified by a natural disaster or a riot. In addition, the selectivity in reporting community emergencies is not purely random but has a distinctive pattern. This patterning is more clear-cut than it is in the case of the reporting of "ordinary" news, although the difference is one of degree rather than in kind. Breed (1958) and Gans (1969), among others, have shown that there is a distinct pattern in what is both reported and not reported; we suggest such a patterned selectivity stands out even more clearly in the presentation of news of local community crises. This should not be surprising. As many sociologists since W. I. Thomas have noted, collective stress conditions bring out in bold relief aspects of social systems and behavior that are not so readily visible in the less stressful circumstances of everyday life.

While most major community crises are reported, there is considerable differential attention paid to them by local mass media groups. Not all events that have the actual or potential power of disrupting everyday routine activities are equally attended to by media personnel. Visibility and concentration of impact rather than consequences for community seem to be important variables affecting the attention obtained (e.g., plane crashes are almost invariably reported in detail but not air or water pollution problems which could have far greater consequences either at the individual or group level). High visibility and rapid onset raise the probability of greater press interest. The slow but not easily seen malnutrition of thousands in a ghetto area does not catch the same spotlight as the sudden riot involving a miniscule fraction of that same population. Differential attention also is related to the amplifying effect of similar events occurring elsewhere (e.g., some local "civil disturbances" that would have been ignored five years previously were attended to in the 1960s because they were seen as part of the general racial turmoil in American society). Today's "news" is often merely yesterday's "news" until something occurs to break the cycle (Nimmo, 1964).

Even when crises are given attention, they are not presented or reported in the same way by mass media groups. Some are presented in such a way as to exclude them from being seen as community emergencies -- they appear as personal accidents (e.g., traffic fatalities, even when involving very large numbers of casualties). Even when reported as a community problem, an event is sometimes relabeled so that it is not defined as a crisis (e.g., "hurricane disasters" become "storms" in tourist or resort areas). The tone or mood in which the information is conveyed can also vary considerably. For instance, at the local level there can be a parallel softening of the reporting of dramatic events as was done at the national level at the time of President Kennedy's assassination (Love, 1966).

Crisis situations would seem to be a particularly good test of this mirror notion. Crises by definitions involve an actual or potential major disruption of ongoing routines and are indicators that there has been interference by accident or design of regular social activities (Stallings, 1970). Of equal importance, they necessitate some collective response (Quarantelli, Weller and Wenger, forthcoming). From that very fact they are not only necessarily attention getting, but it would seem they should require some response by the local mass communication system.

The Disaster Research Center (DRC) at The Ohio State University since its inception in 1963 has been studying organized and group responses to a range of local community crises. Both consensus and dissensus types of emergencies have been studied, a total of 184 such events, mostly natural and technological disasters and civil disturbances.[1] In the course of field research of these events, information has often been obtained about the operation of radio and television stations and somewhat less often of newspapers during such local community emergencies. In fact, a total of 507 open-ended, in-depth interviews averaging over two hours in length have been conducted with mass media personnel, mostly with those involved in the news-gathering process. The study reported on in this paper is but one part of the DRC research on mass communication activity during crises, with some of the work already reported on elsewhere (Quarantelli, 1971; Brooks, 1970; Waxman, 1973; Adams, 1969; Kueneman and Wright, forthcoming).

This body of data and already undertaken partial analyses raise some serious questions about the mirror notion of news reporting. In particular they suggest that dissensus type crises, such as the massive racial and campus disturbances of the middle 1960s, were neither reported objectively nor was a balanced perspective presented of all involved parties. How do local outlets report local community disorders? Four major themes run through the DRC data collected for the last dozen years: (1) Local mass media outlets show a distinctive and selective pattern in their reporting of local community emergencies of all kinds. (2) A feature of this pattern which comes to the fore in civil disturbances is that the reporting is primarily from one perspective -- what we call the command post point of view, i.e., the world as seen by the formal social control agencies in the community, particularly the law enforcement organizations.[2] (3) The assumption of this perspective on local disturbances by community communication groups stems from the socio-cultural structure of local news gathering and distribution in this country. And (4) while there are exceptions, the command post perspective is not peculiar just to the reporting of local civil disturbances.

Thus, our intent in the following pages is not to report on the specific details of a particular local mass communication system response in a given local community crisis. Instead, it is to generally depict what we have distilled out from the various studies undertaken by DRC as to the generic characteristics or pattern of behavior of local mass communicators at times of crises and the basic conditions accounting for such a pattern. We are particularly interested in spelling out the

The Perspective

In the majority of cases, local crises of a conflict nature are presented by the mass media groups from the perspective of the formal social control agencies in the community and thus from a command post point of view. Descriptions of disturbances, the very vocabulary that is used in press accounts (e.g., "football game celebration" instead of "riot"), and what is singled out for attention are drawn from how the situation is defined, perceived, and evaluated from the perspective of local social control personnel. In essence, this means the content reported is primarily from the viewpoint of the police, and secondarily from city agencies such as the mayor's office.

Grimshaw (1968) has pointed out that whether or not an event is labeled as a civil disturbance, a racial revolt, or a class assault makes a considerable difference both for the participants and for how social control agencies react to the event. If something is presented from a command post point of view it will be labeled or defined as lawless action and reacted to accordingly. Formal social control agencies see disruptions of routine or disorders as something to combat, as requiring a restoration of the prior "normal" social routine. The emergency is viewed as one necessitating the quick reestablishment of a "normal" state of affairs. Emphasis is on dealing with the immediate manifestations of the crisis (e.g., blocked streets) rather than on the longer-run conditions that generated these problems.

Some mass media organizations have developed guidelines on how to report disturbances. However, a look at them suggests that they formalize the more usual informal command post point of view. This can be illustrated from three widely used sets of guidelines.[4]

The first contains such statements (with italics added) as:

Ask the law enforcement agency involved whether the developing incident is designated as a disturbance of the peace or otherwise. _Report the official designation of the incident._

Public reports should not state exact location, intersection, street name or number _until authorities_ have sufficient personnel on hand to _maintain control_.

It is suggested that reporters make full use of the _law enforcement headquarters_ nearest such an area until a newsworthy event occurs.

Reporters should emphasize efforts by law enforcement officials to restore order. Advice to the public should emphasize avoidance of areas of potential danger, observance of any curfew, or similar suggestions that _originate with public safety officers_.

The second set of guidelines makes similar suggestions. Radio personnel are urged to "determine the location of nearest police command post and use that source to check unconfirmed information." They are told to "put city officials on the air" so as "to make certain we have the facts" or to turn to "reliable sources such as the police and city officials." The third set of guidelines reiterates similar themes, for example, "dispatch newsmen initially to authority command post, not to the scene."

The command post perspective not only dictates certain emphases in what is reported, but contributes to inaccurate and incomplete reporting, even with regard to supposedly factual details such as casualty figures. In general, inaccuracy is in the direction of an inflation of the emergency. Thus, property losses and sniping accounts in civil disturbances usually are on the high side. A statement by a city official reported by the press that property losses in Detroit were one billion dollars, when the actual figures were $40 million to $50 million, was still being cited years after the disorders in that city. Knopf (1970) has shown that the bulk of news stories about snipers -- usually obtained from the police -- are simply wrong.

Full and accurate details of the kind indicated are of course difficult to ascertain during the unfolding of a disturbance. But it is primarily because the press accepts police definitions of what is important in the situation that there is such concern with the "numbers game" -- i.e., how many rioters are there, what percentage of the police force has been deployed, how many arrests have been made, how much sniping is going on, etc. A rather different set of questions would be asked if the situation were looked at from other viewpoints such as those of active participants in a racial disturbance; neighborhood leaders; otherwise uninvolved residents caught up in the disorders; white, upper-middle class, suburban political activists.[5]

Furthermore, the command post point of view leads to explanations of disturbances that are couched in personal rather than structural terms. Readers and viewers are given descriptions and analyses of complex social phenomena, as these are understood by police officers and public officials. The current "popular or layman" sociology of such persons is to see social problems in personal or individualistic terms, rather than coming from maladjustments of the social structure (see, e.g., Quarantelli, Ponting, and Fitzpatrick, 1974). Such an atomistic view of social reality is of course part of the American cultural or ideological set. Thus, some "why" questions asked by reporters at command posts are answered in terms of the participants in disturbances coming from lawless or extremist segments of the local population, not representing the good elements in the community, and so forth.

Many other features of the command post perspective on urban disturbances could be noted. For example: its tendency to exaggerate both mood and event, its taking of disturbances out of their generating contexts, its depiction of all participants and all disturbances as if they were almost homogeneous entities, its depiction of the events as confrontations between blacks and whites, its implicit assumption that social change is never brought about by violence, etc. Mention

could also be made of the fact that the command post perspective is geared to the current and the present. Thus, there is seldom correction of any misinformation put out in news reports -- such as that a particular police station is under siege -- because other happenings are unfolding and demand immediate attention. One result of this kind of reporting is that a certain image of society and the community, and of social problems and social change are presented to the audience (see Shafer and Larson, 1972).

But we believe we have indicated enough to suggest the quality of a command post perspective. Furthermore, others have also identified a somewhat similar phenomenon (see, for example, Paletz and Dunn, 1969; Blumberg, 1968; Paletz, Reichert and McIntyre, 1971; Tuchman 1972; and Sandman, Rubin and Sachsman, 1972). However, considerably less attention has been paid to the more important question of what factors are responsible for the assumption of this perspective by local mass media. Accordingly we now turn to an examination of the conditions involved.

The Socio-Cultural Conditions

Polemic and popular explanations tend to attribute the command post point of view to conspiracy, incompetency, a "selling out to the establishment," and other personal characteristics of reporters and journalists. Essentially the position is one that there are "bad guys and girls" and this accounts for the observed behavior. However, our data suggests that a more adequate explanation lies in the structural characteristics of the news-gathering process in this country. The handling of news does not occur in a void or vacuum, but takes place within a set of socio-cultural conditions which structure what will and will not occur. For purposes of exposition and analysis, we may divide these into cultural factors (e.g., the values, norms, and beliefs prevailing in the subculture of the community mass communication system) and social organizational factors (e.g., the division of labor, the professional autonomy, and the organizational networks that exist in the subworld of local journalism).

Cultural Factors

The command post point of view is partly facilitated by the internal structure of news-gathering groups, especially their values, norms, and beliefs. What is valued in news is the unusual, the nonroutine. News does not seek to describe society and its expected normal routines, but just the opposite: unexpected events that deviate from the usual. To use a hackneyed example, news is made only when people bite dogs, and not the converse. Furthermore, status, prestige, and rewards go to reporters, stations, and papers that score "beats." The competitive nature of most news-gathering organizations in American society hardly needs documentations. Important for our purposes here is that these two things -- the kind of news that is valued, and the kind of news reporting that is rewarded -- can be found more readily at "command posts" than anywhere else.

Also in the news world there is the necessity to fill up air time or blank pages. The normative demands about this are absolute. One consequence of this necessity is that more easily available sources are used rather than seeking out the hard to find. Furthermore, while information is needed, the bulletin-style traditional format of news reporting discourages seeking more and more detail. The stress is on action that deviates from the normal. News is defined in terms of atypical action. An isolated incident of violence in a long peaceful demonstration may be the only part of the event to be reported. Mass media personnel, like the police, are interested primarily in what is happening. If the police say something is happening, there is a strong tendency to accept that definition of the situation. Again, given the existence of the kinds of norms indicated, normal operating conditions in the news-gathering process tend to push in a command post direction.

Sometimes media personnel are blocked from getting into the scene of disturbances because of different kinds of barriers (e.g., curfews, shootings, etc.). But such immobility often rests on the belief that the important action is taking place where the high level public officials are located. In some of our interviews with them, reporters detail the great efforts expended and the obstacles they overcame to reach buildings where high-ranking law enforcement officers were meeting and where the "news was being made." Thus, while it is true that the more extensive the disturbance, the more difficult it is to move around physically, that is not really the crucial variable involved in most cases.

The general point is that these cultural aspects which we have just illustrated -- what is valued as news, how news is to be handled, where news is to be found, etc. -- all tend to structure the seeking of information from official sources, from the formal centers of control and command. In many cases, this means going to the literal command post set up by officials to handle the local community disturbance. If well preplanned, there actually will be information desks and/or designated press liaison officials where the law enforcement agency view of what is happening will be supplied to the press.

Organizational Factors

The command post point of view is also facilitated in part by the simple division of labor that exists in the usually small news-processing segment of most local mass communication organizations. The very size of almost all news staffs means that they are not geared for very extended, perhaps round-the-clock operations required by major disturbances. The absence of work shifts precludes the augmenting of personnel and makes for maximization of efforts to use ready access to information. Thus, an official command post becomes a very attractive draw to under-staffed organizations.

Small size is also associated to the fact that in the electronic media especially there is not much topical specialization among reporters. This essentially means that most of the so-called gatekeepers involved in the processing of news are necessarily generalists and raw empiricists

on almost all topics on which they report. They do not have the specific knowledge or background to question in depth whatever information they acquire. Many reporters are alert to possibilities of news management or being deliberately misled by news sources. But "journalists usually view the problem of credibility and news management in terms of individuals and rarely in terms of institutions. Therefore, they question motives and ignore process..." (Roshco, 1968: 43). Overlooked is the likelihood that in many cases the police and other officials may not be deliberately distorting information but actually think they have the problems and perceive the situation in the way they indicate to reporters. But police organizations as well as others, especially at times of stress and in dealing with relatively new situations such as massive disorders, may themselves be acquiring totally false information (to monitor police radio calls, as reporters or newspaper editors sometimes do during a disturbance, is often to pick up the same misinformation as the police agency itself is obtaining). The handicap of not being an expert may lead reporters to turn to what supposedly are knowledgeable sources at command posts;[6] but the sources sought may honestly be operating themselves on the basis of false and incorrect information.

In most mass communication organizations there is little direct control in an immediate news-gathering situation, such as a disturbance, by higher echelons or the formal hierarchy. There are many reasons for this but a primary one is that most personnel involved in news gathering usually stand in an informal professional relationship to one another irrespective of what the formal, hierarchical structure may nominally be in the organization. The professional orientation, with its notion of autonomy, predominates. However, this is also a factor that is responsible for the absence of formal planning for emergencies among mass media groups. Plans, especially imposed from above, are seen as constraining the autonomy of a professional. In a specific DRC study of radio stations in Ohio, less than 25 percent of the stations had even any written policy guidelines, much less formal plans on how to operate in emergencies (Quarantelli, 1971). Mass communication groups seem to be the only organization usually involved in community emergencies that do not as a matter of course have some kind of emergency plans. One consequence is that with no plans or policies to guide behavior differently, when disturbances occur, there is a falling back on the traditional pattern of looking to the police for emergency information.

The autonomy attributed to a professional might suggest attempts to find new sources of information other than certain public officials. It does not work that way. Personnel from one communication organization usually have only fleeting contacts with members of other mass media groups during normal times; there is no basic change at times of disturbances and certainly few efforts to pool news gathering or coordinate it in any way which might allow a division of labor in seeking information. Reporters in maintaining their autonomy instead will tend to follow the habitual path in seeking familiar and known sources. There may therefore be unplanned rather than planned convergence on a command post which then, however, is frequently taken

as an indicator that the right course of action is being taken (or as one interviewed reporter said, "You find the news by finding where the other reporters are"). Given this, it is not surprising that few mass communication organizations indicate that they have learned much for their own operations by undergoing a disturbance. So when new community disturbances occur, the pattern is repeated, continuing the cycle with reporters again playing war correspondent roles at police headquarters.

Police and other public officials are relatively easily found during times of disturbances. But equally as important, local mass media groups and other local community organizations typically have common experiences and close social ties predating any disturbance and will necessarily have links afterwards. These social network aspects also reinforce a command post perspective. The daily social work ties of media personnel are important in structuring what they will learn and report at a time of disturbance. News-gathering personnel get habitu- ated to dealing with certain local public officials and get accustomed to going to them for information, a point we have already made earlier in different contexts. They do not have similar links with persons likely to be participating in disturbances. Perhaps less obvious is that the almost certain existence of post-emergency ties between media personnel and official community sources also tends to encourage a com- mand post point of view. In one large metropolitan area, the head of a news bureau, in explaining why certain information about the police was not used, said "We work with the police day in and day out, and have to depend on them for certain kinds of information the year round." Close ties between official sources and news people may make for easy access to particular sources of information, but it is also likely to create a tendency to go along with official versions of disturbances because after the emergency is over, those officials and those reporters will still have to deal with one another.

No one of the socio-cultural factors in itself could structure a command post perspective. But most of the cultural and social organiza- tional conditions usually operative tend to reinforce one another in the same way. Absence of any of these conditions is relatively rare.

On the surface it might appear that there are numerous exceptions. Some mass media groups in certain situations have taken rather promi- nent anti-command post points of view. However, these exceptions to the typical pattern have for the most part not been in local reporting of urban ghetto racial disturbances. It is in fact very difficult to find many clear-cut examples from local reporting of local disturb- ances. The clearer cases are in more marginal phenomena insofar as racial disturbances are concerned. Thus, many stories about the early civil rights demonstrations, some (but not all) of the reports on campus disturbances, and, perhaps as a classic example, the accounts of the events surrounding the 1968 Chicago Democratic convention clearly assumed a strong anti-local command post point of view.

But in these and other similar cases that could be cited, certain special circumstances prevailed to account for the nature of the news reporting. For one, the anti-command post point of view perspective

in many of these instances was assumed far more often by non-local mass
media agencies, such as networks and out-of-town newspapers, than by the
local community mass communication groups. Furthermore, the anti-command
post perspective appears to surface when elements of the mass communica-
tion system itself become a part of the crisis (e.g., police beating or
manhandling of news reporters or TV staff personnel). As an example,
and without necessarily equating the two situations, it is noticeable
that whereas six persons were killed in a ghetto disturbance associated
with the 1968 Miami Republican convention, there was far less of an anti-
command post perspective exhibited in the reporting of that event, than in
the stories on the Democratic convention where no one was killed but where
mass media personnel was more directly involved.

On the other hand, there are relatively few instances of an anti-com-
mand post point of view. Examples can be found but primarily in connection
with media involvement in the event and seldom in connection with local
reporting of local racial disturbances. The typical press report of dis-
sensus crises usually has a command post perspective.

The Pervasive Nature of the Perspective and of the Conditions

We have indicated on the basis of our data that the command post
perspective permeates local mass media reporting of local disturbances.
Moreover, we can show that the command post point of view is in fact not
peculiar either to local reporting or news gathering with respect to commu-
nity civil disturbances. That there is an element of the perspective in-
volved in the handling of other kinds of dramatic events or emergencies
can be easily illustrated. This can more readily be seen in those situa-
tions where initial news accounts have had later to be retracted or ac-
knowledged as originally incorrect.

Thus, immediately after the Attica prison was stormed, news accounts
flashed to the world that the rioting prisoners had cut the throats of a
number of the hostage guards. This was totally incorrect information,
reported by the press without any indication the unchecked story had been
obtained only from a few officials. When Hurricane Camille hit the Gulf
coast of Mississippi, unverified casualty figures of perhaps 1,000 were
reported for several days by mass media agencies pressuring local officials
to give estimates. The actual number of dead was around 240. On the basis
of some scattered and chance remarks of a few police officers, the down-
town area celebration after the Pittsburgh Pirates won the 1971 World
Series was misreported almost in toto as a wild orgy involving a dozen
rapes, extensive fires and destruction, and mass looting (Hallow, 1972).
More localized and less dramatic stories of incorrect reporting usually
do not get such publicity but examples nevertheless also surface at times.
Thus, a newspaper in Minneapolis acknowledged in a later and in-depth
investigation that in depending on official accounts and press releases,
it had failed to report that a seeming verbal conflict between some seg-
ments of the black community and a few aldermen actually involved a major
power struggle with important white elite groups supporting the black posi-
tion (Columbia Journalism, 1968). In Chicago, losses initially reported
as a result of official comments to be over $20 million in just one depart-
ment store fire turned out to be four and a half million dollars for this
and two other store fires occurring at the same time.

The examples cited above range enough to suggest the strong tendency for reporters to accept a command post perspective with regard to many different kinds of events beyond local racial disturbances. However, the available DRC data additionally bear directly only upon the local reporting of local natural and technological disasters; that data clearly show the perspective prevails with respect to the processing of news of those kinds of community emergencies (for an analysis of disaster reporting, see Quarantelli, forthcoming). Thus, we cannot beyond illustrations indicate the degree of the pervasiveness of the command post perspective in other than these two classes of events: local community disturbances and disasters. But we suspect systematic study would uncover it as the dominant perspective in most kinds of news reporting.

To a considerable extent we advance this notion because we believe that the socio-cultural conditions of news processing in American society are operative with respect to most newsworthy events. They are not confined to affecting the reporting of local racial disturbances. They are inherent features of the current American mass communication system, and probably even more so of other communication systems, particularly in totalitarian and authoritarian societies, which is to say most of the world. (Some of the British studies assembled by Cohen and Young (1973, especially pp. 156-175) come close to the point of view expressed in this paper.)

A Postscript: Public Policy Implications

Our objective in this paper was to bring to bear a sociological view of the characteristics and conditions of local mass media reporting of community crises, especially civil disturbances. As such our goal was different from some current simplistic choruses of polemics' criticisms from the political right (e.g., Efron, 1971) and left (e.g., Cirino, 1971) which assume rather than examine, which guess rather than study, and which speculate rather than gather data on what is actually involved in a rather complex social phenomenon. If that is the case, what are some of the implications -- public policy or otherwise -- now that we have finished our research?

We will note three implications. First of all, many although far from all reporters need to be made aware of their implicit command post perspective. There is a need of creating an awareness so that a reporter will not say, as did the following who assumed but one definition of the events, that:

> I have reported four Watts <u>riots</u>, and at no time did I give a second's thought to being "sympathetic" to anybody. It wasn't my job to make judgments; I was entirely preoccupied with simply chronicling what happened (Hill, 1968, italics added).

Instead, it would be hoped that more journalists would come to recognize as one of their colleagues has already observed:

> I think I would /say/ that its (i.e., American press) biggest weakness is its reliance on and its acceptance of official

sources -- indeed, its objectivity in presenting the news. . .
the fundamental reliance of the American news media in my
experience has been, with rare and honorable exceptions, on
the statement by official source, be it government or business
or academic or whatever. And much of what we mean by objectiv-
ity in American journalism concerns whether due credit is
given to the official statement, the official explanation,
the background explanation from the official source. . . By
and large we rely very heavily on the official source, and this
is really what we talk about when we come down to the question
of objectivity (Wicker, 1971).

In addition to creating an awareness of the problem, there is a need
to examine what alternative set of conditions might evoke different kinds
of behavior. That is, it is one thing to indicate that the socio-cultural
features rather than the personal qualities of journalists are responsible
for their behavior in crises. However, it does not follow that such
conditions are immutable. A clear implication of our research is that if
behavioral changes are desired, the structural conditions will have to be
changed. To deal solely with the behavior of news personnel would be to
concern oneself with outcomes, with symptoms rather than the underlying and
basic factors or conditions.

Finally, it is important, at least from a sociological point of view,
to note that there can be functional as well as dysfunctional aspects of
the command post perspective. Most critics and commentators about the
phenomena we have discussed in this paper almost automatically assume that
the command post point of view and the selective reporting it involves
is unquestionably undesirable and negative in terms of consequences.
Undoubtedly there are dysfunctional aspects and we have alluded to some
of them. But a full and complete analysis, such as we cannot undertake
here, would examine the functional or positive aspects of such a perspective.
It could be very instructive to analyze the command post perspective in
terms of the hypotheses advanced a long time ago by Moore and Tumin as
to the social functions of ignorance (1949). The answer to the question
of whether the consequences of selective reporting are functional or dys-
functional obviously depends on who and what is being judged.

Notes

1. A *dissensus* type of crisis is one where there are basic differences
about community goals and about how these goals should be realized during
the emergency. A consensus kind of crisis is one in which there is general
community agreement about overall goals and about how these goals should
be implemented during the emergency. Riots are examples of the first type,
disaster of the second (see Quarantelli and Dynes, 1970).

2. Some writers (e.g., Bagdikian, 1974) refer to the "establishmentarian
bias" or use similar terms with respect to news reporting. We do **not**
use that term for two reasons. Most usages of the term implicitly if not
explicitly take the position that such a viewpoint is essentially "false"
and that the "truth" lies in another perspective. We consider the matter
of factual truth and falsity as an empirical question and not to be settled

by definition. For example, while the original official position on the My Lai massacre proved to be false, it was not false with respect to the Herbert affair. Apart from that, the term is too global, not anchored in any concrete social phonomena. The term command post perspective, on the other hand, has reference to the specific perceptions of local social control and community agencies and is much more operational for research purposes.

3. We leave aside in this paper the local reporting of other communities as well as national disorders, and the reporting by national mass media agencies of local disturbances. As Gans has noted (1972: 698), there are very few studies of local mass communication outlets. All quotations or examples used in the paper come from the DRC field work unless otherwise attributed.

4. The first was originally developed in California, widely circulated around the country and reproduced in Haddad (1967). The second set of guidelines was extensively used among radio stations in Ohio (see Quarantelli, 1971). The third set of guidelines, written by a prominent news editor, appeared in the   Law Enforcement Bulletin (Casselman, 1967). All quotations that follow in this section are from these documents.

5. Of course, people other than social control agency personnel or community officials are sometimes cited or quoted in news accounts of civil disturbances. But the incidents or quotations used are typically employed to reinforce the command post perspective. Thus, for example, a black minister might be cited as deploring "the hoodlums" rioting in the streets and saying that "law and order" need to be restored.

6. It might be argued on logical grounds that specialists among mass media personnel might be more likely to assume a command post perspective. But the empirical data we have, while not conclusive, suggest that the generalist is more likely to take such a view.

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