Making the News

The Development of Network Television News and the Struggle for Black Freedom in the 1950s and 1960s



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ABSTRACT

Making the News examines the relationship between the developing network television news industry and the evolving struggle for Black freedom over the course of the 1950s and 1960s. It traces the shifting contours of battles fought over airtime, struggles waged for fair employment, and arguments prosecuted about ideas, between both sides of the fight for racial justice, and the men creating network news. Activists in a multifaceted evolving freedom struggle and multiple proponents of white supremacy fought to influence not only what story television newsmen told about race in America, but who reported the news, and how networks determined what constituted responsible coverage. How newsmen – who were in the process of figuring out what their news product should be, how their industry should operate, and the best way to meet both their public service and profit imperatives – responded to these battles shaped television news. By charting the story of this relationship over two decades, this thesis deepens our understanding of both civil rights and television news history, expanding our conception of the cast of activists and strategies undertaken in the struggle for Black freedom and uncovering the role that race has played in the business of news and the development of political discourse surrounding the news media. Shedding light on a range of issues from debates about what objectivity meant, to battles over who was in the newsroom producing the news, through to discussions about where to draw the line between reporting and influencing events, this thesis shows how the nexus between race and the news media today was forged over these two decades in the mid-century.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how the evolving struggles over Black empowerment and the development of the television news industry both influenced and responded to each other in the 1950s and 1960s. It argues that the nascent TV news industry's encounter with the explosive topic of race, and stakeholders on both sides of the battle for racial equality (whether activists or viewers), shaped the path of its evolution as much as television influenced the organising of Black activists and white supremacists. At the same time, television became central to civil rights and segregationist tactics. Their struggles over ideas about race and equality impacted television news in the broadest sense, exposing the values and practices of network news to national scrutiny.

By placing race squarely at the centre of the development of the network television news industry, *Making the News* builds on the foundations laid by recent historians in the field of television and the freedom struggle. It seeks to advance the insights these scholars have raised by exploring the network television news industry's encounters with the fight for racial justice over two decades and across the entire nation. Using a wide range of sources from archival news footage to the personal papers of network news executives and the records of civil rights organisations, it charts three major intertwining themes: pictures, people, and principles. Alongside considering what network news broadcast on screen about the fight against white supremacy, it explores who made the news and the professional and public discourses which circulated around news coverage.

The first chapter begins at the dawn of the 1950s in a moment when the pioneers of the industry were first trying to determine what television news should be. It explores how the debates that would shape the relationship between network television and a racially divided America in the twentieth century emerged in this early period. Facing pressure from the African American community, some network executives began to recognise their failure to hire any Black people was causing negative publicity. Vaunting their anti-discriminatory employment policies to the Black press, however, they argued racism played no role in network hiring. At the same time, in beginning to cover stories about racial injustice and desegregation the networks discovered that these incendiary issues resulted in strong reactions from their audiences. From the beginning both Black and white viewers used the discourse of bias and balance to criticise the news.

The second chapter turns to the crisis at Little Rock, arguing that this story cemented the dawn of the televisual age as politicians' use of television made the new medium pivotal to the carrying out of American politics, and the networks used the example of their coverage of the crisis to demonstrate their new industry's worth as a vital member of the fourth estate. Yet Little Rock revealed that television would not provide African American people fighting against racial injustice an unmediated opportunity to define their struggle to the nation. Newsmen's worries that television had marginalised the voices of reasonable white Southerners indicated that if network television news remained a white institution, it would never provide adequate coverage of the perspectives of Black America.

Next *Making the News* moves to the height of the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s, returning in the third chapter to the topic of desegregating network newsrooms. Contributing to a literature on newsroom desegregation which has mainly focused on the world of print, this chapter charts the battles which led to the networks hiring their first African American newscasters. Exploring these battles reveals these decisions – which the networks made sure to get publicity mileage from – were the result of sustained pressures from Black viewers,

individual activists, the Black press, civil rights organisations and the New York State Commission for Human Rights. Considering what happened next for the networks' first Black correspondents, Mal Goode, Bob Teague, and Ben Holman, however, makes clear that the absence of segregation was not the same as integration. The networks celebrated their progressiveness in taking on these reporters, but their employment demonstrated only a token concession to fair employment rather than a total commitment to ensuring that newsrooms were properly equipped to cover all of America.

Chapters four and five focus on the turbulent year of 1963. First, by considering how news reporters' framing of the race relations story shifted from a narrative of Southern communities slowly if painfully coming to terms with desegregation to a tale of a nationwide racial crisis. In this new story, reporters viewed the mass demonstrations on American streets as a barometer of African American feeling which seemed poised to break the banks of peaceful resistance and surge towards militancy. The potential for future African American violence now became the primary frame through which television news interpreted the struggle for African American freedom.

The fifth chapter traces the discursive debates surrounding the topic of bias both in the public realm and behind the scenes at the networks when the racial crisis became America's leading news stories. Tracing these debates reveals that reporters on the ground challenged network executives' beliefs that a free marketplace of ideas should remain open to segregationists. They argued that trying to find balance was not responsible or even possible in a story that seemed so clearly to pit legality and morality against their very opposites. Yet executives argued that such value judgements were not for newsmen to make. At the same time, in proclaiming their adherence to the impossible journalistic ideal of objectivity, the networks gave segregationists a weapon with which to target television news when its coverage painted racism in a negative light. Proving their responsiveness to Southern interpretations of bias the networks began to embrace balance as evidence of objectivity. Providing airtime to white racists therefore became proof of their networks' reportorial neutrality.

In the final two chapters this thesis considers the latter part of the 1960s as Black Power and urban unrest became the defining topics of America's race relations. The sixth chapter considers the relationship between television news and Black Power focusing particularly on Stokely Carmichael. As members of SNCC and their new chairman had become increasingly disillusioned with how the television news misrepresented the fight against racial injustice they pulled away from television news reporters no longer invested in helping them to understand their positions. Instead, Carmichael and the SNCC communications department conceived of their interactions with the news media as a site upon which to enact their Black power politics, privileging Black audiences and Black news outlets. At the same time white television reporters drawn to the fresh and sensational story of Black Power and its charismatic spokesman could not conceive of Black Power outside of the frame of aggressive Black violence they had implemented since 1963. Television as a medium uniquely unsuited to complexity was ill-placed to communicate an ideology which called for America to radically re-examine its relationship to Black America. By exploring the causes for television's distortions of Black Power this chapter seeks to add to a burgeoning field of scholarship in Black Power historiography that explores how and why a warped understanding of Black Power took hold in both scholarly accounts and the popular imagination.

Chapter seven returns to the topic of reportorial responsibility. It reveals that covering civil rights demonstrations and racial unrest over the course of the 1960s prompted the television news industry to confront the difficulty of abiding by the journalistic imperative to document

events without influencing them. The heads of news departments determined the solution to this dilemma lay in divining the difference between authentic protest and contrived performance for television cameras and implementing a policy of caution and restraint. In determining that the line between acceptable political performance and illegitimate publicity-seeking should be drawn to exclude Black demonstrators who responded to the presence of cameras the networks revealed an approach which favoured those with political power. This chapter concludes by exploring the competing criticisms of television news in the late 1960s. Black Americans resented an institution which ignored and misrepresented their communities thereby functioning as a tool of white supremacy. By the late 1960s more and more white Americans, including politicians on both sides of the political spectrum and increasing numbers of print reporters adopted the segregationist critique that television colluded with publicity-hungry African American demonstrators and rioters to fabricate stories. The understanding of responsible reporting that television news executives evinced responded to the beliefs of their white critics in positions of power in American society rather than the complaints made by Black Americans protesting persisting inequality.

Through surveying these relationships from the start of the 1950s through to the close of the 1960s, this thesis expands understandings of how the nexus between race and media has shaped modern America. Although segregationists lost the battle over civil rights, white conservatives ultimately won the war in defining how the American television news industry thought about race and its responsibility to the American public.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	American Broadcasting Company
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
CBSENA	CBS Evening News Archive, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas
CD	*Chicago Defender*
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
DDE	Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum, Abilene, Kansas
EF	Eliot Frankel Production Files, NBC Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin
ERM	Edward Murrow Papers, Digital Collection and Archives, Tufts University, Boston, Massachusetts
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FF	Fred Friendly Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, New York
HBRS	Huntley-Brinkley Report Scripts, NBC Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin
JFKL	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts
JOM	Joseph O. Meyers Papers, NBC Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin
LBJL	Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Museum, Austin, Texas
LC	Louis G. Cowan Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, New York
LM	Les Midgely Papers, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas
LOC	Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

MIRC	Moving Image Research Center, Motion Picture, Broadcasting & Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
MLK	Martin Luther King Jr. Papers, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, Georgia
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NAG	Nonviolent Action Group
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
NBCOF	NBC Office Files Operations, NBC Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin
NdeBK	Personal Papers of Nicholas deB Katzenbach, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts
NYAN	*The New York Amsterdam News*
NYT	*The New York Times*
PC	*The Pittsburgh Courier*
PCM	Paley Center for Media, New York, New York
PI	*The Philadelphia Inquirer*
PS	White House Staff Files, Pierre Salinger Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts
RCA	Radio Corporation of America
RFKAG	Robert Kennedy Attorney General Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts
RT	Papers of Robert Trout, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas
SCHR	State Commission on Human Rights
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SCLCP	SCLC Papers, King Library & Archive, Atlanta, Georgia
SE	Sydney Eiges Papers, NBC Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin

SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SNCCP	SNCC Papers, King Library & Archive, Atlanta, Georgia
UCLA FTA	University of California, Los Angeles, Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles, California
UPI	*United Press International*
WC	Walter Cronkite Papers, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas
WHCF	White House Central Files
WFB	William F. Brooks Papers, NBC Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin
WP	*The Washington Post and Times-Herald*
WHS	Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin

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INTRODUCTION

As smoke curled from the tip of his cigarette, James Baldwin fixed CBS News correspondent Robert Schakne with a sceptical stare. Earlier that week, television screens brought into millions of living rooms across America shocking footage of police officers in Birmingham, Alabama using Alsatians and firehoses on African American protestors who were demonstrating peacefully against segregation. Now, Friday 10 May 1963, on CBS *Eyewitness: Breakthrough in Birmingham,* Schakne questioned America's leading Black literary star on 'negro attitudes' in America. 'Martin Luther King by his own definition is dedicated to nonviolence as a tactic and, if you believe him, as a principle,' the CBS reporter declared. 'But do you think nonviolence will be the pattern or are we likely to have violence?' he inquired.[1]

Baldwin met Schakne's question with a counter-query. 'How many people do you know,' he asked with a raised brow, pausing before delivering slowly the climax of his question, 'who are really nonviolent?' The camera had begun to zoom in on Baldwin and as he uttered his final word the Black writer fastened his gaze on the white television newsman sitting across the table from him. 'How many children do you know who are nonviolent?' he went on. After a beat he pointed out lightly, 'Martin happens to be a Christian.' Following another drawn out silence Baldwin shook his head: 'But the world is not full of Martin Luther Kings. The history of the civilisation that you want me to imitate is a history of violence…What happens, whether it becomes violent or nonviolent, I repeat, depends on you.'

[1] *Eyewitness: Breakthrough in Birmingham* [television programme] CBS, 10 May 1963. D. Television News Collection, MIRC, LOC. This programme was originally viewed onsite at the LOC MIRC in 2019. Later a copy became available on a youtube account hosted by 'Hezakaya Newz' which the author downloaded and has in personal possession. The Hezakaya Newz online copy has since been removed. Hereafter all references to *Breakthrough in Birmingham* relate to this programme.

With his next question, Schakne again called for a prediction about which path the African American community would take: would leadership defined by 'the new militant Negro' dominate over peaceful resistance strategies? After stubbing out his cigarette, Baldwin put an end to the white reporter's line of questioning: 'Let's take it out of that extraordinary vacuum…It is not a matter of a militant Negro leadership,' he announced before summing up America's racial problem:

> It is a matter of changing the attitudes of this country. Martin Luther King is a great and heroic man, but he cannot do for you what only you can do… What is happening to all those children in Birmingham, is being done in your name…And you have no right to pretend that Birmingham is in another country, it is not. It is right here in Los Angeles. It is in New York. It is in Detroit. This. Is. The. National problem.

To Baldwin, questions about whether or not Black Americans would continue to follow the example of Martin Luther King's nonviolence entirely missed the point. The most pressing issue facing America was the brutal reality of white supremacist violence, perpetrated against Black Americans by white racists and tacitly condoned by white liberals like Schakne. For Black activists to successfully communicate to America, they would need to challenge television journalists to reconceptualise their understandings of how race operated in America.

Celebratory sentiments generated by television newsmen, contemporary administration officials, and civil rights leaders have helped to cement in the popular imagination the narrative that the new medium of television played an essential role in both the movement's genesis and its successes. 'The Civil Rights Bill would not have been passed by Congress when it was had it not been for television,' argued CBS newsman Eric Sevareid in the 1960s.[2] Burke Marshall, the Kennedy administration's assistant attorney general in charge of the civil rights division of the Department of Justice, later opined of the period's civil rights legislation, 'television made it

[2] Quoted in William A. Wood, *Electronic Journalism* (New York, 1967), p.89. For more on how contemporary journalists across the print and broadcast news industry viewed their profession's role in the civil rights struggle see Paul Fisher and Ralph Lowenstein (eds), *Race and the News Media* (New York, 1967).

possible. Everybody in the business thought that to be true.'[3] Even civil rights veterans commended the vital role national reporters played in the struggle. 'Without the media's willingness to stand in harm's way and starkly portray events of the movement as they saw them unfold, Americans may never have understood or even believed the horrors that African Americans faced in the Deep South,' former freedom rider and SNCC co-founder and chairman John Lewis opined. His public repetition of the statement, 'without the brave journalists who covered our protests, the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings,' has served to bolster the widely held conception that the story of the relationship between television and racial struggle in the mid-century is the medium's benefit to the movement.[4]

Yet *Eyewitness: Breakthrough in Birmingham* demonstrated that there was far more to the story of the relationship between television and racial struggle in mid-century America than the medium's role in shining a spotlight on Southern racism. Robert Schakne's preoccupation with the potential for Black retaliatory violence demonstrated that reporters did not present a straightforward story in which noble civil rights activists brought to light the brutal evils of white racism in the South. In the months following Birmingham, television journalists – who were predominately white men and viewed the world from a white, male standpoint – brought to America the story of a national racial crisis in which it seemed like Black America was on the verge of aggressive revolt. Baldwin's attempt to shift the focus from white fears about hypothetical Black violence to the present reality of white racism pointed to the fact that a crucial facet of African American activists' struggle to reach the soul of America was their battle to determine whose perspective framed the story of race relations on the nation's television screens.

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[3] Quoted in Robert J. Donovan and Ray Scherer, *Unsilent Revolution: Television News and American Public Life, 1948-1991* (Cambridge, 1992), p.20.

[4] John Lewis, *Hope and Fury: MLK, the Movement and The Media* [television programme] NBC, 24 March 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/video/hope-fury-mlk-the-movement-and-the-media-84873285973 (28 January 2022); John Lewis, Twitter Post, 3 May 2015, 11.01 PM https://twitter.com/repjohnlewis/status/594985105208287232?lang=en (28 January 2022); quoted in Charlotte Grimes, 'Civil Rights and the Press', *Journalism Studies*, 6/1 (2005), p.118.

Moreover, Black activists were not the only actors involved in this struggle with television news. Earlier in the programme CBS had also broadcast an interview with editor of *The Richmond News Leader*, James J. Kilpatrick, in which the Massive Resistance proponent criticised the demonstrators' tactics for achieving racial progress. Kilpatrick, however, was displeased with the final broadcast. Where James Baldwin had featured for 110 seconds, his own interview had only appeared on American television screens for 35.[5] A few months later, appearing as a panellist on a CBS roundtable discussion, *The Press and the Race Issue* – which featured no Black panellists – Kilpatrick pointed to the disproportionate airtime *Eyewitness* had given Baldwin as evidence that CBS did not live up to the ideals of fairness and balance its executives proclaimed.[6] Producers 'proposed to give commentators, as it were, from either side equal time to sum up their point of view,' the Southern editor explained. 'At least, I was told that was the purpose of it,' he pronounced. Allowing Baldwin airtime for three times as long, 'didn't exactly seem to me the sort of fairness and balance that CBS ought to strive for,' Kilpatrick averred drily.[7] For the segregationist, the stop clock didn't lie. And by extension, network news did when executives claimed that fairness served as a fundamental principle which guided their reporting.

In response to Kilpatrick's accusations of bias, his fellow panellist, president of CBS News, Richard Salant, defended CBS's approach to implementing its journalistic ideals. 'I don't think you can measure fairness and balance by a stopwatch,' Salant, a former lawyer, argued. According to the CBS News president, the newspaper editor's incisiveness, and succinctness,

[5] Figures given by Kilpatrick, *Transcript of The Press and the Race Issue, 21 August 1963*, b.2.325/F91,WC. Checked against a recording of *Eyewitness: Breakthrough in Birmingham* they prove correct.
[6] *Transcript of The Press and the Race Issue, 21 August 1963*, b.2.325/F91, WC. All further citations from this programme are drawn from this transcript.
[7] As Scott Weightman's research has shown, by the mid-1960s Kilpatrick had established himself as a national television personality and spokesman for conservatism, becoming a regular panellist on NBC's public affairs programme *Meet the Press*. See Scott Weightman, 'The Outward Face of Massive Resistance: Segregationists' Media Strategies During the 1950s and 1960' (PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 2020), p.83.

meant that in a comparatively short time he, and therefore the show, had covered the segregationist argument. Carrying on his appearance so that it equalled James Baldwin's would in fact have unbalanced the coverage of both sides. Salant believed that fairness was a value judgement not a tangible quality that critics could – or the network should – measure in minutes and seconds.

Salant's defence of his network's reporting on the surface might have appeared as a refusal to agree with the segregationists' criticisms of television news. Yet his response and the production of the panel discussion hinted that journalistic integrity was a point of vulnerability for executives trying to build the reputation of the fledgling television news industry as a serious member of the nation's fourth estate. James Kilpatrick's accusations of network bias showcased the success of the segregationist strategy to shift focus from racial injustice to those who reported it. His multiple appearances on CBS revealed the tendency of networks to pay more heed to the complaints of white Southerners than those of Black Americans. *The Press and the Race Issue,* CBS's explicit attempt to reflect on criticism of civil rights coverage, allowed Kilpatrick and a second segregationist editor, Grover Cleveland Hall, a platform to broadcast their charges about the national news media's bias against the white South. Neither the programme's host, CBS correspondent Charles Collingwood, nor its moderator, Dean Edward Barrett of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, made any mention of African American complaints about news media coverage. With no journalists from the Black press and no Black reporters in the mainstream news media – of whom only a handful had managed to get jobs in the white press in 1963 and only one had been hired in national network news – the panel's discussion on how the news industry should fulfil its obligations to a divided American public, was distorted.

The story of the relationship between television news and American racial protest is far more than a story of how television cameras covered the civil rights movement. It is also a tale of

battles fought over airtime, struggles waged for fair employment, and arguments prosecuted about ideas, between both sides of the fight for racial justice and the men creating network news. In the 1950s and 1960s, network executives and teams in their nascent departments of television news were attempting to pioneer a new industry. Operating with their own sets of at times conflicting professional ideals, commercial goals, and inherent biases, they were just learning how to navigate the power of a novel technology. At the same time, activists in a multifaceted evolving freedom struggle and multiple proponents of white supremacy fought to influence not only what story television newsmen told about race in America, but who reported the news, and how networks determined what constituted responsible coverage. How newsmen – who were in the process of figuring out what their news product should be, how their industry should operate, and the best way to meet both their public service and profit imperatives – responded to these battles shaped television news. Thus, America's revolutionary new electronic news medium not only shaped the story of race and protest in the Unites States, but in turn, in many ways the crucible of the mid-century racial crisis forged the modern television newsroom and its relationship to the American body politic.

The wave of movement histories written in the seventies and eighties in the wake of the civil rights era's so-called classical phase tended to state rather than study the role of the revolutionary new medium.[8] To the degree that they considered television, this first generation of movement historians rarely ventured beyond acknowledging the presence of cameras and declaring the effects that shocking spectacles of segregationist violence had on viewers across the country.[9]

[8] Bayard Rustin refers to the 'classical' phase of the civil rights movement in Bayard Rustin, *Down the Line: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (New York, 1971), p.111.

[9] The host of memoirs from former movement organisers in this period in some cases provide a more informative view of the relationship of activists to the news media. Mary King, who helped to create the SNCC Communications Department is the most comprehensive on SNCC's media strategies, Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1987). See also, John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York, 1998). For insight into how SCLC members organised with the exigencies of television in mind, see: Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York, 1996).

Where historian Taylor Branch's foundational history of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement provided no sustained exploration of the medium's role, African American studies scholar Manning Marable in his survey of African American protest noted only that the violence Birmingham police forces unleashed on praying children occurred 'before national television cameras.'[10] These accounts when they mentioned the medium, rendered television an unmediated conduit to reality which appeared from nowhere and operated outside of the world which it brought to American viewers.[11] In this representation of television as an authoritative source of actuality and an 'instrument of truth,' civil rights historians assumed the interpretation that the early television industry promoted.[12] Readers were left with no exploration of how either Black activists or segregationists engaged with the men behind television news cameras, those whose decisions determined what images and messages would reach the American audience. When it came to the broadcasts themselves, while some noted that a national audience responded with shock and disgust to the graphic depictions of racism, these scholars did not analyse how viewers across races or regions made sense of the images they watched on their screens.[13]

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[10] Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York, 1988), Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1982* (London, 1984), p.71., Clayborne Carson's formative account of SNCC barely mentions television, neither does August Meier and Elliott Rudwick's otherwise comprehensive study of CORE. Stephen Whitfield's foundational study of Emmett Till's murder considered news coverage of the trial of his murderers, but focused on the print press. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, 1981), August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (New York, 1973), Stephen Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till*, (New York, 1988) pp.33-50.

[11] As cultural scholar Alan Nadel has highlighted, the industry in the 1950s actively sought to establish a reputation for television in the public imagination as a 'conduit to reality' given the realism, apparent liveness, and immediacy of its filmed footage. Alan Nadel, *Television in Black-and-White America: Race and National Identity* (University Press of Kansas, 2005), pp.23-27.

[12] Throughout the CBS Evening News archive reporters and television news executives regularly on air, in speeches, and in letters to their viewers argued that the purpose of their reporting was 'to hold up a mirror' to American society as a means to bolster the intended objectivity of their coverage. For more on industry and audience interpretations of television news coverage of civil rights as a neutral mirror, see Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (Illinois, 2012), pp.42,139-143. See also Mark Walmsley, "The First Draft of History": How the Process of News Construction has Influenced our Understanding of the Civil and Gay Rights Movements of the 1960s' (PhD thesis, The University of Leeds, 2015), p.3. For more on television's 'liveness' see Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, pp.95-132., Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton, 2003) pp.13-14., Sharon Monteith, *American Culture in the 1960s* (Edinburgh, 2008), pp.80-81.

[13] An important exception is the mention civil rights histories made of African American communities gathering around television sets to watch news reports of the struggle. Harvard Sitkoff for example recounted activists

Civil rights historians writing in this era who did pay more than cursory attention to television focussed on the way that the powerful new medium provided a remarkable opportunity to communicate to a mass audience, of which savvy movement leaders sought to take advantage. Historian David Garrow's biography of Martin Luther King Jr. published in 1978 offered a wide-ranging account of the SCLC's campaign for Voting Rights in Selma in 1965. He contended, for example, that the organisation's leaders courted crisis and confrontation with the intention of provoking white violence to garner media attention.[14] A decade later, civil rights scholar Adam Fairclough provided a more nuanced view of the SCLC's media strategy. Appreciating that 'snarling dogs, gushing fire hoses, and club-wielding troopers had more impact than murders and bombings if reporters and film crews were present…[the] SCLC sought to evoke *dramatic* rather than *deadly* violence,' he argued. By attracting cameras, the SCLC was able at once to dramatise white racial brutality to a national audience at the same time as limiting the lethal threat of segregationist anger; a strategy geared towards protection as much as free publicity.[15]

Thus, this first wave of historiography on the freedom struggle did little more than reiterate the truism that television news benefitted the civil rights movement by helping to win public support for federal civil rights legislation. Yet many facets of the complex interactions between television, the movement, and white resistance remained unexplored. Few scholars, for example, recognised that segregationists had their own media strategies – an oversight in keeping with

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Cleveland Seller and James Forman's memories of the visceral reaction they had to watching news broadcasts of sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina. Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Racial Equality, 1954-1980* (New York, 1981), p.78.

[14] David Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven, 1978), p.226. Sociologist Aldon Morris later disputed the extent to which the SCLC deliberately provoked segregationists. See Aldon Morris, 'Birmingham Confrontation Reconsidered: An Analysis of the Dynamics and Tactics of Mobilization', *American Sociological Review,* 58/5, (1993), pp.621-636.

[15] Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, 1987), p.228.

what historian Charles Eagles described from the vantage point of 2000 as an 'asymmetry' in civil rights history in which scholars had neglected to explore white resistance to the movement.[16] Segregationists were not the only actors civil rights scholars overlooked.[17] Rarely did they recognise that behind abstractions such as 'television', 'the press', or 'the media', lay actors and organisations with their own racial sensibilities and ideological and corporate incentives.[18] Glossing over television, these civil rights historians neglected to give readers a glance at how NBC, CBS, and ABC news teams framed, packaged, and interpreted the struggle they brought to American television screens or the thinking that informed their decisions.[19] In turn, although an extensive scholarship examining the news industry in the fields of sociology and communications studies developed in this period, this work failed to penetrate the study of civil rights history. Few scholars when mentioning television coverage considered, for example, sociologist Gaye Tuchman's foundational examination of how newsrooms are structured and the processes of news construction, or Herbert J. Gans' study of the inner workings of CBS, NBC, *Time,* and *Newsweek* newsrooms.[20]

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[16] Charles W. Eagles, 'Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era,' *Journal of Southern History* 66:4 (2000), p.842., George Lewis, 'Segregationists Use of Media', in Allison Graham and Sharon Monteith (eds), *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 18: Media*, (Chapel Hill, 2011) p.163. Those scholars who did embark on studies of white resistance in this early period failed to examine segregationist media strategies. While historians have produced many key books on segregationists since Charles Eagles' critique, the topic of their media strategies remains relatively neglected. For an examination of this subject and a survey of the historiography of massive resistance and the media see Weightman, 'The Outward Face of Massive Resistance'

[17] The media strategies of CORE and the NAACP were comparatively unexamined in this era, a historiographical oversight that remains to this day. The most comprehensive more recent exploration of the NAACP's cultural campaigns is Jenny Woodley*, Art for Equality: The NAACP's Cultural Campaign for Civil Rights*, (The University Press of Kentucky, 2014). For the best existing exploration of the NAACP Public Relations Department see George Ware, "'A Gigantic Battle to Win Men's Minds": The NAACP's Public Relations Department and Post-*Brown* Propaganda' in Kevern Verney, Lee Sartain, and Adam Fairclough (eds), *Long is the Way and Hard: One Hundred Years of the NAACP* (University of Arkansas Press, 2009), pp.29-42.

[18] Notable for their consideration of activist and volunteer interactions with specific networks are Doug McAdam's account of Freedom Summer and Seth Cagin and Philip Dray's study of the 1964 murder of civil rights workers Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman during this period. Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York, 1988), Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign in Mississippi* (New York, 1988), p.270.

[19] How network broadcasts relied upon or challenged previous coverage or cultural tropes of both Black America and the American South similarly remained unexplored. As Allison Graham and Sharon Monteith have argued national news 'coverage of the movement was beholden to at least a century of literary and visual tropes, but the events singled out for news exposure were themselves often self-conscious reactions *to* those conventions.' Allison Graham and Sharon Monteith, 'Introduction', in Graham and Monteith, *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture,* p.13.

[20] Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York, 1978)., Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time* (London, 1980). See also Ben H.

In failing to consider the role of television, this early scholarship on the freedom struggle reflected a tendency characteristic of political history of the twentieth century United States to take the mass media for granted.[21] As historian Nicole Hemmer has argued, in works of political history 'the media as a whole are regularly treated as atmospheric rather than structural.'[22] According to scholars Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer, historians as a field have tended to fall into the trap of technological determinism, failing to see the medium as the product of a complex set of relationships between a range of institutions, actors, and regulatory frameworks. Histories of twentieth century America have underappreciated how these dynamic interchanges have 'not only shifted the content of political debate but reshaped the institutional matrix in which politics and policy take shape.'[23]

Historians have also tended to overlook TV news as valuable source material for a combination of reasons: among them the difficulty in obtaining archival footage; the enormous time investment required to analyse multiple broadcasts which cannot be skimmed or key word-searched; and the profession's long tradition of privileging the written word. Few historians since the dawn of television, therefore, have used contemporary broadcasts as primary source material. This despite television in the post-war years becoming the stage upon which public life played out and the means by which the nation's public came to understand the America which

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Bagdikian, *The Information Machines: Their Impact on Men and the Media* (New York, 1971)., Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston, 1983)., Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching* (California, 1980). Scholars within media studies, and journalism have lamented historians' disregard of their fields. For examples from the last two decades see, Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, 'Introduction,' in Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (eds), *Media Nation: The Political History of News in Modern America* (Philadelphia, 2017), pp.3-4., and Nicole Maurantonio, 'The Uses of Visual History,' *American Journalism*, 32:1 (2015) p.79.

[21] Aniko Bodroghkozy, 'Introduction,' in Aniko Bodroghkozy (ed), *A Companion to the History of American Broadcasting* (Hoboken, 2018), p.1.

[22] Nicole Hemmer, 'Objectivity and Its Discontents: Reflections on The Publisher,' in David Greenberg, Moshik Temkin and Mason B. Williams (eds), *Alan Brinkley, A Life in History* (New York, 2019), p.54.

[23] Schulman and Zelizer, 'Introduction,' *Media Nation*, p.3., For a comprehensive overview of the state of the field of television and political history see Oscar Winberg, 'Archie Bunker for President: Television Entertainment and the Transformation of American Politics in the 1970s' (PhD thesis, Åbo Akademi University, 2021)

existed beyond the limits of their own experience. Former journalist and historian, David Greenberg, for example, in a 2012 lament of historians' neglect of television as a source highlighted that a random selection of leading political histories of America in recent decades (including even his own book on the image of Richard Nixon, 'to whose career TV was crucial,') betrayed no hint that their authors had turned on a television set.[24] Those operating in the public sphere in the television age from presidents to protestors had a keen understanding that television mattered; their historians, however, did not. 'All of this adds up to a collective methodological blind spot of major proportions,' Greenberg concluded.[25] Increasingly in recent decades historians have called for their field to pay more attention to television and the mass media.[26]

Where historians avoided watching television as a text, television studies scholars in the twentieth century, on the rare occasion they studied broadcasts from the past, rarely ventured into traditional archives.[27] Television history failed to attract much scholarly attention. Yet as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, what media historian Aniko Bodroghkozy has described as 'a mini-explosion of rigorously researched, archive-based, book-length histories of the medium' occurred.[28] The first considerations of television news coverage of the civil rights movement which examined the medium as a site of contest between various groups each with their own agenda emerged amidst this flourishing of broadcasting history.[29] Among them, media scholar

[24] David Greenberg, "Do Historians Watch Enough TV?': Broadcast News as a Primary Source' in Clare …Potter, C. B., and Romano, R. C., *Doing Recent History: On Privacy, Copyright, Video Games, Institutional Review Boards, Activist Scholarship, and History That Talks Back* (Athens, 2012), p.187.
[25] Greenberg, 'Do Historians Watch Enough TV?', p.187., Quoted in Bodroghkozy, 'Introduction,' p.2.
[26] See Schulman and Zelizer, 'Introduction,' *Media Nation*, Kimberley Phillips-Fein, 'Conservatism: A State of the Field,' *Journal of American History* 98:3 (2011), p.735., Julian Zelizer, *Governing America: The Revival of Political History* (Princeton, 2012), pp.25-26.
[27] Aniko Bodroghkozy, "'Don't Know Much About History:" What Counts as Historical Work in Television Studies,' *Flow*, (17 November 2006), https://www.flowjournal.org/2006/11/dont-know-much-about-historywhat-counts-as-historical-work-in-television-studies/ (28 January 2022). Bodroghkozy in this article lamented the field's preoccupation with the contemporary and neglect of television history.
[28] Bodroghkozy, 'Introduction,' p.6.
[29] An important caveat to this periodisation is J. Fred MacDonald's foundational text, *Blacks and White TV: Afro-Americans in Television since 1948* (Chicago, 1983), the first substantial work on the subject of African American people's representation by a predominately white television industry. For many years it remained one of the only

Mary Ann Watson's exploration of Kennedy-era television provided the first indication that the movement had an impact on the television news industry itself.[30] Michael Curtin's ground-breaking exploration of early Cold War era television news documentaries illuminated framing strategies and commercial incentives which portrayed television's coverage of civil rights in a more critical light. In focusing on capturing a mass audience, he argued, network documentaries slotted the civil rights movement into easily digestible, good versus evil narratives drawn from Hollywood tropes. At the same time, they packaged the struggle of Black America to appear palatable to white middle class viewers.[31] These studies were valuable in revealing that a more complex story existed. The insights they provided, however, were limited by brevity – none of the television histories in this period devoted more than a chapter to civil rights and rarely did their discussions extend beyond the early 1960s.[32] The vital questions this generation of media history scholars raised about the relationship between the Black freedom struggle and the American television news industry remained unexplored in the years immediately following the early 1990s. US television's 'moment of intellectual "coolness"' – in Bodroghkozy's words – was fleeting.

In recent years, the history of televisual journalism has continued to receive scant attention.[33] Of the very small number of books published in the past decade devoted to the topic of network

scholarly works to engage in a detailed discussion of television news alongside entertainment but did not move understanding of the relationship beyond the narrative of the medium as a tool used by activists to promote social change.

[30] Mary Ann Watson, *The Expanding Vista: American Television in the Kennedy Years* (Oxford, 1990).

[31] Michael Curtin, *Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics* (New Jersey, 1995).

[32] Former print and broadcast journalists respectively, Robert J. Donovan and Ray Scherer's history of television news and its impact on the American public provides a valuable exploration of journalists' experiences in covering the breaking story in the South. Relying mainly on the self-aggrandising recollections of those reporters it reinforces the argument that television news was the defining reason for the movement's success. Donovan and Scherer, *Unsilent Revolution.* See also former journalist who covered the movement, David Halberstam's, account, *The Fifties* (New York, 1993). CBS News executive turned broadcast journalism professor Edward Bliss Jr.'s chronicle of broadcast journalism's history contained two very short but extremely valuable chapters on civil rights coverage and the desegregation of network news. Edward Bliss Jr., *Now the News: The Story of Broadcast Journalism* (New York, 1991).

[33] Surveying the past decade of book reviews in a leading journal in the field of journalism history, *American Journalism,* reveals only five works which examine television news history.

television news history, most have overlooked the topic of race and Black protest.[34] A rare exception has been Charles Ponce De Leon's chronicle of network news history, *That's The Way It Is.*[35] In a brief survey of television news coverage of the stories of civil rights and racial rebellions in the 1960s, Ponce De Leon highlighted how the convention in television news production for news teams to emphasise dramatic pictures impacted the narratives reporters sought to tell. Public officials as much as their counterparts, whether civil rights activist or radical protestor, aware of television's penchant for sensation, cultivated their rhetorical styles accordingly to get on TV. Far more remains to be explored about how covering the civil rights and Black Power movements affected the television news industry.

In the field of civil rights history, since the close of the twentieth century, revisionist scholars have paid more attention to the news media, casting national news outlets in a negative role in the fight for Black freedom. Historians who challenged traditional narratives of the movement began to view the news media as an obstacle to Black activists' struggle rather than an instrument of their revolution. Historian Charles Payne in his ground-breaking study of grass-roots activism in Mississippi, for example, argued that the national news media presented a narrative which although sympathetic, obscured the true organising process. 'Those most involved in interpreting the movement to the world,' he asserted, were predominately white, male, Northern newsmen who were often unable to see beyond their own background assumptions and as such framed the story in terms of big events, in terms of traditional leaders and organisations, and in terms of 'what white people did.'[36] More recently, historians of the Northern freedom struggle,

[34] See for example, Mike Conway, *Contested Ground: The Tunnel and the Struggle Over Television News in Cold War America* (Amherst, 2019), Thomas Mascaro, *Into the Fray: How NBC's Washington Documentary Unit Reinvented the News* (Washington DC, 2012), Mike Conway, *The Origins of Television News in America: The Visualisers of CBS in the 1940s* (New York, 2009).
[35] Charles Ponce De Leon, *That's The Way It Is: A History of Television News in America* (Chicago, 2015).
[36] Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (California, 1995), p.289. See also Julian Bond, 'The Media and the Movement: Looking Back from the Southern Front' in Brian Ward (ed), *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Gainesville, 2001), p.24.

like Jeanne Theoharis, have argued that the frames employed by the Northern press served to bowdlerise the Southern movement and demonise resistance in the North.[37]

The omissions and distortions of this media coverage, these civil rights scholars have held, warped public perceptions by creating a fable of the freedom struggle which both sanitised the movement and papered over the cracks of lasting injustice in America.[38] They located the genesis of early civil rights historiography's distorted narratives in this contemporary news coverage as many of the freedom struggle's first scholars solidified journalism's 'first draft of history' by relying uncritically on news media reporting for their source material.[39] Similarly a new generation of scholars pioneering the field of Black Power studies has revealed that early histories of the freedom struggle which promoted a 'declension narrative' were informed by and reinforced the contemporary news media's portrayal of Black Power as a militant, anti-white, and disastrous break from the civil rights movement.[40]

Absorbing the concept of framing from communications studies has helped new generations of freedom struggle historians to view the national news media's reporting on the fight for Black

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[37] Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* (Boston, 2018), p.102.

[38] Theoharis, *More Beautiful*, p.Xiii., Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,' *The Journal of American History,* 91:4 (2005) p.1234., Brian Ward, 'Introduction', in Brian Ward (ed), *Media, Culture and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Gainesville, 2001), pp.3,8.

[39] Payne*, I've Got the Light*, 'Chapter 14: The Rough Draft of History,' pp.391-406. For a critique of how civil rights historians' use of press coverage as data without engaging with media history and theory has led to misconceptions of the past see, Mark Walmsley, 'First Draft', 'Chapter One: The Nature of the American 'Mainstream' Press and its use in Historical Research,' pp.27-53.

[40] The term 'declension narrative' is taken from Peniel Joseph, The Black Power Movement, Democracy, and America in the King Years, *American Historical Review*, 114/4 (2009) pp.1001-1016 (p.1008.) For more scholarship on Black Power, see: Peniel Joseph, 'The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field', *The Journal of American History*, 96 (2009), pp.751-77., Peniel Joseph (ed), *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights – Black Power Era* (New York, 2006), Tom Adam Davies, *Mainstreaming Black Power* (California, 2017), Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill, 2018). For reference to the media's role, see: Joseph, 'The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field', p.757., Edward P. Morgan, *What Really Happened to the 1960s: How Mass Media Culture Failed American Democracy* (Kansas, 2010) Chapter Eight: 'Media, Militancy, and Violence: The Making of 'Bad Sixties' Icons', pp.197-221. See also: Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minnesota, 2004), Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (New York, 2007).

freedom through a more critical lens. Yet beyond considering whether coverage helped or hindered the cause lie important avenues of enquiry for gaining a better understanding of how the complex connections between the development of individual mid-century media industries and the battles waged by segregationists and civil rights activists have shaped the public imaginary. In its overwhelming focus on press coverage and print reporters, little of this scholarship has paid attention to the unique relationship that television – a medium with distinct affordances and an industry with its own particular history and regulatory environment – had with the movement.[41] Civil rights historians who tend still to treat news coverage as an unmediated discourse have also learned little from media studies about audience reception. In presuming that audiences passively consumed the messages that news coverage conveyed to them many scholars of the struggle have overlooked the variety of ways that diverse audiences actively interpreted and reacted to the images on their television screens.

Fortunately, a new generation of scholars have brought together the fields of media and civil rights history. Employing the analytical approaches of media studies, these scholars have illuminated a more complicated relationship between partisans on either side of the fight against racial injustice, the television news industry, and the viewing public. Steven D. Classen's history of WLBT, the local Jackson, Mississippi television station for example, has revealed how local television functioned as a crucial terrain of struggle for the battle over public opinion in the 1960s South.[42] Classen's research has shown how Southern broadcasters resisted airing network

[41] See for example, Theoharis, *More Beautiful, p.104*. An important exception to the contention that civil rights studies have ignored the role of television is Matthew F. Delmont's history of anti-busing campaigns within the context of Northern school desegregation, which places television news coverage in the centre of its analysis. Matthew F. Delmont, *Why Busing Failed: Race, Media, and the National Resistance to School Desegregation* (California, 2016).

[42] Steven D. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggles Over Mississippi TV, 1955-1969* (Durham, 2004). See also Kay Mills, *Changing Channels: The Civil Rights Case that Transformed Television* (Jackson, 2004) For more on coverage of civil rights by local Southern stations see William G. Thomas III, 'Television News Coverage and the Civil Rights Struggle: The Views in Virginia and Mississippi', *Southern Spaces* (3 Nov. 2004), https://southernspaces.org/2004/television-news-and-civil-rights-struggle-views-virginia-and-mississippi/ (28 January 2022).

coverage of integrationist perspectives or reporting which exposed the worst white supremacist excesses, and civil rights activists sought to use regulatory policy as a weapon to target these segregationist programming practices.[43] His exploration of how Black Mississippians watched and discussed white supremacist television contextualised these struggles revealing how they fit into the wider history of experiencing and resisting racism in Jackson.[44]

From a national perspective, Sasha Torres has argued that the knot of coincidentally overlapping interests between the networks and the civil rights movement caused the movement and telejournalists to become powerful allies during the 1955-1965 period. News executives, requiring a unified audience to sell viewer attention more easily to advertisers, made 'common cause' with Black activists in their efforts to achieve a national consensus on the meanings and functions of racial difference.[45] Aniko Bodroghkozy has used historian Grace Elizabeth Hale's work to fit network television's creation of a national audience into a longer history of how mass consumerism challenged the regional racial sensibilities and power structures of the rural South.[46] As well as revealing how the need to appeal to diverse audiences throughout the nation shaped network television, she has shown how audiences across the country made meaning from coverage of racial conflict in the South which they viewed from the standpoints of their specific social contexts.

While Bodroghkozy's work placed a similar emphasis to Torres on the financial imperatives of the commercial networks which broadcast national television, it shone a more ambivalent light

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[43] Allison Perlman's chapters 'The Black Freedom Struggle and the Broadcast Reform Movement' and 'Diversity and Deregulation: The NAACP and Minority Media Rights during the Culture Wars' in her book *Public Interests* have shown how Black activists sought to use broadcasting policy as an instrument of social change. Allison Perlman, *Public Interests: Media Advocacy and Struggles over U.S. Television* (New Jersey, 2016).
[44] Classen, *Watching Jim Crow*, see in particular, 'Chapter 5: Blacking Out: Remembering TV and the Sixties,' pp.140-173.
[45] Torres, *Black, White, and in Color*
[46] Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, pp.6-7. See Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York, 1998).

on the apparent compact between activists and executives. While both Black activists and segregationists had a savvy understanding of the political power of television – as did, crucially, audiences both Black and white whether Northern or Southern – Bodroghkozy found the civil rights movement proved ultimately more successful in negotiating the medium. Yet Black activists were never able to fully bend TV newsmen to their will. According to Bodroghkozy, 'television's embrace of the civil rights movement was provisional.' News teams' support of the struggle was contingent on 'whiteness and white people (at least non-Southern and nonrural) [remaining] neither marginalised nor discomforted.' Network television's concern for keeping white audiences, affiliated stations, and national advertisers content meant that news broadcasts foregrounded an integrationist narrative of colour-blind equality achieved through the legislative and legal process. Television journalists ensured whiteness remained at the forefront of their reporting; although news broadcasts would not show outright sympathy to white supremacists, they privileged white moderates.

Scope and Argument

By placing race squarely at the centre of development of the network television news industry, *Making the News* builds on the foundations laid by these recent historians in the field of television and the freedom struggle. It seeks to advance the insights these scholars have raised by exploring the network television news industry's encounters with the fight for racial justice over a longer timeframe and across the nation. Looking back to the beginning of the 1950s and ahead to the close of the 1960s helps to uncover both the roots and the repercussions of the interactions between the networks and those fighting for and against racial equality at the height of the civil rights movement. The context of the Cold War was present in the determinations of all actors in this history and there are times within this thesis where events abroad play a role, but the story of television news' relationship is largely a national one. In taking this national approach,

Making the News aims to add to civil rights historiography – which has made clear that the problem of white supremacy and resistance against it were never purely Southern phenomena – by considering the ways the networks interpreted racial conflicts and Black protest outside the Southern states into the narratives they constructed about America's race relations.[47] By looking beyond the South it also reveals the struggles centred in Manhattan as Black Americans fought against racism within the networks as private, New York-based companies.

Alongside exploring how ordinary African American people, and activists both moderate and militant engaged with network television news, *Making the News* considers how segregationists, white conservatives, and white viewers across the country sought to apply pressure to the evolving industry. Studying the antagonists to the fight for racial equality as much as its protagonists and those who positioned themselves somewhere in the middle, provides a fuller understanding both of how television news shaped evolving struggles over white supremacy and makes clearer the contexts in which networks made their judgements and developed their policies. To understand the decision-making processes occurring at 'the networks,' *Making the News* aims to explore all levels of the industry, from correspondents and cameramen in the field to directors in the newsroom and executives on the top floors of all three networks, as well as critiques from their competitors in the print press. Examining these different actors reveals the particularity of the decisions each network reached and the internal conflicts behind them. While NBC and CBS, the nation's two leading networks, necessarily dominate this story, their youngest and weakest competitor, ABC also played a vital role.

[47] See for example, Desmond King and Stephen Tuck, De-entering the South: America's Nationwide White Supremacist Order After Reconstruction, *Past & Present*, 194 (2007), pp.213-253., Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), Jeanne Theoharis and Brian Purnell with Komozi Woodward (eds) *The Strange Careers of the Jim Crow North* (New York, 2019).

To consider the relationship between television news and struggles over racial equality from all angles *Making the News* explores a wide range of primary sources. It combines a close reading of archival news footage from regular evening news broadcasts to prime-time documentary news specials with public affairs programming to determine how the networks framed 'the race issue' for American viewers. To uncover the decision-making processes which informed the construction of these broadcasts and the industry's development it analyses the NBC corporate records available at the Wisconsin Historical Society and materials from the CBS Evening News paper archive at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History alongside the personal papers of executives, reporters, and producers housed at these institutions as well as numerous others across America. The internal and external correspondence, news department memoranda, policy documents, scripts and other materials from these archives are invaluable to the quest of peering under the hood of network news. To augment findings from these materials and to gain a fuller picture of how the news industry operated in this period, this thesis draws from the autobiographies of former newsmen, and oral history interviews from the Television Academy Foundation and other collections as well as personal interviews with a range of former reporters, and producers who worked at CBS News during the 1960s conducted by this author.

As well as analysing the inner workings of the networks, *Making the News* uses the records of leading civil rights organisations and their leaders, movement memoirs, and interviews to explore their evolving approaches to network television and what influences they had on informing how the networks reported on race and viewed their responsibilities to American society. Materials from the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson presidential archives help to illuminate when and how the television networks supported or challenged each president's views on race and the role each administration played in cementing television's position in society. *Making the News* also examines the reviews, critiques, and advertising which appeared in newspapers and magazines from the national print press and the Black press as well as television news industry journals and

trade magazines to elucidate how actors outside the networks viewed and put pressure on the television news industry. Finally, it considers the vast amount of mail that viewers both Black and white across the political spectrum and the country over the course of these two decades sent to both the networks and the White House to explore the multiple ways the divided public made sense of American race relations and the news industry's role in representing them.

The title of this thesis: *Making the News* signifies both the formative impact on the television news industry of covering the freedom struggle and the organising goals of Black activists and some segregationists. It argues that the nascent TV news industry's encounter with the explosive topic of race and stakeholders on both sides of the battle for racial equality (whether activists or viewers) shaped the path of its evolution as much as television influenced the organising of Black activists and white supremacists. At the same time television became central to civil rights and segregationist tactics, their struggles over ideas about race and equality impacted television news in the broadest sense, exposing the values and practices of network news to national scrutiny. At times directly and at others unwittingly, the civil rights movement and white resistance against it challenged the networks to interrogate their own operations. Influenced by a matrix of factors in which executives' worldviews as white men intersected with ideological beliefs in the role of news, corporate concerns, and the exigencies of production dynamics, the men shaping the television news industry responded to these pressures in multiple ways. In some instances, they made moves in the direction of transforming the industry into a more representative and egalitarian institution. In others they proactively implemented policies which bolstered the power imbalance in American society. Activists, in turn, evolved new strategies in response to their experiences with the television industry's approach to the struggle. Through surveying these relationships from the start of the 1950s through to the close of the 1960s, *Making the News* finds that although segregationists lost the battle over civil rights, white conservatives ultimately

won the war in defining how the American television news industry thought about race and its responsibility to the American public.

Themes

In exploring how the evolving struggles over Black empowerment and the development of the television news industry both influenced and responded to each other in the 1950s and 1960s, three major intertwining themes emerge: pictures, people, and principles. Throughout the pages which follow this thesis will analyse what network news broadcast on screen about the fight against white supremacy. Central to this story is a consideration of those who made the news and those who responded to it. These pictures and the people who made them created and responded to an evolving set of principles: the professional and public discourses which circulated around news coverage. *Making the News* combines methodologies from three different approaches to history to provide a fuller understanding of how these three themes shaped the story of television news and civil rights. To examine what appeared on screen it employs practices required to understand the history of culture. It uses social history to explore the social structures of the newsroom and the interactions between the different groups involved in shaping the news. Finally, it takes an intellectual history approach to trace shifting ideas about race and the purpose and practice of television news in this period.

Pictures

Making the News considers when reporters covered racial injustice and how they framed and packaged their reporting to reveal both what messages about race Americans received on their television sets and how reporters conceived of American race relations. The difficulties in accessing extant archival broadcasts from this period make it impossible to conduct a

comprehensive survey of the network's reporting.[48] Yet the scattering of regular evening newscasts, hard news documentaries, prime-time specials, and public affairs programmes that are available to researchers in various archives across America make it possible to compile a series of snapshots. These glimpses indicate the worldviews which structured how reporters, editors, and producers interpreted the wider meaning of the individual stories they covered.

Through analysing broadcasts at different points across the period this thesis will reveal how network reporting on Black America evolved. Over the course of the 1950s and early 1960s, buoyed by the *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation ruling, television news reporters devoted an increasing depth of interest to stories about racial inequality. In treating African American people as regular citizens and applying the same reportorial practices to these stories as they would to any other – find relevant people at the centre of a story and interview them – this coverage proved unintentionally radical. Many white Americans would never have seen inside a Black home, for example, until they saw CBS's Frank Reynolds interviewing Emmett Till's grandmother, Alma Spearman, in the wake of the trial of his murderers. Yet in their reporting on the desegregation story the networks largely interpreted resistance to integration as an issue of Southern legal recalcitrance rather than a problem of American racism. In 1963, however, reporters shifted their framing. In the rising tide of African American protest, they diagnosed a national American crisis. From this point onwards, fears of an impending Black revolt inflected coverage which concentrated on the potential for African American violence. Having already established a frame of violent Black aggression, the rise of Black Power and the race rebellions of the late 1960s appeared to confirm their predictions. Television news therefore presented

[48] Up until the late 1960s none of the three major networks systematically archived their news broadcasts. The Vanderbilt Television News archive, an invaluable resource for historians which holds the most complete assemblage of archival television newscasts in existence, only began compiling its collection in 1968. The broadcasts which do exist at the networks from the 1950s and early 1960s remain inaccessible to non-commercial researchers. As private corporations, the networks charge prohibitively expensive rates to view their holdings, an operation which, in the case of CBS, is managed by a third-party company.

Black Power proponent Stokely Carmichael on American television screens as a dangerous demagogue preaching reverse racism, and Black American residents of America's inner cities rebelling in ghettos from Watts to Chicago as self-serving hoodlums. Alongside seemingly senseless Black violence, reporters focused on white backlash as a product of increasingly militant activism, rendering the late 1960s as a moment of wasted opportunity.

By combining broadcasters' and executives' correspondence, print reporting, network publicity campaigns, and oral history interviews alongside analysing the broadcasts themselves, this thesis will explore how the networks used civil rights coverage as a weapon in their ongoing battle for prestige. Thus, executive producer of the CBS Evening News Ernie Leiser saw in the growing civil rights movement in the South 'a domestic story CBS News could franchise' to develop its domestic news operation at a time the network was trailing its rival in the ratings, NBC. 'I want you covering civil rights almost full-time,' Leiser told a young Dan Rather shortly after the network's newest correspondent opened its first Southern bureau in 1962. 'I want you to get as close to Dr. King and the movement as you can and we're going to run with this story.'[49] Where reporting on civil rights was crucial to the internal strategies of CBS, coverage of this important story became central to NBC's efforts to promote its reputation to the public. From on-air reminders in 1957 that John Chancellor had been the first on the ground at Little Rock, to full-page advertisements in the *New York Times* highlighting how ground-breaking prime-time special *The American Revolution of '63* had been, NBC consistently positioned its civil rights reporting to the public and the industry as evidence of the network's superior quality and integrity.

People

[49] Dan Rather with Digby Diehl, *Rather Outspoken: My Life in the News* (New York, 2012), p.97.

Civil rights figures like James Meredith were a central part of this story. Meredith's interactions with television over the 1960s typify the developing relationship between Black activists and the networks as they grew increasingly disillusioned but did not turn their backs entirely on television. Inviting Dan Rather and cameraman Dick Perez into his home in 1963 to film an *Eyewitness* report on his experiences desegregating Ole Miss., by 1966 he was criticising the distortions of the white news media from the stage of the final rally of his March Against Fear which CBS correspondent John Hart reported live.[50] Segregationists like South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond – who on the senate floor accused all three networks of 'following the NAACP line' by discriminating against white Southerners – are just as vital in understanding the evolution of the television industry.[51] So too, are individuals like NBC correspondent and one half of the *Huntley-Brinkley Report* Chet Huntley, and Richard Salant, a lawyer and former Justice Department official turned CBS News President. If news broadcasts are the constructed product of human individuals who themselves were a part of the society to which and upon which they reported, recognising who those people were becomes crucial to understanding how television interpreted American race relations. It was these newsmen who had to respond to criticisms from people like Meredith and Thurmond and whose decisions on screen and behind the scenes determined what narrative the American people saw of America's turbulent race relations.

Southern segregationists painted a picture of Northern elitism to discredit networks they claimed intentionally vilified the South, but many newsmen did not fit this stereotype: Huntley, for example, was a product of small-town Montana, Dan Rather a proud Texan, Walter Cronkite a Missourian who grew up in Texas, and Davidson Taylor an NBC vice president who hailed from Mississippi. Their experiences of the country beyond Manhattan shaped how they approached

[50] For more on the Meredith March Against Fear, see: Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York, 2006), pp.480-494., Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, pp.132-46., Aram Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March Against Fear* (New York, 2014).
[51] 'Thurmond Hits 'NAACP Line' News', *Broadcasting*, 1 July 1963, 65:1, p.27.

and interpreted stories about America's turbulent race relations. While the backgrounds of network newsmen may have been more diverse than their white Southern critics charged, throughout the 1950s and 1960s the majority of newsmen were indeed men. The vanishingly small number of women involved in the network news industry at this time makes this largely a history of men and masculinity. These newsmen were also overwhelmingly white. With few connections to African American communities, sparse network resources devoted to research, and extreme time pressures in meeting daily deadlines, white newsmen had little opportunity to learn about Black America, its history, or how dynamics within the movement were changing over time. As Dan Rather admitted years later: 'Looking back I was spectacularly unqualified to be covering what I was covering.'[52] Yet few newsmen at the time recognised that network news largely provided interpretations of white supremacy viewed from a white perspective.

Black viewers, civil rights activists, and job hopefuls, however, did. They were well aware of how subtle racism operated in network news departments to keep newsrooms, the airwaves, and the view of America's race relations lilywhite. Their complaints and protests forced network executives to grapple with the gaps which existed between hiring policies which appeared progressive on paper but in practice kept the doors of 30 Rock, Black Rock, and Little Rock closed to potential African American newsmen.[53] The history of television's relationship with the fight for Black freedom is therefore also a history of industrial employment struggles for desegregation. The efforts of African American protestors ensured that between 1962 and 1963 all three networks boasted their hiring of their first African American newsmen. There was, however, no overnight switch from segregation to fair and equal employment practices. Since its inception there had been African Americans who had tried to get a foot in the door of

[52] Rather with Diehl, *Rather Outspoken*, p.98.
[53] The industry nicknames for the headquarters of NBC, CBS, and ABC respectively due to NBC's location on 30 Rockefeller Plaza, the aesthetic of the CBS skyscraper designed by architect Eero Saarinen, and ABC's reputation as the smallest network.

television news. By the end of the 1960s the networks like many other American industries, while they celebrated their forward-thinking desegregation, had not committed to anything more than token hiring of African American employees.

Principles

This thesis charts the ongoing war of ideas fought between civil rights activists, segregationists, reporters, network executives, the Federal Communications Commission, print reporters, and viewers both Black and white across the country over what constituted responsible coverage of America's racial story. Structuring the landscape of these battles were the regulatory imperatives the FCC set out and the professional journalistic ideals the networks strove to prove they were achieving. Unlike the print press, which enjoyed the full freedom of the first amendment, broadcasters, who required access to the scarce public resource of the airwaves, were under regulatory obligation by the 1934 Communications Act 'to serve the public interest, convenience, and necessity.'[54] In the 1940s the FCC had determined that partisan broadcasting was not in the public interest. Replacing an initial experiment in the outright banning of editorialising, the 1949 Fairness Doctrine required broadcasters to present 'contrasting viewpoints on controversial issues of public importance,' because 'the licensee has assumed the obligation of presenting all sides of important questions, fairly, objectively and without bias.'[55]

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[54] Barry G. Cole, *Television; A Selection of Readings from TV Guide Magazine* (New York, 1970), p.285, Julian Zelizer, 'How Washington Helped Create the Contemporary Media: Ending the Fairness Doctrine' in Schulman and Zelizer, *Media Nation,* p.181., Perlman, *Public Interests,* p.4. Television historians such as Heather Hendershot and Allison Perlman have shown how 'the public interest, convenience and necessity', a phrase inherited from the Transportation Act of 1920, was first interpreted in purely practical and technical terms. Like duplicated train lines, the public interest would not be served by overlapping radio signals, government licenses to broadcasters therefore would solve such technical problems. However, definitions of the 'public interest' soon took on an ideological and political valence and in the following years Congress, the FCC, broadcasters, the federal courts, and citizen groups continually debated the meaning of 'the public interest'. Heather Hendershot, *What's Fair on the Air?: Cold War Right-Wing Broadcasting and the Public Interest* (2011), p.16. Perlman, *Public Interests*, p.4.

[55] Fairness Doctrine quoted in CBS News Standards, (1976) P.17, Cited in Pickard, Strange Life and Death', P3439, Heather Hendershot, *What's Fair on the Air?: Cold War Right-Wing Broadcasting and the Public Interest* (Chicago, 2011), p.17. For an in-depth discussion of the debates around this decision and the 1941 Mayflower Doctrine which placed a prohibition on partisan editorialising, see: Victor Pickard, 'The Strange Life and Death of the Fairness Doctrine: Tracing the Decline of Positive Freedoms in American Policy Discourse,' *International Journal of Communication*, 12 (2018), p.3439.

Network executives like Richard Salant, arguing that government should not encroach on the freedom of the press, may have chafed at these regulations, but they were deeply invested in their reputations as responsible outlets of professional journalism. They maintained that as members of the fourth estate in a democratic society, network news had a duty to America's citizens to function as a free marketplace of ideas and therefore had to cover all legitimate viewpoints regardless of whether they agreed with them or not. News value – they argued – was the only factor which should determine reportorial decisions on what to cover.

Yet the civil rights movement and white resistance to Black equality challenged reporters' conceptions of what was newsworthy and what perspectives it was responsible to air on American airwaves. Early in the 1950s, newsmen recognised that desegregation was an order of the highest court of the land, but they displayed sympathy for white Southerners wrestling with the challenge to their way of life. In this earlier period, the question of Black American equality fell into what communications scholar Daniel C. Hallin has theorised as the 'Sphere of Legitimate Controversy' – a realm of debate in which reasonable people are allowed to disagree.[56] Those issues which society deems too radical, irresponsible, or even dangerous to be considered in the province of acceptable debate fall into the 'Sphere of Deviance'. By the early 1960s, reporters covering the movement in the South had come to believe that the issue of whether African Americans deserved full citizenship belonged in the 'Sphere of Consensus': the zone of implicit agreement. Those who opposed Black equality and racial justice, therefore, they now relegated to the 'Sphere of Deviance.' Many reporters by the mid 1960s felt it was only possible to engage in a quest for balance in covering perspectives which fell within the sphere of legitimate controversy.

[56] Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Oxford, 1986), pp.116-118.

Conservative white Southerners, however, recognised in the networks' devotion to their proclaimed journalistic ideals an opportunity. By promulgating the criticism that the national press was failing in their professional duty to be objective in their reporting, they attempted to reframe the national conversation around American race relations, rendering national news outlets the real enemy that Americans should be concerned about. Arguing that reporters were colluding with publicity-seeking civil rights activists who had no legitimate cause for grievance white Southerners attacked the reputation of television news networks. Segregationists' charges of slanted reporting provided the foundation for the 'liberal bias' framework which flourished as a conservative criticism of the media from the end of the 1960s onwards.[57] Their arguments about television's reportorial irresponsibility also gained mainstream traction as the decade progressed. Politicians on both sides of the political spectrum, print reporters intent on discrediting their competition, and the white public whose sympathy for Black America had reached its limits by the end of the decade, argued that sensation-seeking television reporting was to blame for the rebellions ripping through America's inner cities.[58]

Both Black activists and segregationist Southerners criticised the news media, but ultimately white men in positions of power proved more successful in making their arguments heard. Network news executives, despite the misgivings of some reporters on the ground, deemed that evidencing their reportorial integrity meant covering supporters of racial injustice. When it came to covering racial unrest in the latter part of the decade, they determined responsible reporting meant outweighing the perspectives of Black militants with moderate leaders and official sources.

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[57] David Greenberg, 'The Idea of 'The Liberal Media' and Its Roots in the Civil Rights Movement', *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, 1/2 (2008), pp.167-187.

[58] Historian Elizabeth Hinton has challenged the conception that the urban unrest from the mid-1960s onwards as 'riots' arguing for an understanding of the violence from Watts to Detroit and beyond as instances of political rebellion. Elizabeth Hinton, *America on Fire: The Untold Story of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960s* (London, 2021).

Structure

Over two decades, television's role in American society changed dramatically. At the start of the 1950s, the nation stood on the precipice of a new televisual age. The majority of households in the country did not yet own a television set. Television news was a fledgling industry scorned and ridiculed by its 'serious' competitors in print and radio who never thought it would last.[59] The early pioneers of the television newsroom operated under the assumption that viewers engaged with their fifteen-minute product as a supplement to their daily newspapers.[60] No Black Americans played any part in network news production. Yet by the close of the 1960s, television had saturated America with at least one set to be found in 95% of American homes.[61] The public's reliance on television news had increased enormously with nine out of ten Americans watching TV news regularly, and the medium having overtaken print as Americans' primary source of news since the early 1960s.[62] President Lyndon Johnson's failure to master the medium of television was cited by his press secretary Bill Moyers as a factor in his decision not to seek renomination.[63] Network television news departments, which now used annual budgets in the tens of millions to produce thirty-minute broadcasts, felt an enormous burden of responsibility in representing America to its public. All three networks had desegregated.

Over this same period Black America's struggle against white supremacy went through an enormous evolution. At the start of the 1950s, Jim Crow ruled the South. Even in the supposedly more enlightened North racial discrimination reigned. Although Black activists protested white supremacy locally and tried to force the national government to act, the only

[59] Reuven Frank, *Out of Thin Air: The Brief and Wonderful Life of Network News* (New York, 1991), p.30.
[60] Frank, *Out of Thin Air*, p.35.
[61] 'At Deadline: More total Viewing,' Broadcasting, 12 May, 1969, p.9.
[62] 'Another Strong Endorsement for TV News', *Broadcasting*, 8 Sept. 1969, p.54.
[63] 'Moyers says TV not LBJ's Forte', *Broadcasting*, 8 May 1968, p.75.

civil rights organisation the majority of white Americans might have heard of was the NAACP. Even white liberals in this period considered the organisation's activists to be extremist agitators and viewed their campaigns for integration as evidence of radical militancy. Two decades later Roy Wilkins, the executive director of the NAACP, was widely viewed as an exemplar of moderate, responsible Black leadership. White America now viewed proponents of 'Black Power' like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown who demanded political, economic, and cultural empowerment, as the radical extremists to fear. In this time the Supreme Court had declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional and legalised interracial marriage, the civil rights movement had succeeded in ensuring the passage of civil and voting rights legislation, and overt racism was no longer widely culturally condoned. Yet for many Black Americans little had changed as the systems which entrenched inequality endured and they continued to experience the United States as second-class citizens. Martin Luther King Jr., having become a household name preaching non-violent resistance in the South had also attacked segregation in the urban North and called for a radical reconstruction of society to solve America's problems of racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. By the end of the decade America had learned of his assassination from Walter Cronkite on the evening news which reported the violence burning through America's urban centres.

Making the News aims to further understandings of the historical nexus between race and media by showing that the struggle for Black freedom, the resistance to relinquishing white supremacy, and the building of network television news were dynamic processes which changed over time in a constant dialectic with one another. This thesis uses a broadly chronological structure which moves through time and space organised by key moments in the relationship between the newsroom and the struggle from the start of the 1950s to the end of the 1960s to uncover this change over time.

Chapter one begins at the dawn of the 1950s in a moment when the pioneers of the industry were first trying to determine what television news should be. It explores how the debates that would shape the relationship between network television and a racially divided America in the twentieth century emerged in this early period. Facing pressure from the African American community, some network executives began to recognise that their failure to hire any Black people was causing negative publicity. Vaunting their anti-discriminatory employment policies to the Black press, however, they argued racism played no role in network hiring. At the same time, in beginning to cover stories about racial injustice and desegregation the networks discovered that these incendiary issues resulted in strong reactions from their audiences. From the beginning both Black and white viewers used the discourse of bias and balance to criticise the news.

The second chapter turns to the crisis at Little Rock. Civil rights and television historians alike have recognised that the 1957 desegregation crisis at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas provided television news with its 'first on-site news extravaganza of the modern television era.'[64] This chapter will argue that the crisis at Little Rock cemented the dawn of the televisual age as politicians' use of television made the new medium pivotal to the carrying out of American politics and the networks used the example of their coverage of the crisis to demonstrate their new industry's worth as a vital member of the fourth estate. Yet Little Rock revealed that television would not provide African American people fighting against racial injustice an unmediated opportunity to define their struggle to the nation. While the Little Rock Nine guided by NAACP leader Daisy Bates made the most of the attention television reporters paid them, the power to frame the meaning of the crisis lay with television reporters. In line with the White House position on the crisis, television news interpreted the segregationist mobs

[64] Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*, p.223., Torres, *Black, White, and in Color*, pp.19-21.

at Little Rock as an example of legal defiance rather than an expression of American racism. Yet newsmen's thoughts about television's coverage of the crisis revealed that the explosive story of racial injustice would bring to light the difficulties in providing responsible reporting of an issue which divided America. Their worries that television had marginalised the voices of reasonable white Southerners, however, indicated that if network television news remained a white institution, it would never provide adequate coverage of the perspectives of Black America.

Next this thesis moves to the height of the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s, returning in the third chapter to the topic of desegregating network newsrooms. Contributing to a literature on newsroom desegregation which has mainly focused on the world of print, this chapter charts the battles which led to the networks hiring their first African American newscasters. Exploring these battles reveals these decisions – which the networks made sure to get publicity mileage from – were the result of sustained pressures from Black viewers, individual activists, the Black press, civil rights organisations, and the New York State Commission for Human Rights. Considering what happened next for the networks' first Black correspondents, Mal Goode, Bob Teague, and Ben Holman, however, makes clear that the absence of segregation was not the same as integration. The networks celebrated their progressiveness in taking on these reporters, but their employment demonstrated only a token concession to fair employment rather than a total commitment to ensuring that newsrooms were properly equipped to cover all of America.

Chapters four and five focus on the turbulent year of 1963. First by considering how news reporters' framing of the race relations story shifted from a narrative of Southern communities slowly if painfully coming to terms with desegregation to a tale of a nationwide racial crisis. In this new story, reporters viewed the mass demonstrations on American streets as a barometer

of African American feeling which seemed poised to break the banks of peaceful resistance and surge towards militancy. The potential for future African American violence now became the primary frame through which television news interpreted the struggle for African American freedom.

The fifth chapter traces the discursive debates surrounding the topic of bias both in the public realm and behind the scenes at the networks when the racial crisis became one of America's leading news stories. Tracing these debates reveals that reporters on the ground challenged network executives' beliefs that a free marketplace of ideas should remain open to segregationists. They argued that trying to find balance was not responsible or even possible in a story that seemed so clearly to pit legality and morality against their very opposites. Yet executives argued that such value judgements were not for newsmen to make. At the same time, in proclaiming their adherence to the impossible journalistic ideal of objectivity, the networks gave segregationists a weapon with which to target television news when its coverage painted racism in a negative light. Proving their responsiveness to Southern interpretations of bias the networks began to embrace balance as evidence of objectivity. Providing airtime to white racists therefore became proof of their networks' reportorial neutrality.

In the final two chapters this thesis considers the latter part of the 1960s as Black Power and urban unrest became the defining topics of America's race relations. The sixth chapter considers the relationship between television news and Black Power focusing particularly on Stokely Carmichael. As members of SNCC and their new chairman had become increasingly disillusioned with how the television news misrepresented the fight against racial injustice they pulled away from television news reporters, no longer invested in helping them to understand their positions. Instead, Carmichael and the SNCC communications department conceived of their interactions with the news media as a site upon which to enact their Black Power politics,

privileging Black audiences and Black news outlets. At the same time, white television reporters, drawn to the fresh and sensational story of Black Power and its charismatic spokesman, could not conceive of Black Power outside of the frame of aggressive Black violence they had implemented since 1963. Television, as a medium uniquely unsuited to complexity, was ill-placed to communicate an ideology which called for white America to radically re-examine its relationship to Black America. By exploring the causes for television's distortions of Black Power this chapter seeks to add to a burgeoning field of scholarship in Black Power historiography that explores how and why a warped understanding of Black Power took hold in both scholarly accounts and the popular imagination.[65]

Chapter seven returns to the topic of reportorial responsibility. It reveals that covering civil rights demonstrations and racial unrest over the course of the 1960s prompted the television news industry to confront the difficulty of abiding by the journalistic imperative to document events without influencing them. The heads of news departments determined that the solution to this dilemma lay in divining the difference between authentic protest and contrived performance for television cameras and implementing a policy of caution and restraint. In determining that the line between acceptable political performance and illegitimate publicity-seeking should be drawn to exclude Black demonstrators who responded to the presence of cameras, the networks revealed an approach which favoured those with political power. This chapter concludes by exploring the competing criticisms of television news in the late 1960s. Black Americans resented an institution which ignored and misrepresented their communities,

[65] See particularly Mark Joseph Walmsley, 'Tell It Like it Isn't: SNCC and the Media, 1960-1965,' *Journal of American Studies*, 48 (2014), Walmsley, 'First Draft'. See also Say Burgin, 'SNCC, the Media and the Myth of an Antiwhite Black Power Movement,' (article under preparation), Mary Blue and Vanessa Murphree, 'Stoke the Joke and his 'Self-Appointed White Critics: A Clash of Values on Network Television News, 1966-1970,' *Media History*, 15:2 (2009), pp.205-220. Peter B. Levy, 'The Media and H. Rap Brown: Friend or Foe of Jim Crow?' in Jeanne Theoharis and Brian Purnell with Komozi Woodward (eds) *The Strange Careers of the Jim Crow North* (New York, 2019), pp.285-306., Christian Davenport, *Media Bias, Perspective, and State Repression: The Black Panther Party* (Cambridge, 2009).

thereby functioning as a tool of white supremacy. By the late 1960s more and more white Americans, including politicians on both sides of the political spectrum and increasing numbers of print reporters, adopted the segregationist critique that television colluded with publicity-hungry African American demonstrators and rioters to fabricate stories. The understanding of responsible reporting that television news executives evinced responded to the beliefs of their white critics in positions of power in American society rather than the complaints made by Black Americans protesting persisting inequality.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DAWN OF TELEVISION NEWS AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In 1954, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, (NAACP) gained a supporter so significant that African American newspaper, *The Chicago Defender,* felt compelled to inform its readers of his registration. 'Edward R. Murrow,' the paper announced to its readers, '…has made an initial payment on a life membership in the NAACP.'[66]

The *Chicago Defender*'s announcement celebrated more than just another celebrity joining the cause of racial equality. A pioneer of the broadcasting news industry, Murrow reported from the trenches vividly defining the Second World War for the radio-listening American public. Nearly a decade later, in 1954, television sets had arrived in 58.1% of American homes and the nation's most influential newsmen had entered the new electronic medium.[67] Murrow's newly minted membership of the civil rights organisation hinted at promise for Black America. If one of the men with a significant hand in shaping the future of American broadcast news had committed support to the struggle of African American freedom, perhaps television newsrooms would not replicate the racist reporting that the mainstream press had produced for centuries.[68]

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[66] 'Edward Murrow Joins NAACP,' *CD*, 16 Oct. 1954, p.3.

[67] 'Radio and Television Sets: How Many -Where They Are,' *Broadcasting*, 27 Sept. 1954, p.33. Murrow's ground-breaking *See It Now* episode 'A Report on Senator Joseph McCarthy' earlier that year, which helped end the career of the Wisconsin senator whose name came to symbolise the witch-hunts of the domestic red scare, cemented the veteran newsman's reputation as 'television's most respected figure' cited in Paul J. Achter, 'TV, Technology, and McCarthyism: Crafting the Democratic Renaissance in an Age of Fear,' *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 90:3 (1994), p.319.

[68] For more on how the white press had historically ignored Black America, see: Kathy Roberts Forde and Sid Bedingfield (eds), *Journalism and Jim Crow* (Chicago, 2021), Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York, 2007), Carolyn Martindale, *The White Press and Black America* (Greenwood, 1986), p.55., Jane Rhodes, 'The Visibility of Race and Media History', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* 10:2 (1993), pp.35-37., Craig Flournoy, 'Reporting the Movement in Black and White: The Emmett Till Lynching and the Montgomery Bus Boycott,' (PhD Thesis, Louisiana State University and Agricultural Mechanical College, 2003).

Yet in television's formative decade, the relationship between network newsrooms and race was more complicated than a new cadre of sympathetic national reporters finally recognising racial injustice as news. Years before the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation ruling, many Black Americans were already waging a fight for integration with the networks themselves. Murrow's colleagues in the offices and studios of CBS and rival network NBC remained lilywhite despite employment policies which appeared not to discriminate. And while Murrow as a private citizen had joined the NAACP, as a professional reporter working in television, he was obliged to refrain from letting his opinions show. Television news departments which were regulated by the FCC and proclaimed their commitment to the journalistic ideals of objectivity and balance did not wish to appear sympathetic to either side of the divisive issue of racial equality.

In the early 1950s, America stood on the precipice of a new televisual age. Even as half of Southern homes and more than two thirds of rural households had yet to own a television set the new medium overtook radio as the preferred avenue for advertisers as early as 1952.[69] In this moment the networks' television news departments were just beginning to conceive of what television news – which in this era produced 15 minute-long evening news broadcasts – might be.[70] As the following chapter will show, the debates that would determine the relationship between the television newsroom and a racially divided America over the next two decades had their origins in this period.

The first section will show why in a period where print newsrooms and other industries in the North had begun to dabble with desegregation, in television only white male reporters brought

[69] J. Fred MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television: The Rise and Decline of Network TV* (New York, 1990), p.52. 'Radio and Television Sets,' *Broadcasting*.
[70] Sig Mickelson, *The Decade That Shaped Television News: CBS in the 1950s* (London, 1998), p.5.

American viewers the news.[71] By exploring NBC's 'Integration Without Identification' programme it will examine how network executives' desire to endear NBC to its Black audience and the advertising dollars they represented initiated action that sounded good without bringing about real change. Hiring policies which appeared not to discriminate but still kept the door shut to Black Americans meant that the networks appeared progressive yet did not risk going so far as to alienate their Southern viewers and affiliates. The new industry did not just apply a colour-blind approach to its employment policies. As the second section will show, early network news reporters applied standard reporting practices to African Americans treating them the same way as any other subject at the centre of a news story. Yet, American audiences soon made news departments aware of just how difficult it would be to produce neutral reporting on the incendiary topic of racial injustice. The final section will reveal how from the moment television first began to cover the desegregation story, audiences invoked the discourse of objectivity to protest reporting which they deemed unfair. Despite efforts to treat Black people as ordinary citizens, a white perspective still shaped television news. Black audiences, in turn, protested broadcasts which failed to give airtime to African American voices. At the same time, Southern segregationists, aggrieved at reporting which recognised the humanity of African Americans, accused the networks of racial propaganda.

Section One

Colour-blind Employment Policies Lead to Lilywhite Newsrooms

In the 1950s, when it came to equal employment, NBC was the leader of the broadcasting pack – on paper at least. After all, General David Sarnoff himself, Chairman of the Board of Radio Corporation of America and its broadcasting service, NBC, had served on President Franklin

[71] For more on the history of desegregation in mainstream print journalism see Pamela Newkirk, *Within the Veil: Black Journalist*s, *White Media* (New York, 2000), Fred Carroll, *Race News: Black Journalists and the Fight for Racial Justice in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 2017), Alice Bonner 'Changing the Color of the News: Robert Maynard and the Desegregation of Daily Newspapers,' (PhD thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1999).

D. Roosevelt's Fair Employment Practices Committee in 1941.[72] The Chairman's commitment to antidiscrimination was enshrined in his corporation's employment policy which stated: 'there shall be no discrimination in its employment practice based on race, color, creed, or national origin.'[73] NBC's pledge to fair employment even predated the New York State law against discrimination.[74] The fundamental attitude it conveyed, RCA President Frank M. Folsom informed the subcommittee on Labour and Labour-Management Relations of the United States Senate Committee on Labour and Public Welfare in 1953, had been 'in effect since RCA's founding in 1919.' Folsom was confident that the general employment policies of RCA were 'in keeping with the highest democratic principles,' and 'both positive and progressive in the interest of better human relations.'[75]

Yet, by 1950 RCA's positive and progressive attitude had permeated neither the studio floors nor behind the office desks of its subsidiary NBC. The network employed hardly any African Americans either on screen or behind the scenes. Despite the purported lack of discrimination in employment practices, NBC had fewer than fifty African Americans working for the business across its entire corporation. Of the few African American employees at NBC, many were in clerical or janitorial positions.[76] In New York, across both the main network and local network owned and operated stations, approximately fourteen African Americans took home a NBC paycheque.[77]

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[72] Letter from Joseph V. Baker Associates, Inc. to General David Sarnoff, 17 September 1953, b.164 f.25 'Negro Public Relations,' SE.
[73] Unnamed document Received Feb 4 1953, b.164, F.25 '1953 Negro Public Relations,' SE.
[74] 'Interracial Relations,' 16 January 1951, b.129 f.28 'Race Relations The Negro National Community (conference)' WFB.
[75] Unnamed document, Received 4 Feb 1953, b.164, f.25 'Negro Public Relations,' SE.
[76] Murray Forman, 'Employment and Blue Pencils: NBC, Race, and Representation, 1926-55' in Michele Hilmes and Michael Henry (eds) *NBC: America's Network* (Berkeley, 2007), p.120., Materials connected with a 1951 roundtable 'The National Broadcasting Company and The Negro National Community' estimated this number to be approximately 37, making a point to highlight: 'Since we do not indicate on our records the race, color or creed of any of our employees, no accurate count can ever be made of the number employed.' 'The National Broadcasting Company and the Negro Community', 1 November 1951, b.129, f.26 'Race Relations Joseph V. Baker Associates,' WFB.
[77] Letter from Joseph V. Baker Associates, Inc. to General David Sarnoff, 17 September 1953, b.164 f.25, 'Negro Public Relations,' SE.

Television's early years coincided with a moment when civil rights organisations, buoyed by a changing climate of opinion wrought by the Second World War, and the liberal reform-minded race initiatives of the Truman administration, were becoming ever more vocal.[78] An energised National Urban League and the NAACP which had long lambasted radio now took aim at the television network for their failures in representation and employment.[79] The Black press had begun to brand NBC as an organisation 'shot through with Southerners' who would refute any appreciable recognition of their racial group.[80] NBC top brass realised the network had a public relations problem.[81]

The African American community's perception of NBC mattered because, as executives began to recognise, Black America represented a fourteen million strong market that the network could sell to sponsors. However, at the executive level, few if any had enough understanding of the African American experience to be able to produce initiatives that would fold this market and all of its lucrative potential into the overall scheme of the network.[82] Understanding what made Black America tick was a tall order for men who defended the use of the racial epithet 'darky' in network programming as a term of endearment.[83] NBC decided to address its

[78] Many scholars of the freedom struggle have argued that a 'long civil rights movement' existed from the New Deal and beyond the 1960s. See for example, Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement', Jeanne Theoharis, 'Black Freedom Studies: Re-Imagining and Redefining the Fundamentals', *History Compass*, 4:2 (2006), pp.348-367.
[79] Forman, 'Employment and Blue Pencils,' p.120.
[80] 'Fifty-Six Million Ears…and Eyes: A Public Relations Report to NBC by the Joseph V. Baker Associates, Inc.' b.162, f.30 '1951 Joseph Baker Associates', SE., Since the founding of *Freedom's Journal*, the earliest known African American owned and operated newspaper, the Black Press had sought to play a dual role by both disseminating news and acting as agents of social change. See, Forde and Bedingfield, *Journalism and Jim Crow*, D'Weston Haywood, *Let Us Make Men: The Twentieth-Century Black Press and a Manly Vision for Racial Advancement* (Chapel Hill, 2018), p.135., Jane Rhodes, 'The Visibility of Race and Media History', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 10/2 (1993), pp.183-190. Armistead S. Pride and Clint C. Wilson II., *A History of the Black Press* (Washington, D.C., 1997).
[81] 'Fifty-Six Million Ears…and Eyes'
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

relationship to 'the National Negro Community', by bringing in outside expertise.[84] Enter Joseph V. Baker.



Fig. 1.1 Joseph Varney Baker, Founder of Joseph V. Baker Associates.

Joseph Varney Baker was an African American man whose role in advancing the cause of Black equality rarely features in scholarship on the freedom struggle. In the early 1930s, the journalism graduate of Temple University left his job as city editor at the *Philadelphia Tribune* to form America's first Black-owned public relations company. Over the next 20 years Joseph V. Baker and Associates, Inc. established the revolutionary strategy of marketing products specifically to African Americans.[85] By convincing companies that African American customers would be loyal to brands that hired Black people, Baker and his associates functioned as civil rights pioneers

[84] Letter from Sydney Eiges to Samuel Chotzinoff, 15 June 1951, b.129, f.'Race Relations the National Negro Community', SE.
[85] Forman, 'Employment and Blue Pencils', p.124.

in their promotion of African American employment. In 1950, the *Chicago Defender* named Baker one of the 'Outstanding Americans' to appear on its annual 'Honor Roll', 'for his efforts in establishing understanding and better relations between the Negro and industry.'[86] Baker became the bridge between corporate America and the Black community. His blue-chip client list included the American Tobacco Company, the Gillete Corporation, and Procter & Gamble amongst many other heavy hitters of the corporate world. That same year, the nation's leading Black PR man welcomed the National Broadcasting Company onto his books.[87]

In Baker's judgement, as he informed General Sarnoff, while NBC may have had a progressive attitude towards race in theory, in practice there was a tendency to trail off into vagueness. 'This is due,' he elucidated to the network head, '…to the fact that while, like sin, everybody is against it, nobody has the specific mandate to do anything about it.'[88] Between 1950 and 1954, Baker helped NBC take action by developing its 'Integration Without Identification' programme.[89] This initiative, the network told leaders of the Black community, meant 'simply, utilising the talent best suited for any and all roles and services without regard to race.'[90] In more complex terms, IWI comprised a plan which aimed amongst other things, to sharpen NBC's race policy; improve relations with the Black press; and increase the number of African American performers and personnel.

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[86] 'Honor Roll', *CD*, 6 January 1951, p.1.
[87] Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, 'Baker, Joseph Varney', in Robert L. Heath (ed) *Encyclopedia of Public Relations: Volume I* (London, 2005), pp.56-60. Although not entirely overlooked by historians of Public Relations, Baker does not feature in *Madison Avenue and the Color Line,* Jason Chambers' ground-breaking history of Black advertising agency employees and agency owners, one of the most important histories in the field of race and corporate advertising. Jason Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry* (Philadelphia, 2011).
[88] 'The National Broadcasting Company and the Negro National Community: A Confidential Report to the Chairman of the Board,' 17 September 1953, b.164, f.25 'Negro Public Relations,' SE.
[89] For more on the Integration without Identification policy at NBC see, Robert Pondillo, *America's First Network TV Censor: The Work of NBC's Stockton Helffrich* (Illinois, 2010), p.152.
[90] Letter, Unaddressed, regarding the Integration Without Identification seemingly to be distributed to members of the 'Negro National Community' b.164, f.25 'Negro Public Relations,' SE

The case of Baker and the IWI programme at NBC revealed that although the networks celebrated their professed progressive stance on fair employment, it was pocketbook arguments that convinced them to take action. Baker impressed upon executives the 'importance of the Negro market.' He made clear in correspondence with General Sarnoff and his report 'Fifty Six Million Ears…..And Eyes' that IWI intended to ensure that 'a market in which $14,000,000 changes hands each year' would 'label [NBC] a 'Friendly Management.'[91] While Sarnoff and NBC executives may have paid lip service to the theory of employment equality, Baker recognised that for any active steps to be taken to close the gap between policy and practice, he had to sell the scheme in terms of the bottom line.

While the public relations expert lauded his integration campaign as 'one of the finest programs, in potentiality, ever sponsored by a unit of American industry,' IWI was far more successful at broadcasting NBC's positive steps towards employing African Americans than actually hiring them in practice.[92] 'Although the project may be definitely labelled 'progressive,' director of the *International Negro Press*, Luther A. Townsley wrote to NBC president Joseph H. McConnell, having attended an IWI roundtable conference in 1951, 'we regret that NBC had no plans to integrate Negroes into the position of news announcers.'[93] The African American newspaperman recognised that a programme which sounded good had not translated into any tangible progress. From the pages of the Black Press, *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist, Izzy Rowe, in March 1953 derided IWI roundtable discussions 'fashioned to extol the virtues of NBC,' which in fact reported no real results. 'Where is all this great radio progress as far as Negroes are concerned, that NBC and its followers tied to cram down their ears,' she asked her readers

[91] 'Fifty-Six Million Ears…and Eyes'
[92] 'The National Broadcasting Company and the Negro National Community: A Confidential Report to the Chairman of the Board,' 17 September 1953, b.164, f.25 'Negro Public Relations,' SE
[93] Letter from Luther A. Townsley, Dir. International Negro Press to Joseph H. McConnell, President National Broadcasting Company, b.129, f.28 'Race Relations The Negro National Community,' WFB.

indignantly. 'What, for instance, is the advancement of the race toward greater integration with the skilled workers behind the scenes of the airlanes and the TV channels?'[94]

The same month, it became clear to one Black American with aspirations of making a career in radio and TV, William Lloyd Williams, that IWI was all spin and no substance. 'I must confess,' Williams wrote to Edward Madden, the network's vice president, 'the whole campaign has left me with a dark brown taste in my mouth.' Williams described himself to the network executive as 'one of the forgotten men in this business.'[95]Alongside every other young Black man, not to mention Black woman, who entered the job market in the mid 1940s, he found his options severely limited. While NBC may have celebrated the employment policy that had apparently not discriminated based on race, religion, or creed since 1919, a de facto ban on Negro employment existed at this and every other network. After eight years of trying to make his way in the industry, when Williams saw NBC's promotion of IWI in the Black press, he believed his time had come. 'Upon applying for employment I was told that I qualified for a floorman's job in TV or as a Production assistant in Radio or TV,' Williams wrote to Madden. 'Then came the story of how destitute NBC was and that the budget wouldn't permit any hiring at present.' The Black broadcasting hopeful's suspicions of the hollowness of such claims were confirmed when he read a broadcasting trade paper announcing that NBC had just enjoyed its best financial year ever. 'And so the well planned publicity campaign continues, as men in the business such as I shake their heads,' Williams declared with resignation.[96] Recognising that it was in fact illegal in New York to slam the door in the face of an African American job applicant, the *New York Amsterdam News* highlighted that white bosses were now more covert in their discrimination. 'Many employers swing their doors wide open, grant sympathetic interviews, tell beautiful lies,

[94] 'Izzy Rowe's Notebook: Round Table for Squares', *Pittsburgh Courier*, 28 March 1953, b.164, f.25 'Negro Public Relations,' SE.
[95] Letter from William Lloyd Williams to Edward Madden, NBC Vice President and Assistant to the President, 29 March 1953, b.164 f.25 'Negro Public Relations,' SE.
[96] Letter from Williams to Madden

shake hands and at the same time manage to keep jobs open for white applicants waiting outside,' the paper argued.[97] Williams was not the first to experience the gap between fair employment policy and discriminatory hiring practice.

The rooms inside NBC remained overwhelmingly white while network executives defended their progressive hiring policies. Edward Madden, responding to William Lloyd Williams' letter of complaint, proclaimed that when it came to hiring, the network did not see colour. 'NBC selects its employees and talent with just one yardstick – ability,' the white executive informed Williams. By arguing that the network was colour-blind in its approach to hiring, Madden reiterated the position that NBC stated to the Black community throughout the early 1950s.[98] In IWI progress meetings with leaders of the Black community, at the same time they admitted that more needed to be done to improve their record on African American employment, network executives highlighted that their hiring policies did not discriminate because they explicitly did not take race into account. In a 1951 speech on 'Interracial Relations', vice president and former director of news, William F. Brooks, read out NBC's policy to prove the network's fair approach: 'Applicants are considered for positions on the basis of their education, experience, and ability. Selection is made in terms of their qualifications without regard to race, color, or creed.' 'We have examined and re-examined our selection processes,' he told the assembled audience of African Americans. NBC's hiring system, Brooks informed his audience, 'we feel is completely fair and does the job for us.'[99] For anyone who had attended NBC's roundtable with 'The National Negro Community' the previous year, Brooks' remarks would have been extremely familiar. NBC Director of Personnel, Ernest De La Ossa, had used exactly

[97] 'Negroes Winning Fight for Jobs: Some Industries Continue to Close Out Negro Labour' *New York Amsterdam News*, 9 Sept. 1950, p.15.
[98] At a 16 March 1953 NBC roundtable on progress Madden repeated his claim that NBC had 'one yardstick – the selection of performers on the basis of ability without regard to racial derivation.' The language Madden used in his reply to Williams was well-worn at NBC. b.164 f.25 'Negro Public Relations,' SE.
[99] William F. Brooks, 'Interracial Relations', 16 Jan. 1951, b.129, f.28 'Race Relations The Negro National Community,' WFB.

the same wording to outline NBC's approach to equal employment.[100] The network had established a line to which white executives felt comfortable sticking: by not considering colour their selection processes were fair.

NBC executive Madden assured Williams, the rejected African American applicant, that ability was the only rubric by which the network judged candidates.[101] 'When the Company resumes its hiring activities in Production,' he wrote, 'your personnel dossier will be re-examined to determine how your qualifications measure up against those of other job candidates.' The problem lay in how that ability was measured: qualifications. Official records of experience and achievement appeared to be a clear measure of talent and ability. But in a society where African Americans had been prevented from obtaining such qualifications, such measures were not an accurate reflection of an African American candidate's quality relative to his white peers. Unable to get his foot in the door of an industry which had up until that point barred African Americans, the Black applicant's qualifications would never have measured up against those of white job candidates. In a report on an IWI roundtable conference in 1951 for *The Chicago World*, Luther A. Townsley made clear to his readers that past lack of opportunity was still keeping African Americans out of the NBC newsroom:

> Because there are few, if any opportunities for Negroes to obtain experience, Negroes cannot qualify for the position of NBC News announcers. Again it's that vicious old circle. One can't qualify because of inexperience, which exists because there are no opportunities for gaining required experience.[102]

The hiring policies which appeared non-discriminatory to white executives, held African Americans back precisely because they did not take race into account. Being supposedly blind

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[100] 'Transcript: The National Broadcasting Company and the Negro National Community: A Roundtable,' October 1950, New York,' b.129, f.26 Race Relations Joseph V. Baker Associates, WFB.
[101] Letter from Edward Madden to William Loyd Williams, 1 April 1953, b.164, f.25 'Negro Public Relations,' SE.
[102] Luther A. Townsley, 'Digging Facts', *The Chicago World*, 27 Jan. 1951, b.129, f.28 'Race Relations The Negro National Community,' WFB.

to questions of colour, executives could celebrate their progressivism by pointing to hiring policies which in reality kept the doors shut to African Americans.[103] As legal scholar Alan Freeman has argued, colour-blindness 'both declares racial characteristics irrelevant and prevents any affirmative steps to achieve the condition of racial irrelevance.'[104] The networks in purporting their lack consideration of a person's skin colour also overlooked the experiences and opportunities or lack-thereof which that individual would have been exposed to as a result of that colour in a racist society.

William Lloyd Williams argued that IWI's press campaign promoting NBC's non-discriminatory hiring practices was nothing more than 'an obvious attempt at appeasement'.[105] Although Baker's approach may have been a step towards opening the network's doors to African Americans, the campaign emphasised appearance rather than substance. An exercise in public relations had done little to effect any real change at NBC; the door remained closed to African American candidates such as Williams. As he lamented to NBC executive Edward Madden – drawing on Cold War rhetoric to drive home the contradiction between the American principles of freedom and democracy and NBC's exclusionary practices: 'Radio and TV for a negro, remain behind the Iron curtain of prejudice.'[106] The network may have recognised the benefit in endearing itself to a Black market, but white executives remained more focused on their majority white audiences. They did not see an urgent need to alter or interrogate the racial make-up of the network newsroom. Despite fair employment policies and programmes like IWI, television news remained overwhelmingly white in the 1950s.

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[103] It must be noted that the New York Law Against Discrimination specifically prohibited inquiry into the race, creed, colour, or national origin of an applicant for employment. Yet NBC executives rarely alluded to the law and seemingly did not view it as an imposition. Rather they celebrated NBC's colour-blind policy as representative of the company's position. 'Negroes Winning Fight for Jobs,' *NYAN*.

[104] Alan David Freeman, 'Legitimising Racial Discrimination Through Antidiscrimination Law: A Critical Review of Supreme Court Doctrine' in Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (eds), *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement,* (New York, 1996) p.35.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Letter from William Lloyd Williams to Edward Madden, NBC Vice President and Assistant to the President, 29 March 1953, b.164 f.25 'Negro Public Relations,' SE.

Section Two

Covering African Americans as Americans

White newsrooms in America had a history of prejudicial reporting. In 1947, nine Fellows of Harvard University's Nieman Foundation for Journalism, engaged in a year-long study of the press to ascertain how well American newspapers served their readers, recognised that a system of discrimination operated within the nation's newspapers. Coverage of Black America by white newsmen who were barely conscious of their prejudices, the study found, presented a distorted image of African Americans. 'As pictured in many newspapers,' the Niemen Fellows argued, 'the Negro is either an entertaining fool, a dangerous animal, or (on the comparatively rare occasions when a Negro's achievements are applauded) a prodigy of astonishing attainments, considering his race.'[107] The Nieman Fellows condemned racist reporting practices which they had found were typical of newspapers throughout the nation:

> North and South, most newspapers are consistently cruel to the colored man, patronising him, keeping him in his place, thoughtlessly crucifying him in a thousand big and little ways. Every editor is aware of the double standard applied to news about Negroes and white men – but only dimly aware. Custom and habit have so blinded editors that they see nothing cruel or unnatural in their discrimination.[108]

American newsrooms, the study found, replicated and therefore perpetuated the racism that existed in American society.

The study highlighted how these racist reporting practices meant that while the press frequently ignored news of horrific incidents of racial violence against African Americans, they overplayed stories in which Black Americans appeared as criminals who had targeted whites. 'A Negro is bigger news when he commits a crime than when a crime is committed against him,' the Nieman

[107] Leon Svirsky (ed), *Your Newspaper: Blueprint for a Better Press* (New York, 1947), p.23.
[108] Svirsky, *Your Newspaper*, p.23.

Fellows concluded.[109] Similarly, as journalism scholars and former reporters Eugene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff have highlighted, national publications like *The New York Times* only wrote about anti-segregationist leaders and African American protest organisations on their inside pages on the rare occasion they reported on them at all.[110] White newsmen in all-white newsrooms where racism had long been an unquestioned norm rarely considered the topic of racial injustice as news.

While television networks demonstrated no intentions to desegregate their newsrooms in the 1950s, the broadcasts which came out of those newsrooms began to indicate a step away from overt racism. The programmes produced by Edward Murrow at CBS showed that the network did not intend to entirely erase African Americans. In 1953, for example, Murrow's interview programme *Person to Person* had as its guest African American baseball player Roy Campanella. *See It Now*, the prime-time news documentary series that Murrow co-produced with Fred W. Friendly with the aim of providing depth and background that the 15-minute newscast lacked, had aired an episode on the Korean War which showed African American soldiers on television for the first time.[111] As Murrow and Friendly gained the respect of critics and CBS officials with their pioneering programme they became increasingly bold. On 16 March 1954 they devoted an entire episode of *See It Now* to a report on Annie Lee Moss an African American civil servant at the Pentagon who had been accused by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee of being a communist spy.[112] Murrow and Friendly's next episode two months later focused on the controversial topic of school segregation.

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[109] Ibid. For more on racist reporting practices of the white press, see: Martindale, *The White Press,* p.55., Flournoy, 'Reporting the Movement,' p.60.
[110] Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, p.10.
[111] Curtin, *Redeeming the Wasteland*, p.122., Ponce De Leon, *That's the Way It Is*, p.20.
[112] *See It Now: Annie Lee Moss Before the McCarthy Committee* [television programme] CBS, 16 March 1953. *Transcript: See It Now: Annie Lee Moss Before the McCarthy Committee*, b.108, ERM.

See It Now was not alone in covering the issue of integration that spring. On 17 May 1954, a Supreme Court decision made America's system of racial inequality a story which no American news outlet could ignore. The Court's nine justices unanimously ruled that the doctrine of 'separate but equal' advanced in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling had no place in public schools.[113] The system of segregation in education was unconstitutional, the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling declared. Yet how Murrow and Friendly chose to approach the story provided coverage of African Americans which would have proved novel to many American viewers.[114] In an episode entitled *A Study of Two Cities*, which aired eight days after the Supreme Court's decision, they devoted the entire half hour the network gave them to an exploration of Southern opinions towards desegregation.[115] Choosing two cities in states that made up part of the Old Confederacy, Gastonia, North Carolina, and Nachitoches, Louisiana, as case studies, the programme presented interviews with residents of each in an attempt to represent to viewers the variety of opinions held in the South. Alongside the white residents of these two cities, however, in *A Study of Two Cities*, Murrow and Friendly also gave airtime to the other demographic the decision affected: African Americans.

The programme presented the Black residents of Gastonia and Nachitoches, in the same way it depicted their white counterparts. After *See It Now* cameras brought viewers a white schoolteacher in the classroom of an all-white high school in Gastonia asking her students their thoughts on the Supreme Court decision, they showed a Black teacher eliciting his students' views at all-Black Highland High School. Once Murrow had introduced a Parent-Teachers

[113] Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S.483 (1954) p.11. https://catalog.archives.gov/id/1656510 (28 January 2022).
[114] Museum of Broadcasting, *See It Now: A Retrospective* Programme, 20 April-15 May, 1982, b.171, f.15, FF.
[115] *See It Now: A Study of Two Cities* [television programme] CBS, 25 May 1954, The Edward R. Murrow Collection, UCLA FTA, *Transcript: See It Now: A Study of Two Cities*, May 25, 1954, b.109, ERM. This programme was originally viewed onsite at the UCLA FTA in 2017. Later a copy became available on a youtube account hosted by 'Hezakaya Newz' which the author downloaded and has in personal possession. The Hezakaya Newz online copy has since been removed.

Association where viewers heard from a white elementary school teacher and a white parent, he announced a Black PTA which gave an African American schoolteacher, Mrs. Hope, the chance to share her views. Moving to Nachitoches the documentary again followed discussion in a white classroom with its counterpart in a Black high school.

By approaching the Black community in these two Southern cities as if they were any other Americans whose opinions were relevant to a Supreme Court decision, *See It Now* provided an opportunity for these Black citizens to demonstrate their respectability. As scholars of African American protest have highlighted, the politics of respectability played a fundamental role in arguments for full Black inclusion in American society.[116] Segregationist white Americans had traditionally proclaimed that Black Americans were unable to either appreciate or practice respectable behaviour; a supposed 'inability' which justified oppression. When African Americans employed tenets of middle-class propriety which had been founded upon racial exclusivity, they challenged this exclusion.[117] The well-groomed and well-dressed Black teachers, students, and parents throughout the documentary, just like their white counterparts, visually conformed to white middle-class standards. In the ideals they eloquently expounded, they also presented values – such as an anti-Communist belief in democracy, and a belief in advancement through education – which white America might recognise and respect. By applying the same treatment to these Southern African Americans that they gave to the white citizens of Gastonia and Nachitoches, Murrow and Friendly produced a radical programme.

[116] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the term 'politics of respectability' in her study of Progressive Era African American women's activities in the Black Baptist Church. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: the Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880*-1920 (Harvard University Press, 1993).
[117] Marissa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, "Dress Modestly, Neatly… As if You Were Going to Church': Respectability, Class and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement' in Peter Ling and Sharon Monteith (eds) *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement* (London, 1999), p.70.

The following year, network reporters' coverage of a sensational trial demonstrated that Murrow and Friendly were not the only newsmen willing to treat African Americans at the centre of a story the same way they would white subjects. In September of 1955, a court in Sumner Mississippi tried two white men Roy Bryant and JW Milam for the murder of an African American teenager, Emmett Till. Television reporters who covered the trial applied the same reporting practices to this assignment that they would any other: find individuals connected to the story and get them to talk.[118] CBS reporters therefore interviewed Till's mother Mamie Till Bradley, his grandmother, Alma Spearman, and the uncle whose home in Mississippi Till's murderers had abducted him from, Moses Wright. Demonstrating that its rival followed the same approach, NBC News reporter Joe Michael's interview of Moses Wright also appeared on NBC News' *Today Show*, the breakfast news programme hosted by David Garroway.[119]

Where once white newsmen had entirely ignored the lynching of African Americans, in these interviews the networks took viewers into the homes of a victim's relatives. Exposure to the interior of a Black American household would have been rare for many white Americans in 1955. The post-war acceleration of residential segregation due to 'white flight' and ghettoisation, meant that large portions of America might never have come into any kind of personal contact with a Black American let alone seen inside their homes.[120] The middle-class taste and values,

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[118] The first director of CBS News, Sig Mickelson later recounted that to realise the goal of covering serious news graphically, the objective of the news department was to 'go to the locale where news was being made or to the people who were making it and photograph them on the spot with sound, recording as much substance as possible and supplementing it with narration.' Mickelson, *The Decade*, p.52. For more on television news and wider news media coverage of the Emmett Till's murder see Allison Graham and Sharon Monteith, 'Introduction,' in Allison Graham and Sharon Monteith (eds), *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 18: Media* (Chapel Hill, 2011) pp.15-18., Flournoy, 'Reporting the Movement', Maurice Berger, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven, 2010), p.101, Jacquelyn Goldsby, 'The High and Low Tech of It: The Meaning of Lynching and the Death of Emmett Till,' *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 9:2 (1996)

[119] 'Till's Uncle Quits Miss.' *PC*, 1 Oct. 1955, p.5., 'Breakdown of Today Show Programming,' b.171, f.34 'Responsibility Reports,' SE., Cassette 027. CBS Archive Footage (021) 1955, Keith Beauchamp Papers, MSS 2015-016, Special Collections & Archives, Florida State University Libraries, Tallahassee, Florida, http://purl.flvc.org/fsu/fd/FSU_MSS2015-016_B01_I022 (31 May 2019).

[120] For more on residential segregation see Douglass Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, 1993), pp.20,47., and Flournoy, 'Reporting the Movement,' p.50. For more on suburbanisation and ghettoisation see Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas Sugrue (eds) *The New Suburban*

showcased in the homes of Till's family members would have provided the first visual evidence some white viewers would have ever seen that these African Americans were just like them. CBS cameras brought footage of Alma Spearman into white American living rooms in a neat living room of her own seated beside Chicago bureau correspondent Frank Reynolds on a patterned couch set off by complementary curtains.[121] American television screens similarly presented Mamie Till Bradley in her Chicago home seated next to a lace-curtained window in her living room and stroking a Labrador on her front porch, clear markers of a middle-class American lifestyle.[122]

The interview set-up with Moses Wright hinted that producers may have staged the settings of these interviews intentionally to highlight the respectability of Till's family. Where Alma Spearman and Mamie Till Bradley were well-spoken, cosmopolitan women in the North, Wright was a sharecropper from the rural Mississippi Delta. CBS cameras, however, captured Till's uncle with a young woman's graduation photograph clearly visible in a picture-frame behind him. The image of this young graduate, mortarboard atop her head and diploma in hand – presumably a family member of Wright's – provided visual evidence of middle-class values: a belief in education and hard work to achieve advancement. Framing the shot to include this photograph had the effect of transferring to Wright the respectability his humble accent might call into question.

History (Chicago, 2006), p.2. and Teron McGrew 'The History of Racial Segregation in the United States Title VIII,' *The Black Scholar* 27:2 (1997), p.27.

[121] Cassette 027. CBS Archive Footage 1955.

[122] 1*955 Special Report: "The Emmett Till Trial,"* Youtube (recorded n.d., uploaded Mar. 2019) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSsJI9IUKkc (28 January 2022).



Fig. 1.2 CBS correspondent Frank Reynolds interviews Alma Spearman in a living room.



Fig. 1.3 CBS cameras film Mamie Till Bradley on a front porch.

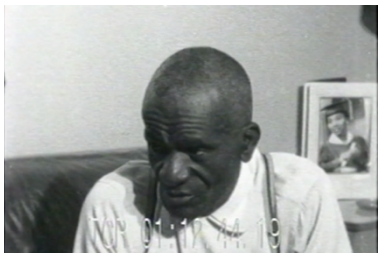


Fig. 1.4 Moses Wright interviewed with a graduation portrait displayed in the background.

These reports by television newsmen in the early 1950s indicated that journalists working in network television were willing to move away from the overt racism that had characterised the news industry in the past. In line with the colour-blind rhetoric enshrined in their company's employment policies – and espoused by their public relations departments – network correspondents endeavoured to cover the African Americans at the centre of national news stories in the same way they reported on white subjects. At times they may well have tried to heighten their similarities to middle-class white America.

Even reporters who believed in the equality of African Americans as human beings, however, did not wish to appear explicitly sympathetic to Black America. As the remaining sections of this chapter will show, network television news departments were invested in presenting news they proclaimed to be neutral. Yet as the complaints of Black viewers made clear, reporting by white newsmen often betrayed the limits of a white perspective.

Section Three

Audience Criticism

Network news executives' firm belief in the principle of fairness and balance was not simply an FCC imposition on the industry. These federal rules – which the networks resented, believing

that the government should play no role in policing broadcast news – supported a belief in the journalistic code of objectivity that lay at the heart of the profession.[123] As journalism historians have shown, when the industry professionalised in the 1920s, an era when science was supreme and elites began to shun partisanship as a hangover of the 19th century, professed objectivity became the guiding ideal which determined credibility in news.[124] As first radio and then television developed, these values imbued the broadcast news industry's conception of its ground rules. The same year desegregation became a leading story, President of CBS, Bill Paley, affirmed in a speech to his organisation entitled 'The Road to Responsibility': 'the principle of fairness and balance is the cornerstone of our news and public affairs policy, as it should be of any broadcaster.'[125] Fairness and balance therefore was not just an external mandate of the fairness doctrine, but the guiding principle of the broadcast news industry and a core tenet of journalistic identity. Television viewers in the 1950s expected network news departments to live up to the journalistic ideals they proclaimed.

As soon as network television began covering the story of segregationists' resistance to admitting Black students to all-white schools in 1954, Black viewers expressed their expectation that news programmes should demonstrate fairness and balance and criticised reporting they deemed unfair. 'Numerous complaints received concerning lack of objectivity in handling Delaware, Maryland, and Washington School situation on NBC TV News Caravan,' read a telegram that landed on the desk of Sydney Eiges on the afternoon of 6 October 1954.[126]

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[123] News executives grew hostile towards the Fairness Doctrine and would call for its elimination on the grounds that the government had 'no legitimate role to play in reviewing the performance of the broadcast press.' CBS News*, CBS News Standards* (1976), p.17., Julian Zelizer, 'How Washington Helped Create the Contemporary Media: Ending the Fairness Doctrine,' in Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (eds), *Media Nation: The Political History of News in Modern America* (Philadelphia, 2017), p.181.

[124] Michael Schudson, 'The Objectivity Norm in Journalism', *Journalism* 2/2 (2001), p.162., Nicole Hemmer, 'From "Faith in Facts" to "Fair and Balanced": Conservative Media, Liberal Bias, and the Origins of Balance' in Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer (ed) *Media Nation: The Political History of News in Modern America* (Philadelphia, 2017), p.127.

[125] Quoted in *CBS News Standards*, p.17.

[126] In 1954 NBC's evening television news programme was the *Camel News Caravan* anchored by John Patrick Swayze.

Howard D. Woods, the City Editor of African American newspaper, the *St. Louis Argus*, had written to the network's vice president of press and publicity to pass on his readers' concerns. 'Many comparing "balanced" treatment of Doug Edwards preceding caravan on rival network,' he continued, hammering home NBC's failure in light of its competitor's fairness, 'thought you should know.'[127]

A couple of days later, the *Argus* editor followed up on his telegram with a two-page letter detailing the main points of complaint his readership had made about the coverage NBC had provided of the story over the four days it made the evening news. Among the issues of misrepresentation they raised, viewers highlighted that on the Wednesday, 6 October broadcast, NBC had interviewed 'the [white] rabble rouser' Bryant W. Bowles, 'without giving adequate expression to his opposition.'[128] If NBC News gave a segregationist spokesman access to the airwaves, Woods' readers made clear: the network should also give integrationists the opportunity to present their views. Black television viewers shared the belief enshrined in the Fairness Doctrine that broadcasters should provide airtime for both sides of a controversial issue and in this understanding of fairness found a means by which to hold broadcast news to account.[129]

The complaints of Woods' readership highlighted that providing a platform for whites who were against the segregationist school protests was a start but not an end in the challenge of fair coverage. Revealing that not all network news broadcasts upheld *See It Now's A Study of Two Cities* approach, the *Argus* editor relayed, 'All of the complainants were critical of both NBC and

[127] Telegram from Howard D. Wood, City Editor, St Louis Argues to Sydney H. Eiges Vice President of Press, 6 October 1954, b.165, f.59 'Negro Public Relations', SE.
[128] Letter from Howard D. Wood to Sydney H. Eiges, 8 October 1954, b.165, f.59 'Negro Public Relations,' SE.
[129] Media historians have also shown how African American activists used the politics of license renewal and the Fairness Doctrine to challenge local television stations in the South for reinforcing segregation. See, for example, Perlman, 'Chapter Two: The Black Freedom Struggle and the Broadcast Reform Movement', in *Public Interests*, pp.46-64., Classen, *Watching Jim Crow*.

CBS for not interviewing Negro children or parents although many could be seen in background of films.' Ordinary African Americans pointed out that coverage about Black rights was unbalanced if the programme did not give voice to the perspectives of those Black people involved in issue.[130] It was not sufficient, these viewers made clear, for network news to cast African Americans as silent extras in the desegregation story.[131]

NBC took Woods' readers' indictments of their professionalism seriously, responding to his message immediately. 'Have received your wire and am looking into situation and will advise you,' Eiges shot back the morning after he received the first telegram. The vice president of press and publicity took the complaints to NBC News director Bill McAndrew.[132] McAndrew and his staff then undertook a thorough examination of their coverage and the decisions behind it. Between 12 and 21 October they made a detailed review of the points Woods' letter had raised and McAndrew, Eiges, and a third man on the NBC staff, Frank McCall, crafted a response.

Bill McAndrew's initial internal reply about the complaints to Sydney Eiges defended his team's intentions to provide a balanced report. 'I have watched and participated in many decisions with respect to coverage of the segregation story on CAMEL as it developed in Milford, Delaware,' the NBC News director assured Eiges. 'We have attempted to be – in our scripts and films – as objective as we know how, being fully aware that this is a story which carries a great deal of emotional concern.' He then illustrated that teams working on the production of the story went to great lengths to ensure that representatives of both sides of the desegregation issue received coverage but often experienced difficulties. McAndrew described how one camera crew had

[130] Nan Robertson, 'Let Negroes Give Views, F.C.C. Says: Directive Issued on Devoting Fair Air Time in Disputes', *NYT*, 27 July 1963, p.45.
[131] For more on the networks' preference for keeping Black victims of racial discrimination who appeared in groups silent see: Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time,* p.60.
[132] Letter from William McAndrew to Sydney Eiges 12 October 1954, b.165, f.59 'Negro Public Relations', SE.

'endeavoured for an entire day to get a statement from the Reverend Randolph Fisher, President of the Local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,' but was thwarted by a spokesman who did not want to speak to them due to the risk of inflaming an already volatile situation. Other attempts at obtaining balancing statements involved similar difficulties, he explained, because of the tense atmosphere in all three of the cities where the story was unfolding. McAndrew then ended his defence to Eiges: 'I feel we played the story as straight as we know how and I would appreciate your assuring Mr. Woods to that effect.'[133] The NBC News director's report on this early integration coverage highlighted the two themes that would define the network news' position on their approach to the civil rights story: that desegregation was a highly emotional topic and that balance and objectivity guided the network news' decisions in covering it.

McAndrew emphasised to his colleague that the team had gone to great lengths to elicit a Black representative viewpoint on the subject, but NBC News was more concerned with appearing straight than sympathetic to its detracting Black viewers. The revisions made to NBC's response to Howard B. Woods reveal how the network privileged the appearance of fairness over any admission that the News Department had favoured the side of African Americans.

An early rough draft of the response explaining the decisions behind the broadcasts betrayed the News Department's antipathy towards segregationists. The letter emphasised that NBC's news director McAndrew felt the coverage would have the overall effect of turning the public against the anti-integrationist position. In reference to the interview with racist rabble-rouser, Bryant W. Bowles, that *Argus* readers had highlighted, the news director explained that after a great deal of consideration about including the material, he was convinced that David Brinkley's

[133] Ibid.

interview with the segregationist 'could not be interpreted as favourable to Bowles or his cause.' The background Brinkley had highlighted and the wording of the correspondent's questions, McAndrew argued, 'were such I do not believe anybody hearing the interview would be sympathetically inclined to this man.' The NBC executive acquiesced that he was willing to admit errors in the coverage pattern made under the pressure of events, but he felt that it ultimately would sway viewers to the African American argument for integration. 'I sincerely believe', McAndrew opined 'that our entire coverage of the Maryland, Delaware and Washington, DC school situation has had the net effect of making more people sympathetic to the Negro position of the controversy than make them sympathetic to Bowles and his group.'[134] In this early draft McAndrew highlighted that the decision-making processes behind the scenes had ensured a series of news reports which disfavoured the segregationist cause.

The version of the letter that Howard B. Woods ultimately received in response to his readers' complaints, however, had been scrubbed of any suggestion that distaste for the segregationist side of the issue had guided NBC News decision-making. Instead, the reply which the *St. Louis Argus* editor received from Eiges and not McAndrew, doubled down on objectivity, fairness, and balance as the principles which guided the news team. In relation to the interview with Bryant W. Bowles, Eiges informed Woods:

> I have this report from our News Department: "We gave a great deal of consideration to the question of whether to use this material. But the way our Washington reporter, David Brinkley, handled the interview convinced us that it could be presented in a way that would be fair to all concerned and that everyone watching would thoroughly understand the situation." While the opposition to Mr. Bowles, as you point out, was not represented in this interview, our feeling was there would be no misinterpretation of Mr. Bowles and his movement.

[134] 'Rough Draft' (undated) to Howard B. Woods, b.165, f.59 Negro Public Relations, SE.

Where the earlier draft had highlighted that Brinkley's handling of the interview ensured that no viewer watching would support Bowles, in the final draft the language had changed to emphasise the fairness of the interview to both sides of the debate. And where McAndrew's original words had assured Woods that the coverage would persuade more viewers towards the African American position and away from Bowles and his group than the other way around, the final letter shied away from taking a side in the situation.

Eiges then reaffirmed NBC's commitment to non-partisanship in the following paragraph by stating that despite the many difficulties it faced in covering the complicated and controversial topic of desegregation, the News Department's 'aim has been and always will be to maintain complete objectivity and balance between all opposing viewpoints and to give those opposing viewpoints the fullest possible exposure consistent with the news value of the story itself.'[135] None of the sympathy for the African American cause that the earlier draft betrayed survived in the final letter that went out to Woods. Between McAndrew and Eiges it is unclear who decided to reframe NBC's position for public consumption, however, an emphasis on fairness and balance replaced any partisan sentiments on the part of the News Department in relation to the integration story.

Both internally in the correspondence between the news director and the vice president of press and externally in the final public reply from Eiges to Howard Woods, NBC News argued that objectivity drove the coverage of the desegregation story. McAndrew's internally expressed suggestion (that sympathy for the African American position on the part of those involved in the production of news may have coloured their decision-making) revealed that NBC's newsmen were not entirely neutral in their beliefs on the subject. The organisation's press

[135] Letter from Sydney Eiges to Howard B. Woods, 21 October 1954, b.165, f.59 Negro Public Relations, SE.

department, however, wanted no such acquiescence to enter the narrative. Rather, they emphasised the News Department's commitment to the ideal of objectivity.

While Black viewers detected unbalanced coverage in favour of the white participants in the story and a disproportionate amount of time given to the anti-integrationist side, in this early period of the desegregation story, white supremacists argued that the networks were slanting coverage in the opposite direction. As historian David Greenberg has shown, the mid-1950s saw the emergence of a segregationist discourse of mainstream news bias in favour of Black America and against Southern whites.[136] CBS News received such a complaint immediately following the broadcast of *See It Now: A Study of Two Cities*. 'You will be interested to know,' James E. Roper a CBS correspondent at the Washington Bureau wrote to Murrow, 'that the first telephone call we received was from a man who, trembling with anger, said: 'You tell that Murrow fellow that he sounds a lot more at ease with the whores than he does with Governor Almond.'[137] Arguing that the *See It Now* presenter and co-producer would not be comfortable in the company of the Virginia governor who supported Massive Resistance against the desegregation of public schools, this irate white viewer criticised Murrow for appearing to take a side.

Mississippians' complaints about the publicity surrounding the Till trial revealed that Southerners strove to refocus national criticism on an irresponsible news media. One local, for example, told CBS News reporter Peter Hackes as he interviewed the knots of onlookers gathered around the courthouse in Sumner, Mississippi that the increased notoriety was worse than the crime itself.[138] By claiming that the reputation of the South was a greater casualty than

[136] David Greenberg, 'The Idea of 'The Liberal Media' and Its Roots in the Civil Rights Movement', *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, 1/2 (2008), pp.167-187.
[137] CBS Memorandum from James E. Roper to Edward R. Murrow, 22 January [no year], b.51, ERM.
[138] *1955 Special Report: "The Emmett Till Trial"*

Emmett Till, this Mississippian reframed the discussion to centre white Southerners as the true victims of injustice. The locus of blame in such arguments, was not the racial terrorists responsible for acts of brutality against African Americans but the reporters from national media outlets whom they argued deliberately slanted their coverage against white Southerners. Similarly, African American reporter Louis E. Martin, in his *Chicago Defender* column about the publicity surrounding the trial highlighted that there were those in the Delta, like Lew Sadler, programme director of Greenwood Mississippi's NBC radio affiliate, who argued that the worst side of the story was being overplayed.[139]

Fred Beard, the segregationist manager of NBC's affiliate station in Jackson, Mississippi, WLBT-TV, advanced a similar critique.[140] In 1956, Beard contributed to his collection of complaint letters to the networks with a 1956 missive directed to Davidson Taylor, NBC's vice president of News and Public Affairs, accusing the network of slanting its news stories and suggesting it was yielding to pressure from the NAACP.[141] Bending to the will of the NAACP became the ultimate segregationist accusation that the press had abandoned neutrality and taken sides against Southern whites in the battle over Jim Crow.

As with the earlier criticism from Black viewers, the network took white supremacists' indictments of their professionalism seriously. Davidson sent copies of the response he wrote to Beard to sixteen of NBC's other News, Public Affairs, and Public Relations executives. Stockton Helffrich, head of NBC's Continuity Acceptance Department also included excerpts of the letter in NBC's monthly Continuity Acceptance/Radio and Television report, a companywide memo that outlined the network's decision-making in relation to issues of

[139] Louis E. Martin, 'Dope and Data', 1 Oct 1955, *CD*, p.9.
[140] Classen's *Watching Jim Crow* examined the attempts of Beard and his station to prevent civil rights activists from accessing the airwaves in the Magnolia State.
[141] The original letter has not been preserved in the NBC records but Davidson's response to Beard suggests its content. Letter from Davidson Taylor to Fred Beard, 22 January 1957, b. 318, f.4 'Policy and Procedures', JOM.

censorship in programming.[142] Thus Taylor's reply presented the official NBC position not just to Fred Beard but to the entire network. The vice president of News and Public Affairs outlined that it was 'never the intention of NBC to slant news stories on any subject.' Taylor then declared: 'We try to make our reporting as objective as we can.'[143] Through this letter turned NBC News policy statement Taylor affirmed to NBC decision-makers the appropriate response to segregationist accusations was a doubling down on the network's professed commitment to impartiality.

While emphasising NBC's objectivity, Davidson's response also pushed back at Beard's charge that the network was giving in to Black activist demands. The NBC executive, himself a Southerner born in Tennessee and raised in Mississippi, reminded the Jackson station manager: 'the Supreme Court decisions on segregation represent the law of the land, as interpreted by our highest judicial body. The National Broadcasting Company, I should think, would never assume a position which declined to recognise this fact.'[144] Segregationists could try to frame network coverage of desegregation struggles as evidence of its one-sided sympathy for African Americans. But they did not have total freedom in defining the debate. The fact that the Supreme Court definitively upheld integration meant that the illegality of segregation shaped how newscasters chose to define balance. With integration as the law of the land, segregationists could never stand on equal legal footing as Black activists. NBC positioned its coverage not as the product of sympathetic reporters' championing the African American cause, but the result of a neutral national news outlet taking the country's laws as a given.

[142] CART Report, 8 January 1957, b.153, f.3 'CART Reports', SE. For more on Stockton Helffrich and censorship at NBC see Pondillo, *America's First Network TV Censor*.
[143] Letter from Davidson Taylor to Fred Beard, 22 January 1957, b.318, f.4 'Policy and Procedures,' JOM.
[144] 'Davidson Taylor, 'Who Headed Columbia School of Arts, Dies', *NYT*, 28 July 1979, p.22.

Segregationists refused to accept this framework and pointed to Northern newscasters' hypocrisy. In early 1957, conservative Southern newspapers argued that national news organisations based in the North ignored the racial inequality and disharmony rampant in their own regions.[145] Southern television viewers complained about the unfairness of the networks' disproportionate focus on racism in the South and failure to cover instances of Northern racial conflict. Early in 1957, NBC News attempted to address this criticism. In the 11 March broadcast of evening news programme, the *Huntley-Brinkley Report,* John Chancellor reported on the death of a Chicago teen – an instance, he highlighted, that could be interpreted as racial violence. Back in the studio, NBC anchorman Chet Huntley acknowledged: 'Southern viewers have complained that we report race violence only from the South – never from the North.'[146] White Southern criticism of Northern network bias had reached a volume that Huntley and the NBC News team felt they could no longer ignore.

Yet Huntley made clear to the audience that NBC was not going to fall into the trap segregationists had laid for them. 'For ourselves,' he told viewers, 'we are not about to begin reporting Northern violence and crime involving the white and Negro races just to demonstrate our impartiality.' In later years television critics would accuse NBC of bending over backwards to prove their fairness by providing segregationists with an excess of airtime, but in this early period, Huntley recognised that the networks' avowed commitment to balance could be used as a weapon against them and refused to succumb to such tactics.[147] 'The biggest continuing American problem is racial readjustment in the South,' he continued, '[w]hen violence results, it assumes an importance – we feel – other violence may not have.' In their assessments of what

[145] Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, pp.213-214.
[146] Huntley-Brinkley Script, 11 March 1957, b.528, f. 'HB March 11-13 1957', HBRS, WSH.
[147] Roberts and Klibanoff have shown that this strategy by Southern editors was successful in influencing newspapers outside the South to consider how Jim Crow operated in their own cities. Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, pp.213-214.

deserved national attention, Huntley made clear, balance was not the only consideration. News value as determined by reporters he argued ultimately defined what NBC would cover.

NBC News may have made a national declaration that the network would not bow to Southern attempts to discredit it. But in addressing the charges of bias on the national evening news the network showed it would not just ignore such indictments of its professionalism. By defending themselves on air, NBC revealed that Southerners had identified a weak spot. And while Huntley's statement aimed to invalidate the argument, at the same time it served to elevate the charges of bias into the arena of national public discourse. In the coming months and years this Southern white discourse about Northern network bias would continue to grow.

Conclusion

In the early 1950s, as television news first emerged, America's race relations played a fundamental role in how television news pioneers began to establish the patterns and protocols of their industry. Even as early television news reporters began to cover African American people in the same way as white subjects of news stories, colour-blind hiring practices kept Black job hopefuls out of network news departments. When school desegregation became a national cause for concern in the wake of *Brown v. Board*, network news professionals discovered that the incendiary issue awakened strong emotions in an American public which actively criticised their coverage. Viewers at home – both Black and white – in accusing the networks of bias, revealed that the news industry's professions of objectivity provided audiences the language with which to castigate their reportorial decisions.

As African American activists and ordinary Black people continued to fight segregation and American racism in the coming years, they presented television news with an ongoing challenge.

In the coming year newsmen would grapple with the dilemma of how to cover this difficult story such that it squared with their beliefs in the role of fair and balanced news in a democracy. Their next biggest test came in 1957, outside the gates of Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas.

CHAPTER TWO

LITTLE ROCK

Watching television with her mother on a couch in Cincinnati, Ohio, Melba Pattillo learned the news that would change her life forever. She had been selected as one of the nine African American students who were to attend the previously all-white local high school, Central High, in Little Rock, Arkansas in the coming 1957 school year. Recalling the moment years later, Pattillo described how CBS News correspondent Walter Cronkite had informed the Pattillos alongside the rest of the viewing public of the unexpected news, prompting her mother to start making phone calls.[148] CBS News had proved a more informative source to Melba and her mother than either the Little Rock schoolboard or the NAACP.

By 1957, over 80 percent of American households owned a television set, with which, as one study found, they now spent triple the amount of time than they spent with their newspapers.[149] When Arkansas governor Orval Faubus defied the nation's courts and ordered the Arkansas National Guard to block the Little Rock Nine from entering Central High School prompting a constitutional crisis, Americans across the country sat transfixed by their TV screens night after night. In what became, according to CBS correspondent Dan Schorr, 'a national evening séance'

[148] Interview with Melba Pattillo Beals, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on November 30, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection. http://repository.wustl.edu/concern/videos/vd66w1480 (28 January 2022)
[149] 'ARF, CENSUS BREAKDOWN US TV FIGURES', *Broadcasting*, 4 Nov. 1957, p.48., 'Tv's Overall Reach Cited by TvB's Cash', *Broadcasting*, 11 March 1957, p.92.

the American public watched the desegregation drama unfold.[150] Although network television news at this time was still a fledgling operation working to produce evening broadcasts that lasted only 15 minutes, America's fascination with the Little Rock coverage both signalled and helped to cement the dawn of a new televisual age.

The centrality of television in the unfolding of the events surrounding the desegregation of Central High demonstrated that the medium's startling immediacy and by now national reach created a new realm of reality. The discussion below will show first how television was becoming the stage upon which Americans conducted public life. Recognising its communication potential, politicians' use of television during Little Rock helped the new medium to become pivotal in American politics. The chapter then explores how Little Rock coverage demonstrated how television news provided novel ways for African American activists to make their own cases to a national viewing public for their inclusion as full members of American society. These opportunities to reach American viewers, however, were circumscribed by the frames which television newsmen imposed upon the story: reporters interpreted the crisis at Little Rock as an issue of legal defiance and public order rather than a problem of American racism. The chapter then shifts from focusing on the nature of Little Rock coverage to considering how the developing network news departments utilised their reporting on the crisis to build their reputations and prove the validity of their growing industry in the news landscape. Finally, it reveals how covering the desegregation crisis at Central High prompted both television news reporters and the medium's critics in the print press to question what constituted responsible televisual reporting.

Politics in a New Televisual Age

[150] Quoted in Halberstam, *The Fifties,* p.679. Cited in Torres, *Black, White, and in Color*, p.20.

'Why not turn on the television set?' an officer suggested when Army Secretary Wilber M. Brucker wished to know exactly what was happening on the ground the day that the 101st Airborne Division arrived in Little Rock.[151] News directors at all three networks had received clearance to break into day-time programming, providing news bulletins with on-the-spot reports from Central High to keep viewers up-to-date with the crisis.[152] A television was brought into the room and Brucker's Chief of Staff Maxwell D. Taylor, alongside any other American in the country with a TV, was able to keep tabs on his soldiers in action in Arkansas through the live coverage.[153] As Roberts and Klibanoff have highlighted, the networks had created a shared experience between citizens in Little Rock, military leaders 900 miles away in the Pentagon, and viewers in homes across America.[154] Members of the public who flicked on the news learned what was unfolding in Arkansas at the same time as the heads of the country's military forces, and at times even the President.

No-one recognised the potential of the new medium more than Arkansas governor, Orval Faubus. Culture scholar Alan Nadel has convincingly described Orval Faubus as the 'first television segregationist governor.'[155] Through his use of television's communication possibilities for personal political advantage, Faubus ensured that TV news played a fundamental role in initiating a national crisis. Calling out the National Guard to prevent the new African American students from desegregating Central High was in and of itself an act of political theatre on the part of the Arkansas governor. But Faubus heightened the drama by announcing his decision on state-wide television. Wire service reports of Faubus' request for airtime helped inform the decision of *Huntley-Brinkley Report* producer Reuven Frank to cover Little Rock on

[151] Quoted in Roberts and Klibanoff, *Race Beat*, p.180.
[152] Jack Gould, 'TV: Reality in the South: Networks Show Scenes of Paratroopers Leading Negro Children to School', NYT, 26 Sept. 1957, p.36.
[153] Roberts and Klibanoff, *Race Beat*, p.180.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Alan Nadel, *Television in Black-and-White America*, p.177.

the first day of the new school year. Vice president of NBC News and Public Affairs, Mississippi native Davidson Taylor had instructed Frank to cover desegregation in Southern High schools, believing it would make for a good story.[156] Frank had originally believed that drama was most likely to occur in Nashville, Tennessee where the previous year the state governor had used tanks and 600 National Guardsmen to quell the riots fomented by segregationist agitator John Kasper to prevent a group of Black children from attending Clinton High School.[157] In contrast, there had been no reason for news departments to expect anything particularly newsworthy would occur in Little Rock. Both Arkansas and the history of its governor were moderate and many of the town's institutions had already admitted African Americans without rousing a single segregationist placard.[158] Reports of the Arkansas governor's impending televised announcement the evening before the first day of school, however, sent a clear message to Reuven Frank. The NBC News producer, believing something big was about to happen, redirected correspondent John Chancellor from his assignment in Tennessee and sent him on the next plane to Little Rock.

Faubus's use of the medium's immediacy during his state-wide television address also served to manufacture a drama that might not otherwise have occurred. The governor claimed on air that deploying the National Guard was necessary as there had been reports that 'caravans' of troublemakers were on their way to Central High. As evidence of the potential for violence he declared stores had seen dramatic increases in the sale of guns and knives. According to Roberts and Klibanoff, journalists at the *Arkansas Gazette* found the next day that none of these claims checked out.[159] The front-page report, however, was too late; as soon as the words were out of Faubus's mouth the damage had been done as the broadcast beamed out live to television sets

[156] Roberts and Klibanoff, *Race Beat*, p.155.
[157] Kasper had been making the rounds of segregationist activities in the South inciting violence. See CBS News documentary, *See It Now: Clinton and the Law,* 6 January 1957, PCM, and Roberts and Klibanoff, *Race Beat*, p.155.
[158] Fifties, *Race Beat*, p.143.
[159] Roberts and Klibanoff, *Race Beat*, p.159.

across the state. The claim that there was going to be trouble made that trouble manifest and scores of segregationists from surrounding areas alerted by the broadcast showed up at Central High the next morning. By making his announcement via live television Faubus by-passed any form of fact-checking, giving himself the power to gin up a controversy that focused national attention on the Arkansas governor.

As the crisis progressed, Faubus showcased a savvy understanding of television's potential as a vehicle for political theatre. According to correspondent Harry Reasoner, who covered the story for CBS, the Arkansas governor showed no qualms in putting on a show for the cameras during the daily press conferences he held in his reception room. 'On one occasion I irritated him with a reasonably tough question. He more or less exploded at me as the cameras rolled, not quite calling into question the legitimacy of my parentage but fairly close to that,' Reasoner later recalled. The outburst, however, had been a contrived performance for the benefit of the viewing public rather than a genuine reaction. After the conference ended, Reasoner described how Faubus 'came over and put his arm around my shoulders. 'Sorry as hell to have to do that to you, Harry,' [Faubus] said, 'but you know how it is."[160] This episode demonstrated the governor's keen understanding of how to manipulate the new television environment. By theatrically attacking the reporter, Faubus managed to ensure he created dramatic footage more likely to make it on to the final edit of the evening news broadcast and thereby providing himself with more publicity. At the same time, he managed to avoid answering a difficult question by shifting focus instead onto the reporter who asked it, casting him as an antagonist rather than a neutral news gatherer. Yet in subsequently apologising to Reasoner, he demonstrated a canny understanding that fostering cordial relationships with television news reporters could prove to be a valuable political tool.

[160] Harry Reasoner, *Before the Colors Fade* (New York, 1981), p.51.

Faubus also took advantage of the political possibilities of television by using it as a means by which to communicate to the President as well as the public. During a private meeting between the governor and the president in New Port, Rhode Island, according to Eisenhower's official presidential diary on 14 September, he 'got definitely the understanding that [Faubus] was going back to Arkansas to act within a matter of hours to revoke his orders to the Guard to prevent re-entry of the Negro children into the school.'[161] However, the next day the Arkansas governor appeared on ABC's prime-time interview programme, *The Mike Wallace Interview*, where he announced an entirely different position. Faubus asserted that the troops' presence was not 'in defiance of a Federal Court order, based upon the premise that the peace and good order of the community is paramount to all other issues.'[162] Contrary to what he had led Eisenhower believe, the governor informed the American public he would not be calling down the National Guard. Over the course of the Little Rock crisis, Faubus had demonstrated how politicians could use the young medium as the new stage upon which to carry out their politicking.

Faubus was not alone in recognising that television could be used for political advantage. The Eisenhower administration's reliance on the new medium during the Little Rock Crisis also helped to solidify its role in public life. Presidential press secretary Jim Hagerty was a staunch supporter of the new broadcast news industry. *Television* magazine during the crisis – in a feature entitled 'Television's friend in the White House' – celebrated Hagerty as a TV enthusiast who had done 'more than any other man in government to increase the stature of television as a disseminator of information and molder of public opinion.' In an interview with the magazine,

[161] DIARY: Notes dictated by the President on October 6, 1957 concerning visit of Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas to Little Rock on September 14, 1957. b.23, f.'Little Rock, Arkansas (1)', Ann Whitman File, Papers of the President of the United States, 1953-1961, DDE.
[162] Interview with Governor Orval Faubus, 15 Sept. 1957, *The Mike Wallace Interview*, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, https://hrc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15878coll90/id/28/rec/1 (28 January 2022).

Hagerty, a former *New York Times* reporter, argued that television had 'come of age' as a medium for informing the public and in fact could do even more than radio and newspapers in bringing Americans closer to their government. 'TV has a more intimate impact on the public because it comes directly into the living rooms of the country,' he told *Television*'s readers, asserting that the President shared his views.[163] It was no surprise therefore that when Eisenhower wished to address the nation on the eve that he had mobilised the 101st division in Little Rock to uphold the Supreme Court's desegregation ruling, the administration chose to use television to reach the American people. A Trendex rating showed that 62% of all the country's TV sets were tuned to the presidential address which all three networks aired simultaneously.[164] The flood of mail the White House received after this address indicated the effect that watching the president from their living rooms had on the American public. The number of letters sent to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue concerning Little Rock and the segregation issue increased from hundreds to thousands in the wake of his televised speech. As late as two weeks after the broadcast, almost a quarter of all Americans who felt moved to write to their president did so in response to the televised Little Rock speech.[165] The administration's choice to opt for television as the platform via which to speak to the public during the crisis helped to cement the place of television news in American society.

Through Little Rock, it became evident the type of power politicians could wield through appearing on the country's television sets as the new medium became a staple in American homes. At the same time, Faubus's appearance highlighted the potential havoc that unfettered access to the airwaves could wreak. Few individuals, however, could enjoy such easy access to television and the public reach it provided. As sociologist Herbert J. Gans highlighted in his

163 'Television's Friend in the White House', *Television Magazine*, October 1957, p.45.
164 NBC, 'In Moments of History' *Broadcasting*, 7 Oct. 1957, pp.48-49.
165 PRESIDENTIAL MAIL: Week Ending Thursday, March 28, 1957 through to Week Ending Thursday, November 21, 1957, Mail Room Records, b.272, OF 72-A-12 WHO, WHCF, DDE.

study of news values, in the mid-century, the economically and politically powerful could obtain easy access to the news in a way that those who lack power could not.[166] Presidential press secretary, Jim Hagerty, remained in constant contact with a standing White House Industry Committee, comprised of representatives from each network, and could inform them when the president intended to make a televised speech.[167] While the networks did not automatically grant this airtime it would be unlikely for them to deny a request from the most influential person in the country, given both his personal relationships with executives in the television industry and the ratings he was sure to provide.[168] For those without economic and political power, like many of the nation's Black citizens, reaching the American public through television proved a lot more difficult. Becoming the centre of a newsworthy event, however, could provide African Americans some access to the nation's airwaves, as the next section will show.

African American People on the Television Airwaves

As coverage of the Little Rock story demonstrated, becoming the centre of a newsworthy event could provide African American people with opportunities to convey messages to the American public. Daisy Bates, leader of the Arkansas NAACP branch and advisor to the Little Rock Nine ensured that the students maximised the national news media's interest in them to advance the cause of African American equality by holding daily press conferences at her home in which they spoke to assembled reporters. When November rolled around Bates architected an 'official' Thanksgiving meal in which television cameras captured the students at a turkey-laden table at the Bates home giving thanks.[169] Through these appearances on camera the students reinforced their claim to equal rights and full citizenship. During the Thanksgiving press conference for

[166] Gans, *Deciding What's News*, p.81.
[167] 'Television's Friend in the White House', *Television Magazine*, October 1957, P45
[168] Head of NBC David Sarnoff had spent his war on Eisenhower's communications staff and both CBS chairman, William Paley, and NBC head of News and Public affairs, Davidson Taylor, were chiefs in Eisenhower's psychological warfare division.
[169] *Eyes on the Prize: Episode 2: Fighting Back: 1957-1962*, [television programme] Blackside Inc., 28 January, 1987.

example, Minnie Jean Brown told viewers: 'I'm thankful for the many people who have stood by us and worked diligently in our struggle for a perfect democracy.' Terence Roberts informed the public: 'I know that Communists enjoy taking advantage of situations like these to twist the minds of peoples of the world but I'm thankful that in America their actions are being foiled through the efforts of many democratic minded citizens.' Couching their statements in Cold War rhetoric and positioning themselves as American citizens, the children had learned to use their time on air to determine the meaning of their desegregation of Central High School as a means by which America could enact its democratic ideals.[170]

Daisy Bates, who had previously worked in publicity, also displayed a savvy understanding that perceived authenticity was a valuable commodity in public self-presentation.[171] According to the *Chicago Defender,* when one reporter impressed with the students' statements at a press conference remarked to Bates, 'Gee, you certainly have trained these kids well,' she quickly put him straight, retorting: 'Indeed I did not train them in what to say, nor did their parents nor did anybody else. They're speaking their own minds and furthermore, let me tell you my good man, they're just typical of thousands of bright youngsters we have all over the state.'[172] Bates understood the importance of the burden of representation that the Little Rock Nine bore and recognised how to play it to their advantage. Rarely did the networks show African Americans on the news and the entertainment landscape was equally lilywhite. In appearing on television, the Little Rock Nine represented not only themselves but all African American children. White support for desegregation could rest on how these students came across on television. That was, unless viewers thought that the students had been coached for the media and were not characteristic of ordinary African American children. Melba Pattillo Beal's memoir later revealed that she and her partners in desegregation had been advised on how to interact with reporters: instructed to

[170] Ibid.
[171] Daisy Bates quoted in Ted Poston, 'A Woman Who Dared…: Mrs. Daisy Bates', *CD*, 4 Dec. 1957, p.6.
[172] Ethel Payne, 'Tells Why Eckford Girl Walked Alone to School', *CD*, 28 Sept. 1957, p.3.

accentuate the positive and refrain from complaining. As a result, she provided to the news media what she described as 'not the whole truth but a version that wouldn't jeopardise the integration.'[173] The students therefore, had received guidance on how to present themselves to the press and had been made well aware of the need to shape responses to journalists in ways that would prove beneficial to the cause of desegregation. Daisy Bates, however, by denying emphatically that the students had received training in their answers and emphasising how typical they were, displayed a sophisticated awareness of how to ensure that the Little Rock Nine's time in the spotlight worked best to both their advantage and that of the desegregation cause.

In the context of a historically all-white news media landscape, the Little Rock Nine through their televisual appearances also made more subtle appeals to the American public. Network newsmen in covering the Little Rock Nine as if they were any other ordinary Americans at the centre of a news story helped these African Americans deploy a visual respectability politics that evidenced their belonging in the white middle-class. On the second day of school for example, a CBS News team captured fly on the wall coverage from inside the Pattillo home as Melba and her family got ready for the day. The resulting report began with footage of CBS reporter Neil Strawser standing on a leafy suburban street outside a large white bungalow in a shot that included a manicured front lawn, neat topiary and a gleaming car as he intoned: 'It's early morning at 1121 Cross Street here in Little Rock, and a new school day is dawning.' The setting on display could have been any middle class house in suburban America and the dawning of the first day of the school year was an experience that every American family would experience. The segment then cut to a view from inside the home as a perfectly-coiffed African American woman walked to a doorway and called out 'Melba.' A girl's well-spoken voice replied, 'Yes Mother,'

[173] Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* (New York, 1994), pp.122-123.

and the woman singsonged back: 'You'd better hurry, you're going to be late for school.' Cameras then brought viewers inside the teenager's spotless bedroom showing the equally pristine Melba fixing her hair in her dressing table mirror. 'As usual the girl in the family is running a little late,' Strawser joked before introducing Pattillo as the camera cut to her joining her mother and brother at the breakfast table.[174] A viewer flicking on to CBS while the news was on could easily have thought they were watching one of the family sitcoms that dominated the network's entertainment programming – except that the family featured in this tableau of the iconic American ritual of morning breakfast were Black. CBS News in bringing viewers inside the household of one of the stars of the Little Rock drama, allowed Melba and her family to show white American viewers, many of whom might never have seen inside a Black home, that the Pattillos were just like any middle-class white family.



Fig. 2.1 CBS correspondent Neil Strawser filmed outside the Pattillo household before school.



Fig. 2.2 CBS cameras film Melba Pattillo getting ready for school while Neil Strawser, standing out of frame, narrates.



Fig. 2.3 CBS films the Pattillo breakfast table, with Melba Pattillo and her brother.

The visual politics of respectability proved most powerful for African American arguments for equal rights during the Little Rock crisis, however, when contrasted with the ugliness of racist hatred. Where Emmett Till's murderers had acted in secret, the segregationist mobs that gathered outside Central High demonstrated their Confederate flag-waving and racial slur-filled

[174] *Little Rock CBS Archive Footage* compiled for *Hope & Fury: MLK, the Movement and the Media,* [dir. Rachel Dretzin and Phil Bertelsen] NBC, 24 March 2018, Ark Media Production Offices, New York.

hatred in full view of television cameras. The most striking imagery from the Southern freedom struggle was that which juxtaposed the dignified stoicism of immaculately dressed nonviolent protesters with the foul-mouthed hysteria of unkempt violent white mobs. As historians Marissa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward have argued, televisual and photographic reports, 'vividly rendered the movement as not only a battle between black rights and white wrongs, but also as a clash between accepted notions of decency and respectability.'[175]

Coverage of the mobs that assembled at Central High School provided early examples of how affecting such contrasts could be. Few broadcasts of the civil rights era were more shocking than the footage television cameras captured of when the mob waiting for the Little Rock Nine outside Central High school attacked veteran African American reporter L. Alex Wilson.[176] A 24 September CBS News special report on Little Rock brought into American living rooms the disturbing scenes of an immaculately dressed Wilson in a suit, tie, and wide-brimmed hat being repeatedly kicked and punched by a moving scrum of angry, shouting, white men as he calmly walked away from the school. At one point a segregationist kick knocked off Wilson's hat. With an air of unharried resoluteness, the reporter turned around and picked it up as five or six more men descended on him propelling Wilson forward with a flurry of kicks. As he continued to attempt to walk away, members of the mob knocked the six-foot three reporter to the floor. Displaying an astonishing command of nerve Wilson then got up, dusted himself off and continued to make his way coolly to his car. Cameras continued to film as a member of the mob sprang forward and delivered a final blow with a brick.[177] In this footage, a morality play unfolded

[175] Chappell et al., 'Dress Modestly, Neatly', p.69.
[176] The transcript of the CBS News Special suggests the programme broadcast footage of this incident. 'Little Rock, 1957: A Special CBS News Program', 24 September1957, b.2.325/F91, f. F. LITTLE ROCK (WC), WC. Footage of the attack on Wilson has also been rebroadcast in subsequent documentaries including *Eyes on the Prize: Episode 2*, *Hope & Fury*, and *13th* [dir. Ava Duvernay] Netflix, 7 October 2016.
[177] Wilson sustained nerve damage from what happened at Little Rock that day and would die three years later at the age of 51.

on screen which punctured through the façade of white Southerners who tried to cloak their white supremacist position in respectability and arguments for states' rights.

The impact that broadcasting this incident had on sympathetic viewers at home soon became evident. Television critics in the print press described how 'the disheartening ugliness' of the footage had given viewers 'a terrifying look at the brutality, the wolfpack instinct of the mob.'[178] Many who watched the scene felt moved to write to the president.[179] One New York resident described to Eisenhower the visceral effect viewing this footage of white supremacy in action had had on him: 'I have just witnessed on television a shocking film of an elderly negro man being pushed and kicked by a mob of white men. Although I had put in over 11 hours of work at my 2 jobs and was hungry, I couldn't eat so upset I became.'[180] As cultural historian of lynching Amy Louise Wood has argued, a spectator becomes a witness when his or her spectatorship bears a legal, spiritual, or social consequence, bestowing a moral or social authority and responsibility.[181] Witnessing the televised footage of the attack on L. Alex Wilson had compelled this New Yorker to enact his civic duty and write to the president in protest.

Footage of the Arkansas National Guard preventing the African American students from entering Central High as the mob harassed them similarly presented in stark visual terms the absurdity of segregationist arguments. Watching African American student Elizabeth Eckford face an absurdly hostile reception upon trying to enter Central High on the first day of school had prompted Illinois NAACP president Gerald D. Bullock, to write to the *Chicago Defender*

[178] Jack Gould, 'TV: President Speaks', *NYT*, 25 Sept. 1957, p.59., Laurence Laurent, 'Radio and Television: CBS' Swift Follow-up on Little Rock Was a Stellar Job of TV Journalism', *WP,* 26 Sept. 1957, p.C16.
[179] In the Public Opinion Mail category of the White House Central Files of Dwight D. Eisenhower's archives there are over 15 boxes of correspondence dedicated specifically to Little Rock, more than any other single issue that year.
[180] Acknowledged Letters Re Little Rock Sept 24, 1957, b.1, Bulk Mail, WHCF, DDE.
[181] Amy Louise Wood, 'The Spectacle of Lynching: Rituals of White Supremacy in the Jim Crow South', *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology,* 77/3/4 (2018), p.4.

describing what the news had shown him.[182] Bullock's mock report of the event highlighted through acid sarcasm, the irony which screamed out to him from the television screen:

> The commentator said there were 2,000 troops … there on orders from Gov. Orval Faubus to give their lives if necessary to protect the state's vital institutions from an implacable invader… Then – suddenly – the camera picked up the invading force: striding resolutely forward through a jeering crowd of men, women and children. It seemed to be a young girl, of perhaps some 15 years, and she must have weighed all of 98 pounds.[183]

Television coverage of Little Rock showcased the powerful argument that filmed footage could make by presenting to viewers shocking imagery of the contrast between dignified unthreatening African Americans and the disproportionate force segregationists wielded in response. Television's combination of moving image and sound captured the drama and pathos of the situation in a way print and radio reporting could not.[184]

Such broadcasts had a palpable effect on many American viewers. Ernest Green, one of the Little Rock Nine, later recounted that older Black audiences had been inspired by watching him and his peers face the adversity at Central High. Green recalled how his seniors would tell him: 'I watched that on TV, and I said to myself, if I could see nine black kids go up these steps, go through all that turmoil and trial and tribulation, then I could do something to change conditions for myself and other black people in my community.'[185] Moreover, Green recollected that such broadcasts also affected white audiences. Many white Southerners with whom he had come into contact over the years would, 'talk about what watching that on TV meant to them.' Continuing he noted, 'it's obvious it had a real impact in turning their attitudes.'[186] According to Green,

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[182] Elizabeth Eckford, whose family did not own a telephone, had not received word that morning of the change in location of where the group of students were to meet and therefore arrived at school alone. Payne, 'Tells Why Eckford Girl Walked Alone to School'.
[183] Lee Blackwell, 'Off the Record', *CD*, 9 Sept, 1957, p.10.
[184] Watson, *Expanding Vista*, p.90. See also Donovan and Scherer, *Unsilent Revolution*, p.6.
[185] Interview with Ernest Green, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on August 26, 1979, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection. http://digital.wustl.edu/e/eop/eopweb/gre0015.0329.043ernestgreen.html (28 January 2022).
[186] Ibid.

many of these white people he had spoken to felt that television coverage of the Little Rock Nine's experiences at Central High had caused them to reconsider the segregationist platforms that Southern politicians were putting forward at the time. Future American president Bill Clinton later recalled that watching the drama at Little Rock unfold on his television set as an 11-year-old in Arkansas in 1957 helped shape his views on race.[187] In the coming years, civil rights organisers, aware of the potential power that broadcasts on the nation's television screens could have in pricking the conscience of American viewers, would aim to recreate such visual morality plays with peaceful nonviolent protests.

However, during the crisis it became all too clear that not all white people reacted positively to news coverage that allowed the Little Rock Nine to demonstrate their respectability. In an interview conducted for documentary series *Eyes on the Prize,* Melba Pattillo Beals remembered the direct connection between news media coverage and torment in the halls of Central High: 'One thing could be said in the press conference in one day, which would trigger hell the next.' The consequences of the extensive ongoing coverage meant that Pattillo's 11th year of high school was 'like war.'[188] The national reach of network television meant that her white classmates were not the only audience of the evening news. News reports which portrayed the African American students as respectable middle-class citizens also reached segregationists far beyond Little Rock. Calls from the Ku Klux Klan, White Citizens' Councils, anti-Black club the Mother's League, and other 'angry strangers spewing hatred and threats' reached the Little Rock Nine, their families, and Daisy Bates following their appearances on television.[189]

[187] Cited in Peggy A. Lewis, 'Preaching, Praying and Strategic Media Planning: From Montgomery to Selma, How the Civil Rights Movement Forced Journalists to Do Their Job', (PhD thesis, Howard University, 2013), p.3.
[188] Interview with Melba Pattillo Beals, *Eyes on the Prize.*
[189] Ibid., Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry,* p.121.

In reporting on these African American subjects involved with the Little Rock crisis in the same way they would any other subject pertinent to a breaking news story, television news teams provided them with an opportunity to exhibit to the American public their right for inclusion. While many white Americans were convinced of the validity of desegregation by the Little Rock Nine, Daisy Bates, and L. Alex Wilson's demonstrations of respectability, others reacted to the coverage with vituperative racism. While the television coverage of Little Rock may have highlighted the power the new medium could have in showcasing the struggle for African American equality – whether winning support or eliciting backlash – network reporters did not explicitly support the fight against racism. In fact, as the next section will show, some newsmen barely recognised race in the Little Rock story at all.

Imposing the Frame of Public Order

News teams who produced the broadcasts dictated the meaning they intended audiences to derive from the events they covered. In the case of the desegregation drama emanating from Arkansas, the networks often framed the crisis not as an expression of racial hatred and a symptom of white supremacy, but as an example of legal defiance – a narrative in line with the position on desegregation emanating from the White House. CBS News presented footage of the assault on L. Alex Wilson as an example of a disorderly mob disobeying the law rather than a racist attack. The broadcast that included the clip showcasing the segregationist mob assailing Wilson aired the evening President Eisenhower addressed the nation on television following his deployment of the 101st Airborne division. Eisenhower, in keeping with his moderate position on race, had focused on the segregationist mob's recalcitrance rather than their racism as the cause of his decision.

The CBS report similarly framed the issue at hand as one not of race but of public order and obedience to the law of the land. Walter Cronkite opened the broadcast for example, by declaring: 'On this day, a constitutional crisis triggered by a mob around a high school. A mob that threatened the authority of the Federal Court system.' He made no mention of the African American students or the racist motivations of the mob and not until the third page of its transcript did the programme's correspondents even mention integration. The special aired the footage of the attack on L. Alex Wilson as part of a segment in which CBS correspondent, Howard K. Smith, reporting from Little Rock, spelled out the details which led to the historic presidential decision. The white rabble's vicious attack on the African American reporter therefore became not an example of Southern racial hatred but an instance of deviant mob criminality. As television critic Lawrence Laurent highlighted, Smith's summation to the segment 'reinforced the conclusion that the issue in Little Rock was obedience to law vs. lawlessness.'[190] The networks might have brought scenes of segregationist brutality into American living rooms but through the construction and narration of their broadcasts they determined that the public should understand them as a problem of public order rather than a demonstration of American racism.

CBS was not the only network to use this interpretive framework in their reporting of the events at Little Rock. In their nightly coverage on the *Huntley-Brinkley Report*, NBC News regularly framed the dominant issue at hand at Little Rock to be one of legal defiance rather than racial hatred. Typical of the coverage to come was anchorman Chet Huntley's very first introduction of the story on 3 September, the first day of school, where he framed resistance to desegregation using the discourse of law and order. 'Last year at this time, the problem in Clinton, Tennessee, was the law of the land and an outsider who organised the people against it,' Huntley told his

[190] Laurent, 'Radio and Television'

viewers, referencing the violent response that met the twelve African American students who had registered at Clinton High School the previous year. 'Today the problem in Little Rock, Arkansas,' he continued, 'is public order, and the man who stands against school integration is the governor himself.'[191] Following the same line as CBS News and in keeping with Eisenhower's approach, the NBC News anchorman's framing of both instances of segregationist intransigence focused not on the problem of white supremacy but on the issue of legal disobedience.

At the same time as framing resistance to desegregation as an issue of lawlessness rather than bigotry the networks told a story that marginalised segregationist politics. As Aniko Bodroghkozy has argued, in *Clinton and the Law*, an episode of news documentary *See It Now* which it dedicated to the desegregation trouble in Tennessee the previous year, CBS News portrayed the anti-integrationist violence as 'a foreign manifestation, infecting the community from outside.'[192] The documentary portrayed the fomenter of the violence, John Kasper, as 'the lawbreaker, the alien presence in [Clinton's] otherwise peaceful and tolerant community.'[193] Over at NBC News, Huntley, in his framing of the resistance to desegregation at Clinton in his introduction to the Little Rock story, adopted the same approach, minimising the issue of racial intolerance and highlighting the lawbreaking insidious influence of Kasper the outsider. While network correspondents could not apply the same framework to Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, they could emphasise that the segregationist mobs that had assembled at Central High were not representative of the true feelings of the Little Rock community. 'There were at most a thousand people in the mob; that is too many,' correspondent Howard K. Smith stated in the 24 September CBS News special:

> But there are one hundred and ten thousand people in Little Rock; two hundred thousand people in Greater Little Rock. About the other one hundred and nine thousand people in

[191] *Transcript of the Huntley-Brinkley Report,* 3 Sept. 1957, b.530, f.12 'HB 9.3.57', HBRS.
[192] Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, p.45.
[193] Ibid.

> Little Rock, I would like to ask one of their leading representatives, Congressman Brooks Hays, what did the people of Little Rock think about this situation.[194]

Brooks Hays then appeared on the special to dismiss the mob as an unrepresentative deviant element foreign to the law-abiding Little Rock citizenry:

> The people of Little Rock repudiate all forms of lawlessness. The group that you've seen in this shocking incident do not represent our city. They represent an element that we would repudiate…And as the President pointed out tonight, many of them are imported from other places. I can give the people of this country…every assurance that the people of our city are devoted to law and order and that the resources that we have for the enforcement of all court orders, Federal and State, will be utilised to end this kind of lawlessness.[195]

CBS's coverage of Little Rock reiterated the framing producers had adopted during *See It Now: Clinton and the Law:* privileging white moderates and portraying white spokespeople who drew upon the discourse of law and order.[196] Producers gave no airtime to any African Americans during the half hour special. Daisy Bates and the Little Rock Nine may have made the most of the attention that television news gave the African American students, but the opportunities they had to speak to the American public were relatively minimal. The network's newsmen overwhelmingly viewed white men in positions of power as the people whom the American public needed to hear from to understand the crisis.

Through such coverage the networks revealed a tendency when reporting on racial inequality to endorse rather than challenge the American establishment. Scholars of twentieth century news industries have asserted that media institutions serve to maintain the status quo with story selection and presentation often guided by the principle of moderation.[197] The coverage from both NBC and CBS did not endorse the widespread social transformation that African American

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[194] *Transcript of Little Rock, 1957 (A CBS News Special Program)* 24 Sept. 1957, b.2.325/F91, WC.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, p.46.
[197] See Gitlin, *Whole World*, Chapter Seven: 'Elevating Moderate Alternatives', pp.205-230, Gans, *Deciding What's News,* p.52.

activists called for, but instead promoted change tempered with moderation and achieved through legislation and the country's legal system. Little Rock provided an early indication of what some civil rights activists would come to learn over the next decade: the white institution of network television might afford them some publicity, but it would never be an instrument of revolution.

Although they interpreted the events at Little Rock through a moderate framework that shied away from denouncing white supremacy, news coverage of the crisis may have helped to generate sympathy from some viewers for the cause of desegregation. Yet television networks engaged in the project of developing a still nascent industry were less concerned with what their profession could do for racial equality and focused more on what covering such an important story could do for television as the next section will demonstrate.

Building an Industry

Covering the unfolding crisis that gripped the nation provided an opportunity for the developing broadcast news industry to prove its worth as a vital member of the nation's fourth estate. The Little Rock story helped television stand out as a medium. While radio could also boast immediacy – transcending the temporal limitations of the print press where news was delayed by the necessity of printing and distributing newspapers – television with its powerful combination of sound and moving image had an unrivalled impact on the viewer. As *Huntley-Brinkley* producer Reuven Frank explained, his fledgling news department at NBC assumed everyone who watched their show had read a newspaper that day or listened to the radio. But tuning in to the news on television was still worthwhile because, according to Frank, 'seeing it was different.'[198] The powerful visuals of hysterical segregationist mobs or bayonet-bearing

[198] Frank, *Out of Thin Air*, p.35.

national guardsmen set against dignified model African Americans trying to exercise the rights assured them by the highest court in the land provided television news with some of the most emotive footage of the era. Those within the young industry took advantage of the power of the networks' Little Rock coverage to evangelise about the impact of their medium. CBS News Director, John Day, for instance, used the example of the segregationist assault on L. Alex Wilson to expound upon the unique power TV news had in communicating to the public. 'Impact is the word to be most associated with television reporting,' he declared to an Air Force Seminar in New York a few weeks after CBS had broadcast the attack. Continuing, he explained how television journalism outshone the print press in its coverage of the incident:

> One can use hundreds of words to describe the expressions on the faces of the members of the mob kicking a Negro reporter in front of Central High School in Little Rock, but a one minute film story – properly scripted, properly narrated and properly integrated into the show – projects the viewer into the very section and tells the story with impact no other medium can muster.[199]

John Day's boss, vice president and general manager of television news, Sig Mickelson, similarly used coverage surrounding the Little Rock Crisis to praise the new medium's role in increasing the average viewer's understanding of the world. In a feature he penned for industry trade journal *Television*, Mickelson cheered the TV news industry's growing use of reporting as a social force and its future superlative potential, arguing that 'the most powerful medium known to man' could 'fuse picture and fact, illustration with idea, to achieve a new dimension of serious journalism'. Mickelson highlighted not just the medium's ability to enlighten the American public through delivering news stories in a way that enhanced its understanding, but the role that television played in better acquainting the nation with the men that governed it. The CBS News executive celebrated how television had expanded viewers' understanding of the world by allowing the average viewer 'to see the most important public figures of the world as living,

[199] Quoted in 'Playback: Quotes Worth Repeating', *Broadcasting*, 21 Oct. 1957, p.140.

breathing and gesturing individuals, with voices, mannerisms, and distinctive personalities.' To illustrate this argument, he drew on the example of Faubus' appearances on public affairs programming during the desegregation drama. 'How TV brings the nation into direct, immediate contact with prominent figures in the news, [was] seen when ABC brought Gov. Faubus to face camera and questions on *Open Hearing* at the peak of the crisis at Little Rock,' Mickelson told readers.[200] Politicians' use of television during the crisis therefore proved mutually beneficial to politicians and the television news industry alike.

The networks may have made the most of their programming around the crisis to cement the reputation of their entire industry, but despite such temporary ceasefires as Mickelson celebrating CBS's rival network's public affairs programming, Little Rock provided a weapon with which the networks waged a war against each other for ratings and prestige in the new industry. As *Broadcasting* magazine highlighted, ABC's interview with Faubus on *Open Hearing* won congratulations for the network from newspaper TV critics who credited it for the scoop of obtaining the governor's first live interview on a network since the crisis had begun. The trade magazine noted that the telecast had even made it outside the silo of media criticism into the newspapers' regular coverage.[201]

ABC scored the first Faubus interview, but covering Little Rock proved most beneficial for NBC, the network that proclaimed it had beaten the rest of the news industry to the story. Reuven Frank, the man responsible for redirecting correspondent John Chancellor from Clinton High School in Tennessee to Central High School in Arkansas, later credited NBC's coverage of the Little Rock story with creating its public reputation. According to Frank, aside from the

[200] 'TV Accepts its Greatest Challenge', *Television Magazine*, May 1958, pp.44-46.
[201] 'Datelines: Newsworthy News Coverage by Radio and TV', *Broadcasting*, 16 Sept. 1957, p.94.

quality of their coverage, being the first on the scene to cover the breaking story determined this success. 'We were first, [we] were there alone.' Frank later recalled:

> The *New York Times*… thought so little of Little Rock they sent Benjamin Fine an education reporter who had never covered a breaking news story in his life. None of the other networks was there... so Chancellor had it alone for almost a week and he came to know this. And people came to follow us and it established us…It really made us. More than any single thing. From then on we were allowed to play with the big boys.[202]

NBC newsmen did not just vaunt in retrospect how their approach to reporting Little Rock had established their news department as a major player in the news business, those at the network actively capitalised on wins scored during coverage of the crisis to enhance its reputation in real time. Chet Huntley's studio introduction to John Chancellor's report from Little Rock three weeks into the crisis, for example, emphasised the network's foresight and commitment to the story. On 2 September, when Governor Faubus sent his National Guard to Central High School, there were three out-of-town reporters in Little Rock,' Huntley informed viewers of the *Huntley-Brinkley Report*, 'one from *Time* magazine, one from the *New York Times* and John Chancellor of NBC News, Chancellor was still there today, and here again is his direct report from KARK-TV.'[203] Being the first network on the scene to cover what would become the nation's leading news story helped boost NBC News' profile in the public arena, but by reminding viewers of this fact in its subsequent coverage, network newsmen made sure to cement this reputational advantage.

Proving that no network was more adept than the National Broadcasting Company at leveraging its reporting on the desegregation drama, NBC also took to print to celebrate victory over its

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[202] Reuven Frank interviewed by Jeff Kisseloff, October 16 and October 20, 1997 Tenafly, NJ, The Interviews: An Oral History of Television, Archive of American Television, Television Academy Foundation. *https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/reuven-frank?clip=73946#topic-clips* (28 January 2022). Archival footage, however, suggests that counter to Frank's memory of the first week, Robert Schakne from CBS News had been there reporting from at least 4 September 1957.
[203] *Transcript of the Huntley-Brinkley Report*, 25 Sept. 1957, b.530, f.28 'HB 9.25.57', HBRS.

rival networks. For example, a double page advertisement it took out in trade journal *Broadcasting* in the midst of the crisis highlighted the network's audience share. Under the emboldened headline, 'IN MOMENTS OF HISTORY,' the advertisment framed NBC's ratings lead during Eisenhower's televised address to the nation on the events in Little Rock as evidence of the viewing public's preference for its superior news product. The advertisement declared that although all three networks had carried the president simultaneously, an estimated 30 million Americans had tuned in to watch NBC – an audience 32% and 69% greater than its rivals the network crowed. 'The nation turns first for news and coverage of great events to the network with the world's most comprehensive broadcast news organisation,' the advertisement declared.[204] The following year, NBC continued to point to coverage of the Little Rock crisis as proof of its News Department's superiority in the industry. In a double page advertisement the network took out in *Television* magazine, it announced: 'At a time when headlines have a special urgency for America, NBC News is providing minute-by-minute coverage of world events unmatched in broadcast journalism for speed, alertness, comprehensiveness and mature interpretation. This has been evident all through the last months of crisis.' The advertisement then highlighted that as a result of its 'resourcefulness at Little Rock,' *Variety*, the weekly periodical for broadcasting executives, had called NBC News 'a heads-up hustling, news-digging operation.'[205] In the highly competitive television news industry, the network took advantage of its News Department's Little Rock reporting to publicise its success. This strategy of using civil rights coverage as proof of the quality and accomplishment of the News Department would become a staple of the network's PR efforts in the coming years.

NBC's advertisement in *Broadcasting* also hinted at the importance for the television industry of the timing of the Little Rock crisis. Following the president's address, the ad's text highlighted,

[204] NBC, 'In Moments of History' *Broadcasting*, 7 Oct. 1957, pp.48-49.
[205] 'NBC Television Network Advertisement', *Television Magazine*, Feb. 1958, pp.4-5.

NBC News commentators had provided a special analysis of the integration crisis which over 20 million viewers had watched – more viewers than had tuned in to the entertainment programming its rivals had aired. Conveniently omitting the special report that CBS News broadcast shortly thereafter, NBC positioned itself as the network committed to public service. By highlighting its rivals' reversion straight to ordinary programming, NBC implied that CBS and ABC were content to provide the public with a bare minimum of news, feeding them instead the empty attractions of entertainment television. Such an argument would have struck a particular resonance in the industry in the context of debates beginning to surround television at the time. As media historians Michael Curtin and Charles Ponce De Leon have highlighted, in the declining years of the decade TV had become the subject of intense popular debate. Critics castigated the industry for its perceived sacrifice of the public airwaves to profit at the expense of public information.[206] Celebrating its commitment to informational programming by highlighting its Little Rock coverage provided NBC with a means to distance itself from the criticisms of television which were then starting to animate public discourse.

Equal to the prestige potential that networks could garner, Little Rock signalled that covering civil rights stories could provide an opportunity for the new medium's news correspondents to enhance their personal reputations and therefore careers. John Chancellor's reporting on the story, for example, helped fix the reporter in the minds of those who viewed his broadcasts on the *Huntley-Brinkley Report* night after night. According to Reuven Frank the following Spring at the annual Radio and Television Correspondent's Association black-tie dinner, Oklahoma Senator A.S. 'Mike' Monroney could be heard announcing: 'When I think of Little Rock, I think of John Chancellor.'[207] Covering the crisis demonstrated that the new visual medium of television, which brought reporters directly into American homes to interpret the events

[206] Curtin, *Redeeming the Wasteland*, p.22., Ponce de Leon, *That's the Way It Is*, p.44.
[207] Frank, *Out of Thin Air*, p.125., Frank, The Interviews.

occurring in the world outside, created a new relationship between reporters, the stories they reported, and viewers at home. As the industry evolved, their appearances on screen became tied intrinsically to a reporter's prospects within their news department. According to Ed Rabel, a CBS News correspondent who covered the civil rights movement in the sixties, a reporter's stock at the network depended on getting airtime. 'The more you're on the air, the more you're seen…the more you were likely to be promoted, the more you were likely to have an improvement in your wages,' Rabel explained.[208] Little Rock demonstrated how the nation's most gripping story, the civil rights struggle, could become a means by which ambitious television journalists could make a name for themselves and in doing so advance in their profession.

Although the television industry, the networks, and their reporters discovered through the crisis in Arkansas how they could use the story of segregationist intransigence in the South to get ahead in the competitive world of news, the Little Rock story also revealed how ill-equipped the fledgling television news business was to handle its biggest ever story. The process involved in bringing the live coverage of the 101st Airborne Division's first day at Little Rock to television screens for example was far from seamless. Behind the scenes chaos reigned. Only rudimentary communications facilities to and from Southern towns existed in 1957. Despite its position as a state capital, the connections between Little Rock and news headquarters in New York were no exception. On the morning the 101st conducted the Little Rock Nine to Central High, getting the historic cut-ins on air was therefore extraordinarily complicated. The intercity TV facilities from Little Rock fed only to affiliate stations in Chicago and not to network head news studios in New York. As a result, the man at CBS in charge of deciding what material should be broadcast, news editor John Day, could not monitor the footage himself. Instead, he had to base

[208] Interview with Ed Rabel, 14 August 2021.

his decisions on when Little Rock pickups should be cut into regular programming on verbal descriptions from CBS people in Chicago which they fed to him through telephone. To make matters worse, technical troubles meant that Day at CBS was out of touch with his Little Rock mobile unit and unable to instruct them. However, suspending their normal rivalries, director of NBC News Bill McAndrew also joined on the line. Cues from the CBS unit had to be relayed from a telephone booth in Little Rock up to McAndrew at NBC who then relayed them to Day at CBS. The CBS News editor then fed instructions back to his Little Rock unit via the same awkward route.[209] Getting the historic coverage to air revealed how poorly placed the television news industry was to bring the nation's viewers a story of major proportions in the South.

Through its coverage of Little Rock, NBC helped to expedite infrastructural improvements. AT&T, the telecommunications company whose originating equipment the networks relied on had no such equipment installed in Arkansas. Each day therefore NBC chartered a plane to carry their cameraman to Oklahoma City where its affiliate WKY-TV agreed to develop their film and feed their report. An hour later, John Chancellor would arrive via second chartered plane ready to look over the footage and film his report. For at least the first three days of coverage Chet Huntley in introducing Chancellor's Little Rock report from WKY-TV made a point of highlighting how the reporter had 'rushed his story and his film' to Oklahoma City because 'the telephone company could not provide facilities in the region'. By 9 September, Huntley announced Chancellor's direct report from KARK-TV, Little Rock's local station.[210] Responding to the pressure NBC had exerted through Huntley's on-air castigation of the company, AT&T had installed the necessary equipment.

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[209] Gould, 'TV: Reality in the South'

[210] *Transcripts of the Huntley-Brinkley Report,* 3 Sept. 1957 – 8 Sept. 1957, b.530, f.s 12-16, HBRS.
Reuven Frank in a later interview put the time before AT&T installed equipment at ten days. Frank, The Interviews.

Through reporting the Little Rock story, the television networks developed their young broadcast industry into a major player in the American information economy, but covering the crisis would also force newsmen to reckon with the effects their journalistic decisions could have on this explosive story.

The Question of Responsible Reporting

Covering the crisis at Central High raised fundamental questions about how the new medium of television complicated the codes of professional standards in journalism established by print and radio. One crucial issue the networks would have to grapple with made apparent by newsmen's reporting of the volatile situation outside the school gates in Arkansas, was how their news teams should navigate the fine line between reporting and influencing events. Little Rock revealed that some members of the young industry had not yet fully grasped how to square the ethics of reporting with the visual medium of television's unique demands to capture dramatic action. Likely the most egregious faux pas was made by correspondent Robert Schakne and his team on assignment for CBS News at the beginning of the crisis.[211] When Elizabeth Eckford arrived alone at the gates of Central High only to be blocked from entry by the National Guardsmen and harassed by the screaming segregationist mob that formed her welcoming committee the CBS team missed capturing the height of the confrontation. The CBS cameraman had failed to manoeuvre his heavy sound camera, tripod, and lens into position in time to get the shot of the mob at the height of their fury. In an attempt to ensure they had good footage, once the team was in place with cameras rolling and sound on, Schakne tried to engineer a re-enactment by urging the crowd to: 'Yell again!'[212] Focused solely on the need to capture the

[211] Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, p.44.
[212] Ibid..

confrontation on film the CBS Newsman had crossed the professional boundary between documenting and influencing an event.

Such transgressions of the news industry's professional obligations provided segregationists an opportunity to shift attention onto television's role in the drama. 'Governor Faubus called us out on that,' Schakne later recalled of his blunder.[213] Print newsmen similarly used television reporters' alleged staging of events during the crisis to cast aspersions on the integrity of those reporting for the new medium. Newspaper journalist Robert G. Spivack, for example, told readers of his nationwide syndicated column that the White House possessed damaging information about a group of photographers and television cameraman who in several instances had paid white high schoolers to attack the African American students. 'Apparently they were trying to get a good fight started in order to get some pictures,' Spivack reported.[214] His accusation raised the question of whether viewers could really believe what they saw on their television screens if the action had in fact been staged. Such allegations conjured doubt both about the true nature of relations between the Black and white students at Little Rock and the scruples of the standards that governed the upstart industry beginning to dominate the nation's fourth estate.

Television newsmen's reporting on Little Rock also led print journalists to question television newsmen's responsibilities to the American public in other ways. In the second week of the crisis, Jack Gould, the *New York Times* television critic, argued to readers of his column that 'as a medium of communications that pre-empts the attention of millions night in and night out, television clearly has distinct obligations in the current integration crisis.' Gould believed that television news networks had a duty to use the 'magnificent capabilities' of their medium to play

[213] Quoted in Bliss, Jr., *Now the News*, p.322.
[214] Robert G. Spivack, 'Watch on the Potomac', *CD*, 31 Oct. 1957, p.4.

a constructive influence during tense moments of upheaval. But news coverage of the Little Rock crisis up until that point had failed to meet such responsibilities, according to Gould, by focusing only on the spectacular breaking news in Arkansas and failing to put it into proper perspective. 'From looking at TV it might be concluded rather readily that violence and defiance were predominant in the South,' he argued, contending that television newsmen had failed to dig below the surface of the spectacle to present to America the 'many sensitive, cultured, and educated white Southerners' who may have objected to integration but deplored violent disobedience of the law. The constraints of the fifteen-minute evening broadcasts, the television critic held, had meant that television had not provided adequate opportunity for what he described as 'responsible Southerners' to tell their own story. Doing so would help alleviate hysteria in an anxious hour for the nation at the same time as assuaging Southern suspicions of prejudiced Northern reporters. 'It is partly through mutual exchange of Northern and Southern opinions, which TV is so splendidly equipped to further, that reason rather than rashness can be made to prevail,' Gould argued. 'It is the duty of the policy-making heads of the networks to give their news departments the green light for more extensive coverage, which is essential if the medium is to discharge its social responsibility with maturity and meaning,' the television critic concluded.[215]

Covering Little Rock also prompted those within the television news industry to interrogate what constituted responsible reporting. In March of 1957, Chet Huntley had been firm in his stance that segregationist charges of Northern bias would not succeed in affecting how NBC reported on the race issue. Yet his experiences covering Little Rock caused Huntley to revise this position. At the start of October, a few weeks after Jack Gould had argued that the networks had a duty to give more airtime to responsible Southerners, the reporter penned an internal

[215] Jack Gould, 'Little Rock Story: Television's Treatment of Major News Developments Found Superficial', *NYT*, 15 Sept. 1957, p.X13.

memo to his producer Reuven Frank, manager of News Operations, Joseph Meyers, and the director of NBC News, William McAndrew. Huntley was 'ill-at-ease,' he explained to his bosses, 'about our approach to the difficult task of reporting the integration story.' Having spoken to dozens of 'reasonable Southerners', the anchor wondered if the news department 'might render a greater service to this whole problem and come off better all the way round' if their reporting demonstrated 'some gesture (however slight) indicating some sympathy for and understanding of the plight of the Southern white?' Huntley did not advocate equivocating or diluting the truth, but he felt it important that reporters should proceed with caution when bandying around inflammatory pejoratives like 'ignorance and bigotry' lest responsible Southerners felt NBC was tarring them with a brush meant exclusively for hateful extremists like those at the Little Rock barricades. 'We do precious little good in any way permitting millions of decently-inclined Southern whites to guess that we might have been talking about them,' he explained to his superiors.[216]

Central to his concerns were white Southerners' perceptions that reporters parachuting in from outside the South could not report fairly on an issue they knew nothing about. Huntley wrote to his bosses:

> I think we have overlooked the fact that we, in New York, are suspect the minute we approach an integration story. In less measure it's the same thing as a New York newspaper trying to tell Arizona and California what to do about the Colorado River or how to adjust Northwest freight rates. Whether provincialism exists here in New York or not, the FACT is we are accused of it and people in other sections are convinced of it.[217]

Whether or not the network deemed them valid, Southerners' perceptions of network unfairness were a problem.

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[216] Interdepartment Correspondence from Chet Huntley to William R. McAndrew, Joseph O. Meyers, and Reuven Frank, 'Subject: Integration', 1 October, 1957, b.319, f.22 'Huntley', JOM.
[217] Ibid.

Huntley believed that both the Southern audiences and NBC's reporting was at fault. 'I detect in the Southerner an inferior complex that is sometimes woeful and almost frightening,' he told his network bosses, 'Maybe the sting of the 1865 defeat lasts a lot longer than we think.' White Southerners, he argued, were hypersensitive and quick to cast themselves in the part of victim. The newsman recognised what communications scholars decades later would spill much ink to emphasise: viewers made meaning out of what they saw based on their own beliefs. (White) Southerners, Huntley argued, viewing the news from their own perspective, were prone to perceive slights real or imagined. NBC should therefore exercise extra caution to prevent its reporting from being misconstrued. 'Are we not unwise in permitting our broadcasts to contain anything which the emotionally disturbed Southerner can (and usually will) misinterpret because we are Northerners, if for no other reason,' Huntley opined. The news department's failure to appreciate the sensitivity of the Southern sensibility up until this point, had allowed reporters to take careless shortcuts in their reporting. 'The pithy, provocative, stinging phrase may be applauded by us here in the shop, but it can be loaded with dynamite in the South,' Huntley observed. 'I do sincerely think there is present here in the shop a 'holier than thou,' 'smarter than thou,' 'let me tell you Buster' attitude on this devilish issue,' the anchor admitted to his superiors.[218] The problem of fairness on the segregation story in the South according to the NBC anchor, lay not in content but tone.

Huntley's letter also revealed the reasons he believed it necessary to adjust the tone of NBC's reporting on the integration issue so as not to offend Southern viewers. 'We may be technically correct,' he averred to his bosses, referring to NBC's condescending attitude towards the South, 'but I don't think it wins either reasonableness or audience.' To make his argument for the need

[218] Ibid.

to reassess their approach to reporting the integration story, Huntley appealed to the network's goals. In this private correspondence to his news department bosses, he was candid about NBC's commercial considerations. With one eye always on the ratings, broadcasters did not wish to alienate Dixie viewers. White Southerner's perception of NBC's reporting as biased risked prompting them to change channels: losing NBC an audience. Yet at the same time Huntley's mention of winning 'reasonableness' indicated his belief in a shared understanding of the purpose of news to help America along the path of resolving its societal problems. According to this view, part of the network's job in reporting the integration story was to help the South reach a solution. The NBC news department may have conceived of Southern viewers as consumers, but it also regarded them as citizens. Broadcasting news that could be mistaken as impartial, Huntley argued to his bosses, would not be in service of NBC's ratings nor its role in democracy. The NBC News anchor concluded his three-page memo with a final reflection: 'Has not Little Rock indicated that we might be wise to give some special thought to the way we go at this impossible assignment? I suggest that this is going to require a whale of a lot more talented and careful and wise reporting than did World War II.'[219]

Whatever McAndrew, Meyers, or Frank may have felt about their star anchor's concern for the feelings of Southern viewers, their thoughts are not preserved in the NBC records at the Wisconsin Historical Society. It is difficult to know whether Huntley's correspondence had an effect on the network's coverage after the Little Rock crisis. What his words do provide, however, is an insight into how reporting on Little Rock had forced this reporter to interrogate his beliefs in the purpose of news. Huntley was clearly concerned with NBC's reputation (and no doubt his own). But his mention that NBC 'might render a greater service to the whole problem' indicated a belief in the role the news played in helping American society better

[219] Ibid.

understand and thereby help find solutions for its difficulties. Alienating millions of reasonable white Southerners, he believed, did not constitute responsible reporting, and would not help America solve its desegregation dilemma.

Huntley's colleague at NBC Dave Garroway, host of the *Today,* show felt similarly about television's role in reporting on the Little Rock story. In a response to viewers who wrote in to criticise what they perceived as Garroway's bias in handling an interview of Orval Faubus, the anchor championed the role of television news in helping the nation through such times of turmoil. 'Can we turn the emotional content of the situation into reason, before it becomes an uncontrollable force,' he asked one angry viewer who had written in their complaint, 'I feel that we must if we are to exist together, and very possibly if we are to exist. I will continue to try to help the achievement of this goal by letting facts show themselves wherever they may be found.'[220] Garroway's response revealed how he positioned himself and his news organisation as impartial purveyors of fact in service of American democracy. The network's responsibility in covering the desegregation crisis, he made clear, was to report the story without taking sides.

The *Today* show host's response also demonstrated a sentiment shared by many newsmen in the early days of the desegregation story, that there were two sides of the integration issue and both deserved a fair hearing. 'I feel intensely the distress of those who oppose integration, as I feel the distress of those who favor it,' Garroway assured his irate viewer.[221] While they may personally have believed in equal rights for African Americans or the probity of integration as the law of the land, in responses to Southern accusations of bias, network newsmen like Huntley and Garroway professed their recognition of the emotional nature of the issue and sought to display appreciation for the white Southern perspective. The Head of NBC's Continuity

[220] Quoted in CART Report, 21 October 1957, b.153, f.3 'CART Reports', SE.
[221] Ibid.

Acceptance Department, Stockton Helffrich, believed that the entire organisation 'ought to see' Garroway's comments to viewers who accused him of biased reporting against the segregationist cause. He excerpted the above quotes in the monthly Continuity Acceptance/Radio and Television report, a companywide memo which outlined the network's decision-making in relation to issues of censorship in programming. Thus Helffrich reinforced the approach that newscasters had taken in covering Littler Rock, even though they framed resistance to desegregation as defying the law, they covered segregation as a debate between two competing ideologies.

Conclusion

Covering the crisis at Little Rock proved a turning point for television news, helping to demonstrate the power of the new medium. Yet the criticisms of print reporters and Southern viewers about their coverage of Little Rock forced television newsmen to recognise that with the dawn of the televisual age, the young industry's newsmen needed to figure out how best to practice the new profession of televisual journalism in a way that fulfilled the industry's professional prerogatives as a member of the fourth estate. Concerns about television's irresponsible reporting, however, also highlighted that criticisms depended on the worldview of the person who levelled them – as did their suggested solutions. Chet Huntley and Dave Garroway, white men who operated in an almost solely white industry and had been raised in small-town Montana, and St. Louis Missouri, respectively, believed that responsible reporting meant focusing on whether they covered white Southerners fairly.

As the civil rights struggle developed into a recurring story, Black communities fought to ensure that the nation's public understood how racism shaped the nation, its society, and institutions

from the perspective of its Black community. One of the most important battles against segregation, therefore, took place in television newsrooms themselves.

CHAPTER THREE

CHALLENGING THE LILYWHITE NEWSROOM

Something was bothering William B. Branch. On the evening of 9 October 1962, NBC News was the source of his frustration. The bitter irony of the network broadcasting, 'Wanted, One Million Jobs', an episode of *Chet Huntley Reporting* which informed viewers about the ills of job discrimination against African Americans, moved Branch to his typewriter. 'While watching your excellent program on Negro unemployment,' he wrote to the show's eponymous host, 'it occurred to me that you might be interested in how the same gentle system operates within your own employer's company.'[222]

Branch was a Northwestern alumnus who graduated in 1949 alongside future head of the Federal Communications Commission, Newton Minow, and future NBC News reporter Sander Vanocur. But this television news hopeful – despite his master's degree from Columbia, his glittering array of writing awards (including one for a script on NBC's 'Frontiers of Faith'), his credits as a journalist for *The New York Post* and a producer at Channel 13, and his membership in all the appropriate unions – could not get a job at any of the networks.[223] Branch's lack of success had not been for want of trying. He had repeatedly applied for network jobs over the years to no avail. 'Since January of this year alone, I have had five interviews at NBC,' he explained to Huntley, 'Each time I am told that I am certainly qualified by background and experience, and that my name will be held at ready hand. But……..and so on.' As a Black man in mid-twentieth century America, Branch surmised what had been left unsaid. 'I'm certain that there are good and decent and fair-minded people at NBC,' he concluded in his letter to Chet Huntley, '…Still, it seems as Dick Gregory once quipped: 'If Huntley and Brinkley woke

[222] Letter from William B. Branch to Chet Huntley, 9 October 1962, b.52, LC.
[223] Ibid.

up black tomorrow morning, they'd be out of a job.' This African American man knew that his race played a role in executives' decisions not to hire him – despite the network's fair employment policies and its News Department's criticism of job discrimination.

By the end of 1963 all three networks had desegregated, yet in 1968 a survey made by the *Columbia Journalism Review* and Jewish service organisation B'nai B'rith found that Black employees comprised only 4.2 percent of all employees in broadcast and print.[224] This chapter uncovers the troubled history of African American attempts to integrate network television news in the 1960s. It begins by considering how African Americans in government bodies, the job market, and civil rights organisations, in the early years of the decade tried to hold networks accountable to their avowed commitments to fair employment. This rising tide of agitation forced the networks to ascertain that the disparity between their policies of equality and the reality of their lilywhite newsrooms posed a threat to their corporate reputations. Once this risk seemed to outweigh the danger of alienating Southern audiences, each network hired its first Black newscaster. Yet desegregation was not the same as integration. The networks' lack of commitment to expansive change and their colour-blind approach to their non-discrimination policies meant that most African Americans who tried to get a job in television came up against an invisible wall. The second section considers how those who did finally break the colour bar tried to act as pioneers for future Black broadcasters. As a result of the networks' token rather than total commitment to integration, however, despite the occasional hire of an African American reporter, newsrooms stayed overwhelmingly white. Finally, this chapter considers how the coverage of civil rights made possible by these few Black reporters provided a glimpse of alternative, deeper, and more empathetic ways of understanding the fight against racial inequality.

[224] Cited in Bliss, Jr., *Now the News*, p.327.

Section One

Under Pressure

In the early 1960s, African Americans became increasingly vocal in their criticisms of a broadcasting industry which had continued in its failure to hire Black Americans both onscreen and behind the scenes. Despite NBC's 'Integration without Identification' programme, and the non-discriminatory hiring policies that each network boasted, the production departments and television programmes of NBC, CBS, and ABC remained lilywhite. In 1962, several different camps began to increase pressure on the networks to address this glaring inconsistency. There were individual crusaders: veteran Black actor P. Jay Sidney, for example, began a campaign for fair employment and representation of African Americans that won significant publicity in the press and helped raise awareness of the issue.[225] Others used their institutional positions. Together with Sidney, the Black Press spearheaded the struggle for African American jobs in the broadcasting industry. At the forefront of the fight was the *New York Amsterdam News*, whose culture critic Dave Hepburn kept readers informed of efforts to challenge unfair employment practices as well as the networks' unsatisfactory responses. At the same time, civil rights groups such as the Urban League and CORE, as well as the Committee for the Employment of Negro Performers, took aim at the broadcasting industry with pickets and demonstrations as part of their wider campaigns for fair employment across all industries.[226]

The targeted complaints of P. Jay Sidney and the rising tide of grievance prompted newly appointed African American Chairman of the New York State Commission for Human Rights

[225] 'Izzy Rowe's Notebook: A Bias by Bias Description', *PC*, 10 November 1962, p.22., Dave Hepburn, 'In the Wings', *NYAN*, 2 June, 1962, p.18., Jack Gould, 'The Negro Actor in TV: A Campaign Bears First Fruits But There's Much to Be Done', *NYT* 10 June 1962, p.127., Watson, *The Expanding Vista*, pp.98-99.
[226] Dave Hepburn, 'In the Wings: Time to Close Ranks', *NYAN*, 14 July 1962, p.18.

(formerly the State Commission Against Discrimination), George Fowler, to take action.[227] Announcing that within the television industry, the frequently enunciated corporate policy which called for fair employment practices was not in fact being implemented, his commission became the first agency to embark upon a full-time, concerted drive to expand employment opportunities for African Americans in broadcasting.[228] Alongside public pronouncements about the damage of the networks' overwhelming whiteness, the commissioner held meetings with the heads of CBS, NBC, and ABC, refusing the network's attempts to palm him off to second echelon officers according to Hepburn's reporting.[229] Vice commissioner Bernard Katzen initiated an investigation into the employment of African Americans in television.[230] 'We are going to be a catalyst, a watch dog, a reviewer of situations and want to be kept informed by the networks of what they are doing,' Fowler declared in the *New York Amsterdam News*, signalling the Commission's public commitment to holding the networks accountable to their pro forma promises.[231]

Fowler's appreciation of the potential television had to revolutionise the lives of African Americans fuelled his initiative to bring practice in line with policy. Job opportunities were not all that was at stake the commissioner argued. Fowler charged that television was 'not presenting a true picture of the Negro on the American scene,' according to the *New York Times*.[232] The scarce and stereotypical roles given to minorities and particularly African Americans, the Commissioner argued, did not show 'realistically his image as an American citizen.'[233] More important even than acting parts, Fowler believed, was the position of news commentator. In this role an African American would not play a character, instead he (and this was still

[227] 'Media Criticized on Negro's Image', *NYT*, 18 May 1962, p.63.
[228] George Norford, 'The Revolution on TV', b.18, LC.
[229] Dave Hepburn, 'In the Wings', *NYAN*, 8 September 1962, p.18.
[230] Ibid.
[231] Dave Hepburn, 'In the Wings', *NYAN*, 9 June 1962, p.18.
[232] 'Media Criticized on Negro's Image', *NYT*, 18 May 1962, p.63.
[233] Cited in George Norford, 'The Revolution on TV', b.18, LC.

envisioned as a he, the weather was the remit for African American women) would appear nightly as himself. This regular appearance as the fountain of knowledge providing commentary which enlightened and informed the home audience, Fowler believed, would help to erase the damaging stereotypes that had for so long blighted American race relations.

As pressure increased, in June of 1962, each corporation issued policy positions which stated their unequivocal opposition to any form of racial discrimination.[234] Leaders of the fight highlighted that despite network protestations to the contrary, any action taken was a result of the reputational damage risked by the SCHR's investigation into network hiring practices, George Fowler's public pronouncements, and the 'constant agitation' of those fighting for fair employment. Following the first network public statement, which had come from CBS executive Hubbell Robinson, Dave Hepburn argued to his readers:

> In our way of thinking, although Robinson indicated that this decision now had nothing to do with the current militancy or any particular incident, all signs point to the fact that the networks are aware of the agitation and the picketing and, for their own protection, will try to do something about it. [235]

Commenting on the timing of NBC's statement the following week, Hepburn highlighted how publicity surrounding CBS's directive had forced the network's hand. According to the media columnist's inside sources, while NBC had written their statement weeks previously, the top brass at the network had hoped not to have to release it and only did so once coverage of their rival's actions increased the public relations stakes.

The three directives on fair employment policy were not, however, equal. CBS – the network which had led the public statement charge – had indicated that discriminatory hiring practices

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[234] Shannon Gore, 'Civil Rights Television Documentaries in the United States: 1960-1966', (PhD thesis, Northwestern University, 2009), p.22., Watson, *Expanding Vista*, p.99.
[235] Dave Hepburn, 'Networks Agree to Change Policy on Negroes: Networks Following CBS in Race Roles', *NYAN*, 9 June 1962, p.1.

existed and that their network was now prepared to do something about it. NBC and ABC on the other hand, refused to admit to any fault. The nation's oldest network, NBC, reaffirmed its 'long standing and continuing policy of non-discrimination in employment.' America's youngest and smallest network ABC, in the wake of CBS and NBC's directives, released a statement pointedly declaring that 'the network encouraged the use of the best talent available, regardless of color.' Both networks Hepburn highlighted, 'pointedly proclaimed that there was nothing wrong with their policy and that, as far as they were concerned, discrimination did not exist.'[236] Despite ABC and NBC's initial denial of any culpability, eventually the SCHR's efforts ensured that all three networks assigned vice-presidents whose purported responsibility was to follow through on programmes designed to stimulate African American employment both on and behind the camera.[237]

At the same time that the growing campaign for fair employment applied pressure on the broadcasting industry, the changing climate of public opinion brought about by the wider freedom struggle made putting an African American on-air a less risky prospect for network news departments. Bob Teague, the reporter NBC hired to desegregate its New York station in 1963, later described in his autobiography his perception that in the early 1960s, television news executives felt emboldened to seek out the first Black hires for their visual medium.[238] Teague recounted to his readers how when CBS had tried to recruit him in 1961, two years before he took a role with NBC, in the job interview CBS News vice president Ernie Leiser proclaimed the network's motives: '[he] waxed long and eloquently on the sociological significance of the daring move his station was prepared to make. The time had come to ignore the wrath of

[236] Ibid.
[237] Ibid., 'NOW A NEGRO PUSH ON RADIO-TV', *Broadcasting*, 1 July 1963, p.27.
[238] Newspapers – which showed only the names and not the faces of their reporters – could be less concerned about the potential affront that Black journalists might pose to the racial sensibilities of their white audiences. The print press, therefore, had begun to desegregate a decade earlier as evidenced by the careers of Bob Teague and Ben Holman. See also Bonner, 'Changing the Colour of the News', Carroll, *Race News*, Newkirk, *Within the Veil*.

unenlightened elements to my presence on the tube.'[239] Teague's report of Leiser's account of the network's motivations suggested an underlying factor that had been at play in keeping Black Americans out of television news: concern about white backlash. By acknowledging that hiring an African American was a significant and daring move, the CBS News vice president made clear that the network had never previously intended to put into practice its non-discriminatory hiring policies for fear of alienating white viewers. By the early 1960s, however, according to Teague, some television executives were beginning to deem the risk worthwhile.[240]

Leiser's willingness to risk hiring an African American correspondent was not quite as intrepid as he had made it out to be according to Teague's account. An indication of how change was more likely to occur first at the local level, the CBS News executive was only looking to hire Teague for the network's local owned and operated New York station WCBS. While the job market in local news was less competitive than that at the national level, the stakes of desegregating a station that catered solely to a much smaller Northern metropolitan audience were also much lower. A far more daring move would be to hire a Black reporter in the network news department. Network broadcasts which reached national television screens would bring an African American reporter into households across the country – including those of Southern segregationists.

When former press secretary of the Eisenhower administration James Hagerty became ABC's new head of news in 1961, he made it clear that his network would be the first to take such a risk. Announcing his intention to appoint an African American newsman for a network position when he took on the job, Hagerty made sure to keep the Black press well-informed of his

[239] Bob Teague, *Live and Off-Color News Biz* (New York, 1982), pp.33-34.
[240] Teague however did not get the job. The $200 a week Leiser offered him was less than his salary at the *New York Times*. According to Teague, when he asked for more money, Leiser terminated the interview. Teague, *Live and Off-Color*, p.34.

progress in the search. 'There was a great deal said and written about his intending to hire a Negro newsman,' P. Jay Sidney, the actor leading the charge against bias in the television industry, pointed out darkly in an interview with the *Pittsburgh Courier* about his fight for fair employment.[241] Hagerty's extended drawing out of the recruitment hunt, Sidney opined, had been a deliberate publicity move.[242] The new ABC News head's efforts to maximise favourable optics included a specially arranged interview with Dave Hepburn, who two months prior had castigated ABC as 'the least self-conscious of the networks, regarding the employment of Negroes.'[243]

Eventually, Hagerty narrowed the potential pool of 38 candidates he had scouted down to eight.[244] Following a set of auditions at the ABC News studios, Malvin 'Mal' Goode, a veteran of the *Pittsburgh Courier* and former radio news broadcaster, was the man who got the call.[245] Goode accepted Hagerty's offer on the spot and with that became the first man of his race to report the network news: making ABC the network that scored a public relations win with those committed to racial equality in America of being the first network to crack the colour bar.[246]

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[241] 'A Bias-by-Bias Description'
[242] Ibid.
[243] Dave Hepburn, 'ABC Hiring a Negro Newsman', *NYAN*, 7 July 1962, p.1., Dave Hepburn, 'In the Wings', *NYAN*, 5 May 1962, p.A16.
[244] 'ABC-TV Hires Courier's Goode as Newsman', *CD,* 1 September 1962, p.1., 'Mal Goode Hired as ABC-TV Newscaster', *CD,* 30 August 1962, p.3., 'ABC Chief Defends Goode Decision', *NYAN*, 15 September 1962, p.19.
[245] A biography of Mal Goode is under preparation. Rob Ruck and Liann Tsoukas, *The Mighty Mouth: The Life and Times of Mal Goode.*
[246] Interview with Malvin Goode conducted by Clifton B. Cox, 24 October 1984, Teaneck Library Historic Project, Archive Collection of the Teaneck Public Library https://archive.teanecklibrary.org/OralHistory2/goode.html (28 January 2022).



Fig. 3.1 James Hagerty, Head of ABC News, and Mal Goode, ABC's first African American correspondent.

It may seem surprising that ABC was the network to lead the way with such a historic move, for they were frontrunners in nothing else. From an anti-discrimination perspective, both CBS and NBC had proved more outspoken and more willing to demonstrate action towards achieving fair employment. In terms of audience numbers, the smallest network had always lagged behind its older and more established competitors. But ABC's poor record on fair employment may have increased the pressure the network felt to act, and its trailing behind in the ratings race may have given executives the latitude to take a gamble.

On closer inspection, it appears the risk Hagerty had taken was calculated. While its rivals had taken the lead in making public statements about their employment policies, ABC could garner the prestige of being the forward-thinking network which placed the first African American behind a network news desk. However, that desk was not in the ABC News newsroom. Rather

it was housed in the much lower-stakes location of ABC's United Nations bureau.[247] Former Eisenhower administration press secretary James Hagerty was no doubt aware of how the optics of placing an African American reporter at the UN would help strengthen America's fragile image in relation to civil rights for a global audience in the context of the Cold War.[248] According to *TV Guide,* however, Goode's placement at the UN was because network executives feared his presence as an African American in the main studio would be too disruptive. Goode himself in a 1991 documentary produced by Howard University's WHMM-TV argued that the network consigned him to the UN bureau in the belief he would only get 'one or two stories a year.'[249] Fortunately for Goode, and a little less fortunate for American blood pressure, the Cuban Missile Crisis struck six months into his post catapulting the UN into the centre of the world's attention and Mal Goode onto American television screens. This exposure later helped him make the jump to the main newsroom and he went on to cover key civil rights stories including James Meredith's Mississippi March against discrimination and the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

While Goode's appointment in 1962 was not as revolutionary as it may have seemed, it helped spur CBS and NBC to desegregate their newsrooms.[250] Previously, men in the personnel department when questioned about the lack of African American reporters had been quick to tell the African American community about the saturation in the news department and the extremely low rate of turnover amongst announcers.[251] Not wanting to be outdone by ABC,

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[247] Ibid.
[248] For more on civil rights as a Cold War foreign policy consideration see: Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (New Jersey, 2011).
[249] Cited in Todd Burroughs, 'The Inspiring Life and Times of a Broadcasting Pioneer', *The Scanner, Portland, Or.*, 18 October 1998, p.12.
[250] There were also those in the Black community who criticised ABC's choice of Goode as its first Black reporter given the journalist's light complexion, arguing that 'the "first" should have been "someone darker"'. Cited in Phyl Garland, 'Mal Goode Denies Riff With ABC: Rift Rumours 'Ridiculous,' Says Goode', *PC*, 2 February 1963, p.1.
[251] We have no turnover practically on announcers,' William F. Brooks declared in his speech to leaders of the 'negro national community.'I don't think we have put on a new announcer for years. They get there – they seem

however, the other networks quickly found space for some new hires. 'In TV the game of "follow the leader" is an axiom,' Dave Hepburn explained to his readers, 'Everybody watches to see what goes on the other network and then jumps the bandwagon.'[252] It helped that, '[d]espite ABC's fears, they *did not receive a single complaint* from North or South [emphasis in the original].'[253] Within six months of Mal Goode's new job, CBS and NBC had also hired new African American journalists. Ben Holman's name appeared on the roster of the *Evening News with Walter Cronkite*, making CBS the first network to place an African American newsman in the network newsroom.[254] Shortly thereafter NBC hired Bob Teague. Although many in the Black press celebrated his desegregation of the network, Teague's new position was at WNBC, the network-owned local station in New York.[255]

Bob Teague believed his breaking of the colour barrier at NBC in 1963 could be linked to the networks' own coverage of wider African American protest against employment discrimination. Recounting in his autobiography the circumstances of his hiring at the network, Teague pointed out that 'getting the job was subtly related to television's inadvertently persuasive coverage of black demands for a piece of the action in the early sixties.' African Americans demonstrated to create newsworthy events that would draw attention to the ways implicit racism kept colour barriers in place. Teague opined that newsroom executives were forced by their own news coverage of such protests to consider the way that racism had functioned in their own hiring practices, despite the colour-blindness of their employment policies on paper. 'After seeing

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to stay and like the job'. William F. Brooks, 'The National Negro Community', 16 January 1951, b.129 f.28 'Race Relations The National Negro Community', SE.

[252] Dave Hepburn, 'In the Wings', *NYAN,* 7 July 1962, p.18.

[253] Dave Hepburn, 'In the Wings', *NYAN,* 9 March 1963, p.18.

[254] Holman reported for CBS but he never achieved the designation of correspondent. The first African American reporter CBS hired as an official correspondent was Hal Walker who was first hired by the network as a reporter for the Washington bureau in 1968 before being promoted to the position of correspondent in 1969. See, Bliss, Jr., *Now the News*, p.328.

[255] 'Ex-Gridder, Newsman Bob Teague Gets NBC Job', *Jet,* 18 April 1963, p.55. 'Progress Report – 1963', *Ebony*, January 1964, p.116. Many contemporary news reports and scholarly accounts since have incorrectly asserted that NBC hired Teague as a network correspondent. For example, Newkirk, *Within the Veil*, p.63.

countless examples of unconscious biases reported on their own screens,' he argued, 'news-biz executives were beginning to realise that they were equally unconscious.'[256] The dawning recognition that their own newsrooms were as white as the businesses demonstrators were protesting, Teague argued, played a role in the networks' decisions to desegregate their newsrooms.[257]

Despite the networks' widely reported hirings of a single Black reporter, expansive and lasting change within the television industry would not come about quite so easily. A forum on 'The Negro in Television' organised in late 1963 by the SCHR's new African American TV consultant George Norford and sponsored by the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences late in 1963, showcased how differently African Americans and broadcasting industry executives perceived the networks' desegregation efforts. Against charges from civil rights activists on the panel that progress had been too little and too slow, their fellow panellists from CBS and NBC pointed to their networks' efforts to employ African Americans where and when feasible. From the audience Robert Kalaidjian, director of CBS Personnel, declared that CBS was now actively beating the bushes to find African Americans of executive calibre. Another audience member, African American producer Bill Branch, however, derided the networks' efforts at 'integration by memo.'[258]

William B. Branch had first-hand experience of how the networks' stated fair employment policies obscured their discriminatory hiring practices. The same year that the CBS and NBC news departments hired their first African American reporters, Branch, in his attempts to get a job in Public Affairs found himself in the same frustrating position William Lloyd Williams had

[256] Teague, *Live and Off-Color*, pp.33-34., Gore, 'Civil Rights Television Documentaries', p.126.
[257] Gore, 'Civil Rights Television Documentaries', p.125.
[258] Dave Hepburn, 'Panelists Concentrate Fire on Ad Agency Man', *NYAN*, 9 November 1963, p.17.

experienced a decade earlier.[259] Aside from a string of impressive accolades and a resume which included print journalism, writing for television, and broadcast production, Branch had that most important of not-so-secret ingredients required to get a foot in the door: connections. Among them was *CBS Reports* producer William Peters, whom he counted as a friend.[260] Peters' contacts had managed to get Branch an interview with the man in charge of hiring at CBS Public Affairs, Jack Kiermaier. But there the African American applicant's luck ran out. Writing to Peters, Branch described his experience with Kiermaier: 'He gave me the impression that he was irritated that he had been asked to see me in the first place. Eventually he stated quite frankly that he couldn't and wouldn't consider anyone with my meagre background in actual production.'[261] Just as Williams had experienced a decade earlier, those with the power to hire African Americans expected Black job applicants to have qualifications and experience at levels competitive to their white counterparts despite the industry's history of unequal opportunity.

Branch expressed his frustration at CBS's unfair expectations to his producer friend, Peters: 'I, certainly, am the first to realise that I don't have the 12 or 14-year network background that's ordinarily required, but when I got out of Northwestern 14 years ago, they weren't even hiring Negroes as elevator operators,' he explained.[262] African American job hopefuls like himself therefore found it impossible to acquire the type of resume that networks required. Despite his frequent applications over the years, the only job any of the networks offered was that of janitor. The closest Branch could get to experience in broadcast production at the time therefore was to sweep the floor of NBC's TODAY show. He went on to describe the 'bedevilling predicament' that still beleaguered African Americans in 1963. The explanation of the problem is worth quoting at length for the frustration it reveals at being entangled in this Gordian knot:

[259] Branch to Huntley, 9 October 1962.
[260] Letter from William B. Branch to William Peters, 2 October 1963, b.52, LC.
[261] Ibid.
[262] Ibid.

> Now that networks are at last concerned about actually hiring some negroes instead of merely proclaiming their allegiance to the principle of equal opportunity, they apparently suddenly expect to find negro applicants with a full list of qualifications – and experience, yet! – in fields in which they themselves (meaning the networks) have never allowed negroes the opportunity to enter. Thus – like Southern school systems and Northern unions – our opportunity to get equal apprenticeship and experience has been severely limited, and then the resultant lack of equal credentials is the reason given for continued refusal![263]

This problem, which plagued almost all African Americans with aspirations for a professional job in the United States, was compounded by the inability of those on the other side of the colour line in positions of power to see it as Branch made clear. As he lamented to Peters, the frustrated Black candidate could not figure out how to explain this situation to people in actual hiring capacities. Past attempts he explained, had 'boomeranged':

> The guy (Joel Heller at CBS, who now shares an office with Kiermaier!) seemed offended, as if it wasn't cricket somehow for me to mention the possibility of racial factors being involved, and assured me there was no longer any such problem at CBS because he had seen several memos stating there was to be no discrimination![264]

Branch highlighted the maddening irony of confronting white executives who believed a policy which had no bearing on reality. From his position of power, Joel Heller could ignore evidence that employment discrimination persisted. Although executives like ABC's head of news James Hagerty and CBS News vice president Ernie Leiser celebrated their forward thinking in desegregating their newsrooms, other white gatekeepers like those Branch encountered in his quest for a job, could claim that they did not see colour when it came to hiring. As a result, African Americans like Bill Branch continued to be held back because of their race. 'Man – if I were free to devote even one-half the energy and time to doing a job as I have to to get one,'

[263] Ibid.
[264] Ibid.

he exclaimed to Peters in frustration, 'old Leonardo Da Vinci and his peers would have to rise up and salute!'

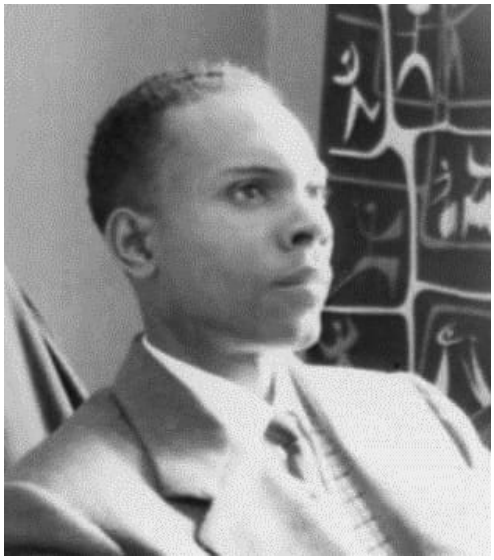


Fig. 3.2 William B. Branch.

Over the course of the 1960s, many different actors tried to make the networks aware that their fair employment policies hid discriminatory hiring practices, from the Black press to Government Commissions and the individual Black Americans who tried to get a job. Only when the freedom struggle had begun to shift America's climate of opinion did the networks risk their bottom lines and put a Black correspondent on screen. For an overwhelming majority of African Americans, however, the doors to the networks remained shut. By exploring the stories of the first African Americans hired by the network, the next section shows how colour-blind hiring was not the only barrier to entry for hopeful Black broadcasters in a news industry with a token rather than total commitment to desegregation.

Section Two

Trailblazers or Tokens?

None of the men in this first generation of African American network news reporters were strangers to being the lone Black face in an otherwise lilywhite room. All three had solid credentials as colour-bar breaking pioneers. In 1952, Mal Goode had become the first African American member of the National Association of Radio and Television News Directors. Ben Holman upon his appointment to CBS was even more versed in the ways of the white world of mainstream reporting. He began his journalistic career by desegregating the *Chicago Daily News* in 1953.[265] In 1962, after a brief stint in radio he made the jump to television becoming the first African American in television news at CBS's Chicago affiliate WBBM-TV.[266] It wasn't long before the men from headquarters came knocking at his door.

Bob Teague had an even longer history of crossing the colour-line. In 1950, the *Chicago Defende*r reported on how the 21-year-old senior from Milwaukee had become a campus leader and 'self-appointed ambassador for the Negro race' at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's largely white campus. Teague, unlike his Black peers – whom the *Defender* denounced for their failure to integrate – had thrown himself into campus life. He was the star player on the formerly all-white football team, the only African American in the University's acting troupe, and the sole Black writer for the campus daily newspaper. The otherwise lilywhite Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity had even elected him president. However, student politics, the paper reported, was Bob's major activity – an area, he told the *Defender's* readers, 'where a guy can learn a lot about working and getting along with all kinds of people.' As the newspaper made clear, most of those people were the white kind. The paper hammered home this fact through the large photographs

[265] Newkirk, *Within the Veil*, p.64.
[266] 'WWBM-TV Quietly Joins Trend', *Broadcasting,* 3 September 1962, p.9.

accompanying the article which showed a six-foot, handsome, smiling Bob Teague standing at the centre, at ease and in control of various groups of his white co-ed peers.[267]

After graduating from UW-Madison, Teague used the lessons he had learned in integration to work and get along with the lilywhite mainstream news industry. Passing up offers from four professional football teams, he put his journalism major into practice by becoming a reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal* and one of the only African Americans in the country at the sports desk of a white daily. After six years, he graduated to the newsroom of the *New York Times* where he remained until his hiring by NBC desegregated the network's flagship local New York station.



Fig. 3.3 Mal Goode.



Fig. 3.4 Ben Holman.



Fig. 3.5 Bob Teague.

Goode, Holman, and Teague were celebrated by the Black journalism community and the mainstream press as pioneers who paved the way for the future African American news reporters who followed in their footsteps.[268] Arthur Fennell, president of the National

[267] 'Big Wheel on Campus', *CD*, 20 May 1950, p.13.
[268] Dennis Hevesi, 'Malvin R. Goode, 87, Reporter Who Broke a TV Color Barrier, Obituary', *NYT,* 15 September 1995, *https://www.nytimes.com/1995/09/15/obituaries/malvin-r-goode-87-reporter-who-broke-a-tv-color-barrier.html* (28 January 2022), Yvonne Shinhoster Lamb, 'Journalist Benjamin F. Holman Obituary', *WP*, 27

Association of Black Journalists and an anchor for WCAU-TV said of Mal Goode upon his passing in the 1990s that he 'set an example for journalists to follow' as a 'Black man who made it in television news despite the naysayers.'[269] Goode had been a forthright advocate for African American advancement. A board member of the Pittsburgh NAACP, he was a 'true crusader for civil rights,' according to his former editor at the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The Black journalist rarely turned down the opportunities his platform presented to speak out for Black rights.[270] By 1983 he had appeared in more than 350 cities discussing civil rights on more than 50 college campuses and at 200 chapters of the NAACP.[271] It is no surprise therefore that a number of African American journalists remembered Goode as having pioneered the path they were to follow. 'He opened the way for the next generation,' ABC correspondent George Strait declared in Goode's *New York Times* obituary.[272] NBC's Carole Simpson, the first African American woman to anchor a major network newscast; Ed Bradley, a member of CBS's *60 Minutes* team; and Ben Holman all pointed to Goode as a source of inspiration, encouragement, and mentorship.[273]

Holman himself followed suit in working to advance Black journalism in the mainstream. As well as his years of effort promoting minority interests in broadcasting at the Community Relations Service – the agency that Congress created through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to promote change without turmoil – he went on to become a Professor of Journalism at the University of Maryland. Here, he was instrumental in establishing the University's student chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists and won awards for his work attracting minority students to journalism careers.[274] The man who took up Holman's mantle as lone Black

January 2007, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/26/AR2007012601698.html (28 January 2022).

[269] 'The Inspiring Life and Times of a Broadcast Pioneer'

[270] Sandy Hamm, 'Civil Rights Crusader, Mal Goode, Dies', *PC,* 30 September 1995, p.1.

[271] 'Black Mayors Honor Mal Goode', *Columbus Times*, 14 September 1983, p.1.

[272] Hevesi, 'Malvin R. Goode'.

[273] Hamm, 'Civil Rights Crusader' He also took his expertise to the African continent in a 1963 delegation of other African American reporters to teach journalism.

[274] 'Ben Holman: Respected Journalist, Professor and Mentor', University of Maryland, Philip Merril College of Journalism, College News, https://merrill.umd.edu/2014/02/ben_holman/ (28 January 2022)

correspondent at CBS in 1968, George Foster, also committed to educating the next generation. Foster became Director of Mass Media Programs at Fort Valley State University in Georgia and later was instrumental in establishing Howard University's television broadcast centre.[275] Cognisant of their roles as trailblazers for the African American community and the unique responsibility that being the first among the race entailed, the pioneers of television news sought to extend their privilege, doing what they could to create opportunities for those who aspired to follow in their broadcasting footsteps.[276]

Yet surveying the backgrounds of the first men hired in television news reveals a pattern whereby the success of these African American frontrunners in the news industry fostered only their own further advancement rather than improvements in opportunities for other Black reporters. Rather than concluding from these journalists' successful work in previously all-white newsrooms that the industry had nothing to fear in hiring African Americans, the white journalism world chose to conclude that there was nothing to fear in hiring that specific Black journalist. No flood of African American reporter hires followed Ben Holman's desegregation of the *Chicago Daily News*, nor for that matter the weakest of trickles. Holman remained the lone Black reporter at the paper for ten years. His tenure there did not usher in a wave of African American job offers but it did make him a more attractive candidate for advancement in the white industry. His time in each white newsroom helped make him a more appealing prospect to the next by proving that *this* African American could work alongside white colleagues without causing trouble. Such considerations were likely to have helped spur his quick succession from desegregating the *Chicago Daily News*, then WBBM, followed by CBS. Similarly, Bob Teague's

[275] 'George Foster Obituary', *The Washington Post*, 6 June, 2010 https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/washingtonpost/name/george-foster-obituary?id=5944615 (28 January 2022).
[276] Bob Teague passed on his knowledge and experience by teaching summer programmes at Columbia University's School of Journalism and training students for television at the Community Film Workshop. Mel Tapley, 'Gil Noble, Bob Teague Handle Heat on Television', *NYAN,* 11 December 1982, p.29.

jam-packed student CV would have appeared to the *Milwaukee Reporter* as proof of his talent in putting white Americans at ease as well as his academic and extracurricular prowess. His time in the *Milwaukee Reporter's* white environs assured the *New York Times* that he was a safe bet to add to their white newsroom. Proof that he could get along with the white reporters at the nation's leading newspaper ensured that he was the right Black man to desegregate WNBC.

These first African American newsmen in all-white newsrooms recognised that their hiring demonstrated no real commitment on the part of white news executives to eradicating employment discrimination or changing the white perspective of their newsrooms. 'This season, no network worth the mention would want to be caught without a Negro newsman in tow,' P. Jay Sidney remarked scathingly in 1962, arguing that the networks' hiring of African American newsmen was a 'fashion in pets' that wouldn't stick.[277] Ben Holman, commenting on the thinking that informed his job offer at CBS decades later remarked: 'ABC had Mal Goode, NBC had Bob Teague. CBS had to have their black too.' Their hiring, Holman argued, was nothing more than a symbolic attempt by the networks to give the appearance of equality in their newsrooms. Recalling his move from WBBM-TV to CBS, the African American broadcaster asserted that the day after he left, the Chicago station 'said they had to hire another black. "We need another Negro." It was strictly tokenism. You had to have your token Negro.'[278] Ben Holman viewed this small concession to desegregation as a matter of optics rather than ethics. White news executives had begun to deem it necessary to demonstrate their lack of racism by having at least one Black journalist on staff, but hiring one African American reporter was enough. By only embracing token rather than substantive change in the 1960s, the television

[277] 'A Bias-by-Bias Description'
[278] Newkirk, *Within the Veil,* p.64.

news industry proved in line with the pattern of desegregation in schools and many Northern workplaces that historians of the Northern freedom struggle have shown.[279]

Newsrooms that had made only a token effort to integrate could be far from welcoming for men like Holman. Peter Herford, who began working at CBS News as a producer in the early 1960s, later described how the networks sudden hiring of their first Black reporters brought an underlying racism to the fore in even those white newsroom colleagues who considered themselves free-thinking liberals. While the African American newsmen may have enjoyed good relationships with many of their colleagues, 'conventional wisdom' at the time according to Herford was that 'none of them would have had their jobs if they weren't Black.'[280] Any time newsroom bosses gave a Black reporter a prized assignment or a guest anchor slot, he recalled, such sentiments would surface from white colleagues.[281] From Herford's perspective, it appeared that the psychological burden of being the only African American correspondent at CBS News and the pressure to justify his place in the newsroom by outperforming his white co-workers weighed heavily on Ben Holman's shoulders.[282]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Holman soon left the CBS Newsroom, but in his future career the veteran journalist sought to highlight the importance of newsrooms hiring African American journalists. In 1965, the Community Relations Service hired Holman to helm a programme

[279] See for example Thomas J. Sugrue, 'Affirmative Action from Below: Civil Rights, the Building Trades, and the Politics of Racial Equality in the Urban North', *The Journal of American History*, 91:1 (2004) pp.145-173, Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*.
[280] Mal Goode, for example, refuted rumours that there had been friction between him and some of his co-workers, declaring to the *Pittsburgh Courier* in early 1963 'I've never worked with a finer bunch of people and I've never been happier in a job in my life.' Garland, 'Mal Goode Denies Riff With ABC.' Author interview with Peter Herford, 20 November 2021.
[281] Author interview with Peter Herford, 20 November 2021. Such treatment in the CBS newsroom was an improvement on Holman's experience at the *Chicago Daily News* the previous decade where as the only Black reporter in the bureau he was shunned by his white colleagues. Newkirk, *Within the Veil*, p.60.
[282] Author interview with Peter Herford, 20 November 2021.

aimed at promoting cooperation between the media and minority communities.[283] According to scholar of CRS, Bertram Levine, in its earliest strategic planning the agency recognised that discrimination in the image-building business led to an absence of Black journalists which helped to reinforce the invidious racial stereotypes that the media perpetuated.[284] The continued lack of reporting on the African American experience, combined with the failure to depict Black Americans as normal human beings ensured the myth of white superiority persisted. This, the CRS identified, was making peaceful acceptance of the civil rights laws more difficult.[285] Moreover, the agency's director Le Roy Collins recognised that newsrooms could not expect white reporters to cover Black America satisfactorily given that good reporting did not result from reporters who didn't know their beat. Bad journalism, they reasoned, wasn't just bad for business, but bad for America. The agency therefore devised a two-pronged attack. First, it tried to convince the nation's leading opinion moulders to recruit and train more minority newsmen, by highlighting that the new insights and access to new news sources they would bring would provide new opportunities at the same time as helping the news media meet their obligations to the American people.[286] Second, realising that effective change would not come from the top alone, CRS initiated the programme which Holman led, aimed at ensuring cooperation and generating links between the news media, civil rights leaders, and marginalised communities.[287]

Taken together, the careers of the first African Americans hired by the networks reveal that a colour bar broken was not a colour bar banished. By the decade's waning years, little real progress had been made in integrating network news. Writing in his *Pittsburgh Courier* column in

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[283] Holman's work with the Community Relations Service saw him rise to Director of the agency in the Nixon and Ford administrations where he held the status of assistant attorney general making him the Justice Department's highest-ranking Black person. Lamb, 'Obituary', Bliss, Jr., *Now the News,* p.328.
[284] 'NOW A NEGRO PUSH'
[285] Bertram Levine, *Resolving Racial Conflict: The Community Relations Service and Civil Rights, 1964-1989* (Missouri, 2004) pp.218-219.
[286] Ibid.
[287] In 1968 Holman returned briefly to network television news taking on a producer role at NBC. Shortly thereafter President Nixon appointed him director of the CRS. Bliss, Jr., *Now the News*, p.328.

December of 1967, Diggs Datrooth could still report that 'in New York, as throughout the Nation, [the communications] industry, especially television, has been reluctant to hire Negro announcers, particularly newsmen.' Ben Holman no longer reported the news for CBS; while ABC might still employ Mal Goode and NBC had hired another African American reporter, Bill Matney, alongside Bob Teague, these reporters appeared on screen infrequently. 'None of the three networks has a regular on camera national negro reporter,' Datrooth highlighted in his announcement that amongst its series of White-Collar hearings in New York the following year, the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission would be examining the communications industry.[288]

Nevertheless, in entering white newsrooms these men contributed to the fights against racial inequality. The appearance of Black faces as not just the subjects but the purveyors of news was a breakthrough albeit not a total victory in the struggle. However, the significance of Black Americans reporting for network news lay not just in the fact of their reporting but the nature of their coverage.

Section Three

Coverage

Exploring the reportage of the Black broadcast journalists who are often overlooked in scholarship on civil rights reveals the insights that African Americans could bring to the race beat, as well as the unrivalled access their membership of the national Black community would provide. Bob Teague's reporting of civil rights could lend an insider's perspective that would not have been possible for a white reporter. NBC's first African American hire was one of the featured reporters in the network's prime-time documentary, *The American Revolution of '63,*

[288] Diggs Datrooth, 'National Hotline', *PC*, 16 December 1967, p.16.

which aimed to provide a 'comprehensive 3-hour examination' of the civil rights struggle.[289] The heavily-publicised documentary, which pre-empted Labour Day 1963's entire evening of network programming, ventured into 68 towns and cities affected by civil rights conflicts. One of those cities was Elizabeth, New Jersey. It was here that viewers met Bob Teague reporting from the construction site of the union county courthouse annex where a jobs demonstration was taking place.[290]

'When you watch demonstrations like this one,' Teague explained to the camera during his segment, 'a number of questions come to mind about the ideas and emotions of the people involved.' In his commentary on the demonstration Teague positioned himself outside of race. But he did so to highlight intersubjectivity rather than objectivity – a deft touch only made possible, or at the very least authentic, by his African Americanness.

Using the indefinite pronoun 'you' Teague placed both himself and viewers at home within the report. A month later, Rodney P. Carlisle, an African American evening news viewer from Oakland, California, wrote to the head of CBS's Evening News programme, Walter Cronkite, outlining the significance of a white reporter's casual exclusion of the African American audience in his use of the second person plural. 'If you came into this restaurant for a sandwich, you would not find a Negro on the stool next to you,' the white CBS newsman had announced to viewers at home from the frontlines of the struggle in Cambridge, Maryland.[291] Carlisle explained the significance of such slips:

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[289] 'September on NBC' Circular Distributed to NBC Staff from the Office of Sydney Eiges, Vice President in charge of Public Relations, September 1963, b.567c, f.'P+P Opinion Leaders Campaign 1960-1964', Library 1934-1976, Operations 1931-1976, Office Files 1927-1976, NBC Records, WSHS.
[290] *The American Revolution of '63* [television programme] NBC, 2 September 1963, NBC Television Collection, MIRC, LOC. The following analysis of Teague's reporting is based from viewing this documentary at the LOC and later online via the digital C-SPAN archive. https://www.c-span.org/video/?473375-3/the-american-revolution-63-part-1&event=473375&playEvent (22 January 2022).
[291] Letter from Rodney P. Carlisle to Walter Cronkite, 3 October 1963, b.2M406.6, WC.

> If the 'you' of your newscast is all white by implication, then you are practicing a form of segregation so deep-seated that the Negro is fully justified in feeling alienated from American society. By a simple act of analysis of your conception of the audience, you can do much to break down the psychological isolation of nearly twenty million Americans.[292]

The 'you' of the white reporter in Cambridge did not include Black viewers. Such reportage at the same time as covering the struggle inadvertently reinforced the structure of a racist society which alienated African Americans. 'Try to write your newscasts as if the Negro exists, is alive and interested, and is among your audience,' Carlisle implored Cronkite. 'If you can't do this much, then there is little hope for integration.'[293]

Teague's 'you', on the other hand, was raceless, eliding the white and Black viewers of the documentary into a single universal viewership, appealing to both. While a white reporter could also have done this, as an African American, the strategy became deliberate. His Blackness rendered him outside of the assumption of white as default and Black as other. Therefore, it is extremely unlikely he would have taken for granted that a universal audience meant only white Americans.

Furthermore, the indefinite pronoun – by positioning Teague as one with his audience – meant that white viewers were subtly compelled to identify with the Black man on screen. Teague's raceless and inclusive 'you' was at once a recognition of, and challenge to, the default assumption of whiteness, at the same time as being a call to the universality of human experience. A lot was going on in that one little pronoun.

[292] Ibid.
[293] Ibid.

The second part of Teague's confrontingly inclusive strategy of racialised racelessness is evident in his reference to the demonstrators. By describing them as 'the people involved' rather than identifying them as African Americans, Teague emphasised both their humanity and universality. One way to find answers to questions about the ideas and emotions of the demonstrators, the reporter continued, was 'to put yourself on the picket line.' Over the following few minutes, he took viewers at home on a journey few would ever experience. This was a voyage upon which it is unlikely a white reporter could have ventured – at least not with the same insight and authenticity. Cameras followed Teague as he marched on the picket line alongside the demonstrators, reporting on the experience as he went. From this vantage point he could access for the American viewing public an unrivalled level of insight. For the first time, those uncommitted masses who were not involved in the struggle got a taste of what it was to march in demonstration for equal rights.

'The first thing that strikes you is an awareness of pride, tremendous pride. You sense it in all the people around you,' Teague told viewers as the camera followed him marching on the picket line in front of the construction site. As the camera cut to portraits of the individual marchers on the picket demonstrating silently and stoically with their signs, he described the sense of courage and fortitude required to continue fighting for a cause that had no chance of being won any time soon.

'The strangest part about it is everybody here keeps going,' his narration told the audience as the screen filled with a close-up of bodiless feet walking past. By constructing the tenacity as strange, the African American reporter used the strategy of distance to position himself with an audience new to the experience, drawing them in to understanding. At the same time, he set himself up for an interrogation of the emotional experience: 'It's something like swimming out to sea. No end in sight, no signs to tell you how much farther you have to

go. So you just keep going. One stroke or one step at a time. Hoping. Somewhere, sometime, an easier way of fighting back.' Through this description, Teague allowed the audience first-hand insight to the experience of marching on the picket and provided them access to the interior world of the demonstrators.

Teague's reporting allowed viewers at home a snapshot of the corporeal as well as the emotional cost of demonstrating. He explained: 'After a while your feet start hurting. You get tired.' The journalist turned marcher continued, describing how physical weariness came hand in hand with mental fatigue: 'You get bored. You start thinking about all the other places, all the other things you'd rather be doing right now.' By explaining the tedious exhaustion of demonstrating, Teague made apparent the sacrifice required, thereby emphasising the importance of the cause. Any viewer who may have thought demonstrations were fun or glamorous was quickly disabused of that notion once they'd spent a few minutes with Teague on the picket. Furthermore, he enjoined the viewer – in the shoes of the marcher – to confront the constant potential for danger: 'What if the person next to you slugs a policeman? What would you do? Suppose a policeman slugs you?'

Throughout the segment Teague maintained his identification with the audience, pulling them into the experience no matter who they were with the lasso of the indefinite and raceless 'you'. At the same time, that Teague himself was so clearly African American brought to light the implicit assumptions about on whose behalf a reporter was speaking when they made generalised statements. The inherent supposition about race would have gone unnoticed by a white audience if the same statements had been made by a white reporter whose unracialised viewpoint would be taken as the norm. That Bob Teague, a Black American, was including himself as the same as them meant white viewers had to

confront these assumptions. Furthermore, viewers were led to consider themselves the same as him and by extension the demonstrators. By continuing not to mention race he emphasised the universality of the thoughts and feelings of the marchers thereby highlighting their humanity. NBC's new African American reporter provided coverage that spoke to African Americans and enlightened white viewers in a way none of the white reporters on staff could have.



Fig. 3.6 Bob Teague on the picket line reporting at a jobs demonstration in Elizabeth, New Jersey, 1963.

At the same time that Bob Teague's reporting from the picket line provided a new perspective for NBC viewers, the experience proved formative for the young African American correspondent. As Teague explained to television critic Steven H. Scheuer ahead of the release

of *The American Revolution of '63*, filming the segment in New Jersey had been Teague's first time taking part in a demonstration and an experience that was 'a revelation' to him. 'It was a personal thing that meant a great deal to me and I learned I should have been there a long time before,' he explained. 'So many people feel that the civil rights question is another thing, like communism or lung cancer, that they've read about but that doesn't really touch their lives… My experience on the picket line impressed me with the fact that from ridicule to contempt there is just a short jump to violence.'[294] Reporting on the civil rights movement aided Teague's own understanding of American racism and galvanised him to take a more active role in fighting for racial equality.

Teague's reporting also at times provided insights that tempered white interpretations of Black protest. In another segment featured in the documentary, Teague reported on the Nation of Islam, a religious and political movement which the news media had dubbed the 'Black Muslims.'[295] This Black nationalist organisation and its charismatic spokesman, Malcolm X, had first crashed into American public consciousness with sensational 1959 CBS documentary *The Hate That Hate Produced* hosted by Mike Wallace.[296] This headlining-grabbing portrayal of the Muslims as a dangerous Black Supremacy group determined the lens through which the white news media reported on the organisation. *The American Revolution of '63*'s host Frank McGee presented the Black Muslims' militancy as a threat in his introduction to the segment, but Bob

[294] Steven H. Scheuer, 'TV KEYNOTES: 3-Hour Telecast Set on 'Rights'', *Tarrytown New York Daily News*, 30 August 1963, p.16.
[295] Malcolm X resented both the moniker and the white news media's portrayal of the Nation as angry black Muslim extremists. Stephen Tuck, *The Night Malcolm X Spoke at the Oxford Union: A Transatlantic Story of Antiracist Protest*, (California, 2014), p.168., Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*, Chapter 14: 'Black Muslims', (New York, 1965), pp.236-265.
[296] The documentary first aired in five half-hour episodes on WNTA-TV in New York and CBS later rebroadcast it to the nation as a single extended special. Black journalist, broadcaster and acquaintance of Malcolm X, Louis Lomax, was instrumental to the production of the programme but its polemic scaremongering was the result of editing and commentary by white host and producer Mike Wallace who was also responsible for the provocative title. Thomas Aiello, *The Life and Times of Louis Lomax: The Art of Deliberate Disunity*, Chapter: The Hate That Hate Produced, (London, 2021) pp.24-39., Tuck, *The Night Malcolm X Spoke at the Oxford Union*, p.42., Haley and X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, pp.236-265.

Teague's report added nuance to this narrative. 'It's feared by some whites that the Muslims advocate violence,' Teague told viewers, 'but that's not exactly the case. They don't believe in starting a fight, but if white men mistreat them, they won't turn the other cheek.' Teague highlighted the distinction between aggressive and defensive violence – one many white journalists failed to appreciate. While the Black Muslims might push moderate African American leaders to become more militant, Teague allowed, he observed the necessary role that such seemingly dangerous alternatives played in advancing the African American cause. 'It's the implied threat of increasing Muslim power that makes some whites more willing to negotiate with the so-called moderate groups,' he explained. Where the white news media was most often alarmist in its reporting on African American militancy, Teague's analysis explained the necessity of such threats to the overall project of equality.

Over at ABC, Mal Goode brought to the table what no white reporter could: connections. An African American community leader with an extensive history of activism, Goode counted the King family, Malcolm X, and Jackie Robinson amongst a list of friends that read as a veritable *Who's Who* of prominent Black Americans.[297] His history with the King family is evident through personal correspondence in which he addressed letters to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as 'Mike' the civil rights leader's original birth name and signed off with regards to King's wife Coretta and the civil rights leader's parents.[298]

Goode used his connections to improve ABC's civil rights reporting, as demonstrated in ABC's comprehensive coverage of the Meredith March in 1966. The network reported on the march from its beginning at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis to the State House in Jackson, with all of its attendant confrontations, conflicts, and developments – a triumph Nick Archer, ABC's

[297] 'Civil Rights Crusader, Mal Goode, Dies'
[298] Letter from Mal Goode to Martin Luther King Jr., 7 July 1966, b.2, f.16 'American Broadcasting Company', MLK.

Director of News, believed only possible through Mal Goode's connections. Dora McDonald, King's personal secretary, had provided the assistance, information, and names of further cooperative contacts along the march route that had been essential for the coverage. Writing to express the network's gratitude for her help, Archer asked Mrs. McDonald to pass along their thanks to her friends who 'were so helpful…those whose names we might not have in our records.'[299] That such people were not on file at ABC suggests the value that Goode's network had brought to the coverage. It is unlikely that ABC without the in of their Black reporter, would have had such easy access to Mrs. McDonald and her rolodex.

Bob Teague's first-hand account of the picket line put the American public in the universal shoes of demonstrators. Mal Goode's network ensured that viewers watched more comprehensive coverage. Considering these instances of the difference in framing and informing that these African American reporters brought to network coverage of civil rights offers a glimpse of how transformative integrating the newsroom could be. The limitations of the networks' approach to desegregation in this period, however, meant that few Black television journalists were able to do this kind of reporting. Yet the African Americans who did cross the colour line in network news ensured that the struggle for Black freedom was not solely viewed through white eyes.

Conclusion

Helen G. Hayward and her husband, Donald M. Jr., were fans of Walter Cronkite's Evening News. As was the case for millions of Americans in the late 1960s, the programme formed a regular beat in the rhythm of their household, its anchorman a frequent evening guest in their

[299] Letter from Nick Archer, Director of News Service ABC to Mrs. Dora McDonald, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 29 June 1966, b.2, f.16 'American Broadcasting Company', MLK.

living rooms. But the Haywards had a problem they felt they should share with the CBS News anchor. 'We find fault with the fact that you have no negro announcers or reporters,' Mrs. Hayward informed their nightly visitor in April of 1968, arguing that the programme's 'coverage of news will become valid only when you have the courage to show Americans that you believe we all are equal.'[300]

A few months later Catherine Mitchell, Walter Cronkite's administrative assistant, confidently assured a letter-writer complaining about the lack of Black reporters on CBS News that: 'Several [African American] men are now learning their trade in various CBS News bureaus…we give you our reassurance that we are doing our utmost to solve any inequality that may exist at CBS News.' In the news department, the problem of racial inequality was on its way to being solved according to Mrs Mitchell.[301]

The struggle to integrate television news, however, was far from over. James Hagerty, according to Dave Hepburn's reporting for the *New York Amsterdam News*, believed that 'the first Negro newsman on TV would be another Jackie Robinson in essence.' If his position in the newsroom and on television screens proved a success, Hagerty 'felt that that the barrier would be broken for good.'[302] Yet by the end of the 1960s television newsrooms remained overwhelmingly white.

In the end, the desegregation of all three networks proved to be the beginning rather than the end of the fight to change the colour of television news. The struggle for fair employment within network newsrooms would continue even as television news covered the struggle for equality happening outside their offices. In 1963 the rising tide of civil rights activism caused a

[300] Letter from Helen G. Hayward to Walter Cronkite, 29 1968, b.2M527, WC
[301] No mention was made of the gender inequality that characterised this and every other newsroom.
[302] Hepburn, 'ABC Hiring a Negro Newsman'

step change in the relationship between television news and the struggle for Black equality on the nation's streets.

CHAPTER FOUR

1963

On 10 May 1963, television screens in millions of households across the country beamed out the violent spectacle of three white police officers manhandling an African American man as two police-dogs strained against their leads to snap at him. 'This is Birmingham, the South's mightiest industrial city as the world knew it this week,' the voice of CBS correspondent Charles Collingwood declared as one officer grabbed the man in a headlock and dragged him off the screen. 'These are the frontlines of the battle between Dr. Martin Luther King's Negro disciples of nonviolence and the uniformed forces of Birmingham led by Commissioner Eugene 'Bull' Connor,' Collingwood's narration continued, as the footage cut to another scene of a police-dog lunging to bite a young African American man.[303]

This opening segment of CBS's *Eyewitness* episode, *Breakthrough in Birmingham,* presented the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's 'Project C for Confrontation' to viewers as a stark morality play. The vivid footage made clear the one-sided nature of the 'battle'; the only armour the stoic young man had to protect him against the police-dog's snapping jaws was his cardigan. Collingwood's narration helped reinforce this interpretation of events. Over footage of Bull Connor surrounded by the officers in his charge Collingwood relayed in a slow and deliberate tone Connor's comment on the actions of his forces toward the peaceful demonstrators: 'We were trying to be nice to them, but they won't let us be.' To an audience who had just witnessed

[303] Although Collingwood referred to Connor as Commissioner, the city had converted from a commission to a mayor/council system the previous year and Connor had been beaten in the election by Albert Boutwell who appeared later in the documentary. *Eyewitness: Breakthrough in Birmingham* [television programme] CBS, 10 May 1963. D. Television News Collection, MIRC, LOC. This programme was originally viewed onsite at the LOC MIRC in 2019. Later a copy became available on a youtube account hosted by 'Hezakaya Newz' which the author downloaded and has in personal possession. The Hezakaya Newz online copy has since been removed. Hereafter all references to *Breakthrough in Birmingham* relate to this programme.

a jarring scene of brutality such a sentiment was disingenuous at best. By repeating Connor's words in his own voice Collingwood drew out the irony of the segregationist's words and the moral bankruptcy of his tactics, leaving no room for doubt that there was any excuse for the cruelty of the Birmingham law enforcement.

In 1962, a Gallup opinion poll found that 4% of Americans thought race was America's most pressing problem. In 1963 that number jumped to 42%.[304] The narrative presented at the beginning of *Eyewitness: Breakthrough in Birmingham,* seemingly provided an explanation for the sudden emergence of race as an issue in the American public's consciousness. By shining a spotlight on the Southern racial brutality in Birmingham, the new medium helped the civil rights movement to convert a previously indifferent national audience to its cause. Even President John Kennedy noted that the televised brutality of Bull Connor's police-dogs and firehoses made him 'sick,' and helped him to 'understand why the Negroes in Birmingham are tired of being asked to be patient.'[305]

However, a closer inspection of *Breakthrough in Birmingham* and a wider look at news broadcasts from 1963 reveals a much more complicated story about the relationship between television news and the movement that year. This chapter provides a fuller understanding of the sudden jump in public concern about race. It argues that Birmingham ushered in a step change in the frequency of television's coverage of racial unrest and completely altered how network news reporters framed African Americans' fight for freedom. Before Birmingham, network news in 1963 reported primarily isolated incidents. These illustrated the ways that the 1954 Supreme Court's *Brown V. Board of Education* desegregation ruling was continuing to play out slowly and

[304] Frank Newport, 'Race Relations as the Nation's Most Important Problem', *Gallup*, 19 June 2020 https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/312875/race-relations-nation-important-problem.aspx (28 January 2022).
[305] Quoted in Donovan and Scherer*, Unsilent Revolution,* p.17.

painfully in Southern communities. After Birmingham, television interpreted the wave of civil rights activism that swept the country as a nationwide racial crisis. Where once newscasters had focused on the respectability of individual African American citizens against a backdrop of segregationist violence, in the wake of Birmingham they highlighted potential Black violence in the face of continuing injustice. Through covering the civil rights revolution, the television networks found a method to emphasise their value as purveyors of news, and therefore maximised the airtime they devoted to reporting on the topic. America's transformation in how it thought about race in 1963 therefore makes sense given that television news dramatically changed how it covered the topic in this period.

Part one of the following chapter considers *Eyewitness*, CBS's half-hour news show which purported to bring viewers a probing, close-up look at a major news story each week.[306] A close reading of how the programme framed the race issue in its episodes before, during, and after Birmingham traces how on-the-ground conceptions of this breaking news story changed in real-time, over the course of the year. This section also explores the strengths and weaknesses of the media strategies of leading civil rights organisations, revealing the limitations on their ability to influence the story that television news told. Furthermore, it shows how closely television coverage aligned with the messaging about civil rights broadcast by the Kennedy administration, even as it reveals that the 'television president' did not have total control of the airwaves.

Alongside weekly news programming, all three networks dedicated in-depth special coverage to the topic. The second part of this chapter concentrates on one such example – *The American Revolution of '63* – a landmark documentary special produced by the NBC News department. It explores how NBC positioned the documentary as a weapon in the network battle for prestige

[306] 'CBS News Eyewitness Program Promotion Announcements', 1961, b.2K117, CBSENA.

using its exploration of the civil rights issue as evidence of NBC's commitment to public service and the necessity of television news. The chapter concludes by detailing how the narratives of a multifaceted racial revolution, national in scope, with varied goals, and poised on a knife-edge between moderate and militant leadership, crystallised to determine the story of race in America in 1963 and beyond.

PART ONE

Eyewitness

Section One

The Color Line on Campus: 'That slow and painful thing called desegregation crawls on'

The opening credits of *Eyewitness*, began with a white line that slowly drew itself into a large ring filling the screen. This ring would then shrink and rise bringing with it the show's title and revealing the circle to be the dot of *Eyewitness's* 'I'. The graphics department overlaid their introductory animation on a moving background: film that introduced the topic of the episode. When they were lucky, Wendell Hoffman, Herb Schwartz, or Dick Perez, the unit's cameramen would provide the graphics department with a piece of footage offering a perfect focal point for their self-drawing circle, allowing it to isolate a particular element of the scene. *The Color Line on Campus* proved to be one of those fortuitous episodes. Viewers who tuned in at 10.30PM on 25 January 1963 watched the *Eyewitness* circle draw itself around the face of James Meredith, the first African American student at the University of Mississippi, isolating him as he walked down the steps of a university building and past the camera.[307]

[307] *Eyewitness: The Color Line on Campus*, [television programme] CBS, 25 January 1963. MRC Vault, Media Resources Center, University of California, Berkeley, CA. This programme was originally viewed onsite at the UC Berkeley archive in 2017. Later a copy became available on a youtube account hosted by 'Hezakaya Newz' which the author downloaded and has in personal possession. The Hezakaya Newz online copy has since been removed. All further references to *The Color Line on Campus* refer to this programme.

Eyewitness had chosen Meredith's impending decision on whether to withdraw from the university he had desegregated as the headline news story to report that week. Isolation was the theme that the episode decided had defined his experience of integrated college life. Walter Cronkite, the episode anchor, introduced Meredith as 'a solitary student on a campus overflowing with school spirit' as the main body of the report began. He highlighted that: 'He walks alone, lives alone, with rare exception eats alone at a table apart from his fellow students at the college cafeteria.' The previous year, President John Kennedy had mobilised federal troops to quell the riots that erupted at the Oxford campus when Meredith, a 29-year-old air force veteran, enrolled at Ole Miss.[308] White students could be forced to accept integration, but they couldn't be impelled to like it.

At the start of 1963, CBS News viewed desegregation as the biggest story about racial inequality in America. But they framed the story as only concerning the South. *Eyewitness* used Meredith's decision as an opportunity to explore how previously all-white Southern university campuses were responding to their first African American students. In presenting these stories, the *Eyewitness* team used the same approach reporters had used since the 1950s: covering James Meredith at Ole Miss, Harvey Gantt at Clemson College, and Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Homes at the University of Georgia as if they were the same as any white subject of a story. The documentary largely did not focus on race, rather it framed these pioneers as respectable, worthy students who were just like their white peers.[309] At the same time, it highlighted the irrationality of the frosty welcome the rest of the student body gave them. Despite these difficulties, *The*

[308] The Attorney General, Bobby Kennedy, had been forced to keep three hundred soldiers on the campus to protect the undergraduate, who by the time of the *Eyewitness* broadcast a year later still had federal body guards. Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought To Be:The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama*, (Cambridge, 2010), p.292.

[309] For an in-depth discussion of how television news utilised the framing of 'worthy Black victims' in the *Color Line on Campus* and other programming, see: Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time:* pp.4,46-51.

Color Line on Campus emphasised the inevitability of desegregation. Mandated by the Supreme Court and supported by a federal government willing to throw its full weight behind enforcement of the law, these news stories argued that the South would align with the North through legal mandates the country would achieve racial equality. Ultimately, as Walter Cronkite summed up cheerily in his concluding remarks to the show, 'that slow and painful thing called desegregation crawls on.'

The Color Line on Campus provided a snapshot of how television news conceived of the story about equal rights in America in January of 1963. The *Eyewitness* episode explored the crumbling of the colour line at America's colleges as the most important news that January week. Yet what is striking to viewers watching the broadcast today, armed with the knowledge of what was to come, is that newsmen did not frame desegregation as part of a struggle for Black equality. This story covered how individual universities and states were responding to the imperative to integrate decreed by the Supreme Court. The programme made no mention of civil rights, the leading activist organisations, or their leaders. In fact, the only time *Eyewitness* mentioned activism was to distance its protagonists from the NAACP, emphasising that their intentions to integrate were personal and not political.[310] This brief mention of the NAACP was as close as the programme came to recognising that an organised fight for African American freedom existed.

White Southern resistance to integration, *Eyewitness* made clear, would not automatically disappear once colleges had desegregated. The programme highlighted how the pioneering African American students may have desegregated the university, but white students did not welcome them into the student body. *Eyewitness* drew out the trials and tribulations that each of

[310] Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, p.57.

these African American pioneers had faced in desegregating their respective colleges to emphasise the white student resistance to their presence. Cameras focussed on James Meredith's ten-year-old Cadillac which bore the scars of recent harassment. The dramatic smashed window provided visual evidence of the violence the camera crew had not been there to capture. Correspondent Lew Wood's line of questioning similarly revealed an intention to highlight the difficulties Hamilton Holmes experienced. 'How rough has life been for you at the University of Georgia since you arrived?' the reporter asked Holmes. Not content with just the problem of loneliness, a few minutes later the correspondent then reiterated a more specific invitation to provide evidence of harassment: 'What incidents or problems have taken place in the past year and a half?' he asked. This time Holmes took the bait and the broadcast devoted a full five minutes to his recounting of an altercation with a group of fraternity boys who had blocked in his car. Once again, *Eyewitness* emphasised how white Southern students were not an enthusiastic welcome party to their new African American classmates.

CBS made a case implicitly to the programme's viewers about the irrationality of the white students' segregationist defiance. The programme did so by emphasising the respectability of its African American protagonists to invoke arguments for their inclusion in a white space. In the way they dressed and the values they held, these exemplary African Americans all fit into an ideological framework familiar to middle-class white America. By emphasising the respectability of the African American students whose stories it told, *Eyewitness* made a claim for their right to attend the nation's white universities. In doing so, the documentary followed what Aniko Bodroghkozy has highlighted as television news' tendency to focus on worthy Black victims, the version of Black America white viewers would feel most comfortable inviting into their living rooms.[311]

[311] Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time,* pp.4,46-51.

Eyewitness made visual arguments for respectability through the choice of location in which the team filmed interviews with each subject of the story. Reminiscent of the interviews with Emmett Till's family members, the programme presented viewers with interviews conducted in respectable domestic settings. Correspondent Dan Rather, for example, brought viewers into the Jackson, Mississippi home where Meredith joined his family on the weekends. The interview segment of the broadcast showed the Ole Miss student seated on his living room sofa, with his pretty, well made-up wife next to him and their adorable dungaree-clad three-year old son propped up on her lap. For good measure, the opening shot showed a few pre-interview seconds of Rather playing with Meredith's son before the questions began. This Black family with their middle-class manners and their well-kept living room were a veritable mirror image of the white families across the country who might be watching the broadcast from very similar living rooms. Similarly, the *Eyewitness* team was able to portray a portrait of respectability in staging their interview of Harvey Gantt. Although the 20-year-old could not provide the ideal props of picture-perfect wife and progeny, he could boast a living room with a regal Edwardian couch, upon which he and correspondent Hughes Rudd sat for their conversation. Such an item of furniture, with its elegantly rolling wooden arms, was a clear marker of middle-class good taste. Placing the extremely polite, diffident, and well-spoken Gantt, with his hesitant but winning smile, in such respectable surroundings, once again made an implicit argument for his inclusion in white campus life and white society.

Ultimately, *Eyewitness* crafted a tale of progress. Walter Cronkite concluded the final segment of the broadcast by emphasising that 'since that incident last year, Hamilton Holmes hasn't had any trouble, and since he and Miss Hunter were enrolled two years ago, six more Negro students have been admitted to the University of Georgia without trouble.' This observation mirrored the sentiment with which the correspondent had introduced the segment. He had highlighted

that, although the university's reluctant admittance of the two students had been met with an explosion of serious demonstrations, two years down the line the situation had improved. Charlayne Hunter, Cronkite told viewers, 'at first had rocks thrown at her dormitory window, but things are much different now.' There followed an interview where the young journalism student told viewers how she had developed some fairly strong friendships and could now move freely about the campus without fear of being stopped by an agitator. Progress had been made.

Desegregation, the broadcast argued implicitly, was inevitable. Despite the initial resistance, eventually white supremacist attitudes, which were inherently irrational, would fall away in the wake of legal change – especially given the Kennedys' willingness to throw the full weight of the federal government behind enforcing the court order. As a result of the administration's support of the desegregation ruling, the programme implied, the recalcitrance of the South would eventually erode, and the States of the Old Confederacy would be brought in line with the national perspective on integration. 'I think the most important lesson is that Mississippi with all of its governmental resources cannot resist successfully the will and the power of the federal government' the programme showed Ole Miss. Chancellor, Dr. John D. Williams, acquiescing. The broadcast portrayed Clemson college as following the same pattern. Cronkite underlined the march of history towards progress by highlighting that 'the Clemson campus was once a plantation owned by the great exponent of states' rights, John C. Calhoun.' The college had put up a legal fight against the federal government to keep its campus lilywhite but eventually the outgoing governor had to give up, declaring: 'We have run out of Courts'. The new governor, according to Cronkite, was now preparing to accept the Federal orders.

Eyewitness made clear that the president and his federal government fully supported James Meredith and had been willing to exert the might of its influence to protect him. Yet Kennedy's rhetoric in January of 1963 revolved not around support for the struggle of African Americans

to achieve true freedom and equality, but for the necessity to obey the law of the land. At the press conference *Eyewitness* excerpted, Kennedy framed the issue at this stage as one of law, not morality:

> If the United States government had failed to exert its influence to protect Mr. Meredith…that would have been far more expensive…This country, of course, cannot survive if the United States Government and the Executive branch does not carry out the decisions of the court…. So, there's no question in my mind that the United States Government had to take the action that it did.

The narrative on equal rights that *Eyewitness* put forward in *The Color Line on Campus*, was in line with that of the Kennedy government. This story was not about a civil rights movement, but about how desegregation was playing out across the South: slowly, painfully, but inexorably, brought about by legal change. White America had nothing to fear from individual respectable African American students, who were just like them. Yet in just a few short months television news would dramatically alter the narrative it presented about America's race relations, a change brought on by events that took place in Birmingham, Alabama.

Section Two

Breakthrough in Birmingham: 'Whichever way things go, Birmingham will have been a turning point.'

'Big Ed' had a thing for words. Known on his birth certificate as Edward T. Clayton, the Public Relations Director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from 1963-1965 was a veteran print journalist. His career took him on a tour of the Black Press, from Editor in Chief of *Jet* to the top jobs at *Ebony*, *Tan*, and *Negro Digest,* via the features pages of both the Louisville and Chicago Defenders. 'He reeked of printer's ink' remembered Clayton's friend and colleague

Alfred Duckett, Director of the *Associated Negro Press*.[312] The SCLC's PR man believed in the printed word.

Yet this lifelong devotee to the print press argued that the key to remoulding attitudes towards African Americans and their status in America lay in television. 'Unquestionably,' the SCLC Public Relations Director wrote in a February 1965 special feature for the *ANP*, 'the television cameras of the various networks have been responsible, in a large measure, for communicating more completely the grievances of the civil rights movement and the harsh brutalities against it by hate-crazed sheriffs and policemen.' He could find no better example of television's impact than Birmingham, Alabama, in the summer of 1963. 'A case in point' Clayton told his readers:

> Here, had it not been for the extensive and excellent coverage of those massive demonstrations by television crews in the field, who were on hand to record on film the unbelievable scenes of snapping dogs attacking children and the fury of high-pressure firemen's hoses turned against peaceful demonstrators, there might not have been an aroused public conscience.[313]

Clayton's words encapsulate the police-dogs and firehose narrative of television news' role in the civil rights movement: that television exposed white racist violence enacted upon evidently blameless Black victims to a national audience.

In his celebration of television's impact, Clayton went on to describe how the new medium transcended 'the whim and prejudices' that print editors and the reporters on their staff could deploy in the selectivity of photos and slanting of stories. 'Not so with the television camera,' he argued. 'It recorded what it saw, and was re-played on the screen for all to see in its complete drama of hate and viciousness.'[314] Clayton's assertion of television's immunity to bias rested on

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[312] Alfred Duckett, 'Tribute to 'Big Ed', *NYAN,* 24 September 1966, p.7.
[313] Ed Clayton, 'Television May Be Salvation of Negro History and Lost Heritage', *ANPI*, 10 February 1965, b.118, SCLCP.
[314] Clayton, 'Television May Be Salvation of Negro History'.

the belief that film footage removed the layer of interpretation necessary for print journalists to describe events to their readers in words. His claim suggested that moving image and sound provided the full context of an event, which the single snapshot of a photograph could not.

Yet, television did not see and record for itself. It did not document without bias. The story television news told was just as much a product of the whim and prejudices of the industry's own editors, and reporters requiring just as much selection and interpretation. The footage of Birmingham arrived on American screens within a well-crafted editorial framework. Rarely, however, have scholars studied closely the actual film or the context of its broadcast.

This section will provide a close reading of CBS News *Eyewitness: Breakthrough in Birmingham*, the 10 May report that relayed and explained the week's climactic events to America's Friday night prime-time audience. It will reveal how CBS News, through narrative and editorial decisions, contributed to the framing of a dramatic morality play between good and evil. Next, this chapter will use this moment to compare and contrast the media strategies of the Southern movement's leading organisations the SCLC and SNCC. Finally, this section will argue that the police attacks on peaceful protestors were only one element of the way television coverage conceptualised Birmingham. *Eyewitness* positioned the events of that week as a flashpoint of change in the country's racial story, ushering in a new era of racial crisis. Gone was the narrative of how individual Southern colleges and communities were slowly accepting the court ruling to desegregate. Television news now recognised resistance on the part of African Americans and introduced the frame of future Black retaliatory violence. Although the broadcast showed the peaceful demonstrations of the SCLC, its focus was on the perceived threat of Black America rejecting moderation for militancy.

Victims and Villains

In its coverage of the demonstrations in Birmingham, in the first part of the half-hour programme *Eyewitness: Breakthrough in Birmingham*, CBS News contributed to the construction of a narrative of good peaceful demonstrators versus evil segregationists. As Martin Luther King Jr. argued in his 1964 treatise, *Why We Can't Wait*, nonviolent protest 'dramaticized [sic] the essential meaning of the conflict and, in magnified strokes, made clear who was the evildoer and who was the undeserving victim.'[315] The establishing footage for the broadcast that *Eyewitness*' film editors Kenneth Dalglish, Jerome McCarty, David McCruden, and Joseph Rogers chose to play behind the title sequence made a visual argument for casting the villains and the victims of the story. An introductory shot of well-dressed African Americans moving peacefully along the street as a police officer watched them, quickly cut to an extreme close-up of a hand gripping a baton next to a uniformed leg. The shot lingered, following the hand as the anonymous legs of the police officer it belonged took a few pacing steps and the circle of *Eyewitness*'s logo drew itself around the baton, as if to emphasise it to the viewer. Throughout the coverage of Birmingham, CBS's cameras would seek out and highlight close-ups of law enforcement weaponry. Through this visual strategy, the programme anonymised and dehumanised segregationist police-officers, rhetorically eliding them into the incontrovertible symbols of violence they carried. Although this introductory clip showed no action, the menacing potential for violence was clear; the viewer left to consider the possible damage that a billy club might inflict upon the person the pacing policeman chose to use it on.

The next frame made a clear suggestion of who that victim might be. The camera returned to the procession of African Americans focusing on two Black children: a boy and a girl. The black and white grade of the cameras rendered their shirt and dress respectively in a dazzling white –

[315] Martin Luther King Jr. *Why We Can't Wait*, (New York, 1964) pp.39-40., Linda Childers Hon, '"To Redeem the Soul of America": Public Relations and the Civil Rights Movement', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9:3 (1997), p.177.

a cultural marker of innocence and purity. Rhetorically the juxtaposition of menacing law enforcement weaponry and innocent children made a clear case for who was on the side of the angels and primed viewers how to interpret the scenes to come in the episode.

Moreover, by the time viewers watched *Breakthrough in Birmingham* on 10 May, most would have known how Birmingham police officers had attacked civil rights demonstrators. Those who had missed the previous Friday's evening news, the day when Bull Connor had directed the local police and fire departments to use force to halt the Children's crusade demonstrations, may well have seen the front page of the *New York Times* the following morning. The newspaper displayed *Associated Press* photographer, Bill Hudson's infamous image of a white police officer gripping the cardigan of a young Black man as the officer's dog lunged at him.[316] During the next few days, the city's law enforcement's attacks on demonstrators continued to make the news. The footage in the title sequence built upon a narrative that already existed in the public sphere. The menacing billy club represented the white supremacist violence that viewers knew was coming. The white-clad children, although perhaps not the actual individuals who were attacked, nevertheless became stand-ins for those who were, transferring onto them the pathos of a sympathetic victim.

In the opening segment of the episode, *Eyewitness* showcased Bull Connor's city servicemen's escalating attempts 'to be nice.' After footage of policemen and their dogs attacking unarmed African Americans, they showed firemen using high-power firehoses on the peaceful protestors in Kelly Ingram park. Aside from a brief introduction explaining that the footage was filmed the previous Saturday near the 16th Street Baptist church, for a full minute and ten seconds *Eyewitness* producers let the relentless barks of police-dogs and screams in the distance provide the only

[316] Bill Hudson, *Associated Press* Wire Photo, *NYT*, 4 May 1963, p.1.

soundtrack. The montage showed clip after clip of African Americans being knocked off their feet by the force of the firehose jets the firemen aimed directly at them. The cumulative effect of the segment on Kelly Ingram Park highlighted for the viewer how the force used by Birmingham's white segregationists to halt a peaceful protest was both unwarranted and unrelenting.

In this first introductory section on the events in Birmingham, CBS News cameras recorded the 'drama of hate and viciousness' and brought to television screens 'for all to see' as Ed Clayton would argue in the pages of the *ANP* two years later.[317] Yet the team behind *Eyewitness* directed the viewer where to look, how often, and how long. Repeated focus on officer's batons and their snapping Alsatians, symbols of violence, cemented the association of the Birmingham police force with brutality. The extended screening of the firehose footage hammered home the lack of mercy shown by the men under Connor's command.

This first part of the broadcast aligned with the publicity goals of the SCLC. Clayton described television as 'a stout ally in the front ranks of the civil rights movement,' an assessment that had been gaining traction in public discourse. In the same year, 1965, at a journalism conference, chief of NBC's Washington news bureau, William B. Monroe Jr., pronounced in a quote that would ring out from future television histories, 'Negroes are the architects, bricklayers, carpenters, and welders of this revolution. Television is their chosen instrument.'[318] However, a closer look at the media strategies of movement organisations in comparison to one another helps to illuminate the contingency of the relationship between television news and activists in the African American freedom struggle.

[317] Clayton, 'Television May Be Salvation of Negro History'
[318] William B. Monroe Jr., 'Television the Chosen instrument of the Revolution' in Fisher and Lowenstein, *Race and the News Media*, p.84.

The Media Strategies of SNCC and the SCLC

While television clearly played an important role, it was neither unbiased instrument nor unconditional ally. SNCC developed a sophisticated communications system aimed at getting information about the struggle to national news outlets and convincing journalists and their editors it was newsworthy. The SCLC on the other hand, had media savvy leaders who designed newsworthy demonstrations. Publicity was crucial to civil rights organisers, but television was never a weapon in their power to wield. Civil rights activity had to align with the demands of the medium and the industry if it was to win exposure, and activists never had full control over how and how much of their message newscasters relayed to the national audience.

In the early years of the 1960s SNCC held that the national news media, as a means to achieve national publicity, was essential to the project of Black liberation. Recalling in her autobiography the reasoning behind this belief, SNCC member Mary King explained:

> Without exposure and mobilised public opinion, there was no point to the struggle. The sacrifice would be lost to oblivion. News media were therefore essential, for how else would the American people, including many white Southerners, know about the machinery of injustice that tyrannised blacks in the South?...The civil rights movement could not succeed without significant coverage by the national news corps.[319]

Regarding the national media as the key to raising crucial public awareness, SNCC focused on ensuring that information about the fight against white supremacy on the frontlines of their grassroots movement in the South reached the desks of national reporters.

To achieve this goal, the organisation developed a dedicated and sophisticated communications department, helmed by communications director Julian Bond.[320] With the assistance of first

[319] King, *Freedom Song*, p.213.
[320] For more on the SNCC communications department see: and Leigh Raiford, "Come Let Us Build a New World Together': SNCC and Photography of the Civil Rights Movement', *American Quarterly*, 59/4 (2007),

Dorothy Miller and then Mary King, Bond engineered and ran a sophisticated system to gather news of the organisations activities, as well as incidents of injustices African Americans experienced and dispatch it to the news media. According to a 1964 memo to all SNCC field staff entitled 'EFFICIENT PRESS SYSTEM,' the communications department instructed organisers in the field that each action group should have a press coordinator, whose sole job was to work with the local and national press. In consultation, the press coordinator and field secretary would decide who would be in contact with headquarters via the Wide Area Telephone Service (WATS) lines SNCC paid for.[321] The Atlanta office demanded that activists on the scene keep the office informed on an up-to-the minute basis. They would then forward the reports pouring in across the country on to what Mary King described as a trellis of press contacts whose telephone numbers they kept on a constantly updated 'hot list.'[322]

As Mary King remembered in her memoir, placing news stories involved more than simply issuing releases to the press. SNCC communications workers had to gain and then maintain credibility with the journalists with whom they worked. Bond, Miller, and King remained cautious, deliberate, and thorough, meticulously checking all information and often deliberately minimising reports to ensure they were unemotional and believable.[323] The instructions for field staff about communication within the SNCC papers corroborates this sophisticated understanding of what the national news media would require for a story, and the rigorous demands the communications department made of workers in the field to achieve them. Phone report instructions impelled staffers to have accurate, extensive, and exact information ahead of

pp.1129-1157. And Mark Walmsley, 'Tell It Like it Isn't: SNCC and the Media, 1960-1965,' *Journal of American Studies*, 48 (2014), pp.291-308,

[321] Memo to All SNCC Field Staff (n.d.), b.36, f. 'Staff memos' SNCCP. Letter from Julian Bond to Steve Bingham (n.d.) b.24, f. 'Correspondence, n.d.', SNCCP.
[322] King, *Freedom Song,* p.222.
[323] Ibid., p.233.

time and written down, including the what, to whom, where, when, and why of an incident, with specific details and correct spellings.[324]

The instructions also ordered staffers not to go by hearsay but to run down specific quotes from named sources of information. Similarly, detailed directions on how to write a press release revealed the department's acute understanding of news imperatives. For example, explaining that the first paragraph of a release should sum up the topic, 'but the nature of news copy requires that it be attributed to a source' and that when quoting or mentioning anyone by name to 'give his age, race, home, organisational status.'[325] By ensuring their information was up to the journalistic requirements of the news industry, the SNCC communications department gave themselves the best chance of getting national press coverage of the arrests, beatings, firebombings, and economic reprisals against local movements in the South.[326]

Despite all of the communications department's efforts, they could not guarantee the interest of the national press corps. According to Julian Bond, 'the challenge' for the communications department was 'to get these journalists interested in it', not only through cultivating contacts but by convincing national reporters, and in turn their editors, that '[t]his is something hot.'[327] For television news in the early 1960s, the communications department had to make the networks feel they had something hot enough to warrant precious time on an evening newscast, which lasted only 12 minutes. [328]

[324] Press Release exemplar (No title, n.d, 1964), b.21, f. 'SNCC Communications', SNCCP.
[325] Instructions on writing a press release (No title, n.d.), b.21, f. 'SNCC Communications', SNCCP.
[326] King, *Freedom Song*, p.222.
[327] Communications Department, SNCC Digital Gateway, *https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/sncc-national-office/communications/* (28 January 2022).
[328] The 15 minute slot for the evening news included three minutes of time devoted to airing commercials.

The SNCC communications department did have success in getting their stories into the national press in the early 1960s. Yet the minimal coverage of the organisation's activities on television news in 1963 suggested the difficulties they had in convincing white television news that Black grassroots organising against injustice would make for good TV. During the course of their efforts to draw attention to the 1963 Mississippi Freedom Ballot – a mock election designed to demonstrate that Black citizens wanted to vote – King and Bond began to understand the implicit racial bias of national reporters. White news organisations, the SNCC communications department learned, were only interested when white volunteers were involved. 'I realised with a sinking feeling of finality how permeated by racism the country was,' King remembered, '[i]t was much easier for the Friends of SNCC groups outside the South to badger their local wire-service outlet in the hometown of a person who was white.'[329] Alongside the racial bias that informed reporters' news judgements, news media which dealt best with incidents, events, and leader figures, could not and would not communicate the story of a process.[330] The visual medium of television relied on dramatic footage to tell a singular story of individuals rather than an ongoing story of organisations. As a result, King argued to SNCC's chairman, 'the American press…. has managed mainly to distort our message all along, and will continue to do so.'[331] SNCC realised that the national media was not and never would be a stout ally.

The SCLC on the other hand, had a wholly different approach to its media relations. Where SNCC had a sophisticated communications department, the SCLC had a public relations operation which in 1963 was a shambles. Ed Clayton described the department when he took on the role in the winter of 1963 as 'in a state of disarray and chaos.'[332] SCLC public relations

[329] King, *Freedom Song*, p.240.
[330] Ibid., p.247., Letter from Mary King to John Lewis, 10 January 1965, b.2, f. 'Lewis – King, Mary', SNCCP.
[331] Letter from King to Lewis
[332] Public Relations Dept. Report, April 16-17 1964, b.119, SCLCP

had been without a director since James R. Wood had vacated the position over a year previously. Wood had been Wyatt Tee Walker's administrative assistant at the Petersburg Improvement Association and joined the SCLC with Walker in 1960.[333] The move saw Wood promoted to assisting Martin Luther King Jr.'s administration at the same time as taking on the title of public relations director. However, after embroiling himself in some unfortunate internal politics, Wood left the job abruptly in the February of 1962 at Walker's behest.[334] The public relations department, far from the powerhouse driving the SCLC, was rather an overlooked element of the organisation where the roles were ill-defined, responsibilities had lapsed and the employees were reluctant.

Unlike SNCC, any media attention the SCLC garnered in 1963 was not the result of the efforts of a sophisticated and well-run department that institutionalised an understanding of news production. Instead, it was due to a learned appreciation of the exigencies of the media in general and the television news industry in particular on the part of SCLC leaders. Few would contest that the organisation's telegenic president had a keen sense of the power of publicity and how to garner it.[335] Martin Luther King Jr. was also aware of the need to navigate those who controlled the spotlight. As CBS reporter Dan Rather noted in his autobiography, when King detected a newsman who might have been more foe than friend, the SCLC leader did his utmost to avoid that person's crew and in their presence never took his eye off that individual.[336] Moreover, he recognised that making the time to develop working relationship with others who had the potential to be helpful, like Rather himself, paid dividends in helping King hone his

[333] Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill, 1997) pp.37-38.
[334] Clayborne Carson (ed) *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., Volume VII: To Save the Soul of America*, January 1961-August 1962. (California, 2014), p.263.
[335] Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America,* p.28., Torres, *Black, White and In Color*, p.29., Donovan and Scherer, *Unsilent Revolution,* p.15.
[336] Dan Rather with Mickey Herskowitz, *The Camera Never Blinks: Adventures of a TV Journalist*, (New York, 1977), p.98.

understanding of the television business. If a high-profile speech he made didn't make the Evening News for example, King was able to call Rather and find out why.[337]

King was not the only civil rights leader who learned how to use television to the movement's advantage. By the time of the Birmingham campaign, a number of the leading lights of the SCLC had first-hand experience with the new electronic medium. Andrew Young, for example, recognising the power of television 'to shape images and ideas,' became involved in the development of television programming at his previous organisation, the National Council of Churches.[338] Working on *Look Up and Live,* a series co-sponsored by the NCC and CBS, Young got to know men like Al Cox and Prentiss Childs who would carry on working at the network and become useful contacts for developing the SCLC's relationship with news crews.[339] As Young remembered, Cox's recommendations that colleagues at CBS and other news departments look him up when they went to Alabama gave the young civil rights activist credibility with news crews 'who didn't have a lot of experience covering blacks.'[340] Relationships between the civil rights movement and television newsmen played a crucial part in getting the story onto the nation's screens.

Aside from future contacts in the TV News business, his time both in front of and behind the camera producing *Look Up and Live* also introduced Young to the demanding requirements of successfully communicating via television. Here he learned that the medium required, above all else, clarity and concision to get a message across to an audience. He would teach this invaluable lesson to the SCLC campaign in Birmingham. Aware that in 1963 advertisers were willing to pay

337 Rather, *Camera Never Blinks*, p.104.
338 Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America*, (New York, 1996) p.111.
339 Letter from Prentiss Childs (Co-Producer of *Face the Nation*) to Ed Clayton, 13 May 1964, b.118, SCLCP, Young, *An Easy Burden*, p.111.
340 Young, *An Easy Burden*, P225.

a hundred thousand dollars for one minute of the American public's attention that prime-time television would grant them, Young knew that every second of exposure on the Evening News was precious. Moreover, he understood that their time in front of the court of world opinion was usually limited to just the few minutes network news would give an individual story. According to Young, the organisers 'had to craft a concise and dramatic message that could be explained in just sixty seconds. That was our media strategy,' he remembered in his autobiography.[341] Young's appreciation of how to adapt the SCLC's organising to meet the demands of television became crucial in the Birmingham campaign.[342]

Wyatt Tee Walker was the SCLC member tasked with the primary responsibility of dealing with the press. In the wake of an NBC report on the unfolding desegregation drama in Georgia, where Chet Huntley had denounced the NAACP as an extremist organisation, the show's anchor provided airtime for the organisation to defend itself. As Bodroghkozy has pointed out, where most African American viewers and civil rights supporters excoriated Huntley, Walker saw an opportunity to foster goodwill at the nation's leading network. Reaching out to the NBC anchor, he commended both Huntley and the network for providing rebuttal time and the 'fair presentation with equal time for both sides of the coin.'[343] Walker recognised that it would be wise to get on the good side of a man who had both the ears and the eyes of the nation.

Four years later, Walker, who had become King's right-hand man as executive director of the SCLC and a key strategist of its campaigns, had continued to cultivate his good relationship with the press. In the daily 9AM briefings he held during the Birmingham campaign, he gave background to planned demonstrations for the day, answered questions and explained SCLC

[341] Young, *An Easy Burden*, P208, Lewis, 'Preaching, Praying and Strategic Media Planning', p.4.
[342] Torres, *Black, White, and In Color*, p.28.
[343] Quoted in Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, p.75.

reasoning.[344] He also recognised that the surest way to ensure time on television was to make life as easy as possible for the news teams covering the story. Although national television infrastructure had come a long way from the chaos of Little Rock in 1957, mobile satellite hook-ups had yet to become a reality. Walker therefore devised the demonstration schedule to ensure that any action would be over by noon and crews could send the physical film on the 2PM flight necessary to deliver it for processing in New York in time to make it onto the Evening News.[345]

As Mary King argued, '[w]ithout national exposure and mobilised public opinion, there was no point to the struggle.'[346] SNCC had a far more extensive and sophisticated communications operation than the SCLC, which institutionalised an understanding of how best to transmit information to the press. SNCC worked to convince the white news media to cover racism in the South and tried to persuade reporters that its grassroots organising was newsworthy. The SCLC, on the other hand, adopted the strategy of creating newsworthy events. Although the organisation's public relations department was a shambles, the innate appreciation of its leaders for the visual requisites of television and the close connection between public disruption and media coverage, helped them devise a strategy that ensured press attention.[347] Although the SCLC managed to get coverage for its demonstrations, including the Birmingham Children's Crusade, they could not dictate the way in which television newsmen chose to cover the story.

Moderation Vs. Militancy

The first segment of *Eyewitness: Breakthrough in Birmingham* helped construct the narrative of segregationist dog and fire-hose wielding villains versus nonviolent peacefully protesting African

[344] Young, *An Easy Burden*, p.207.
[345] Ibid., p.226.
[346] King, *Freedom Song*, p.213.
[347] Doug McAdam, 'Movement Strategy and Dramaturgic Framing in Democratic States: The Case of the Civil Rights Movement', in Simone Chambers and Anne N. Costain, (eds) *Deliberation, Democracy, and the Media* (Oxford, 2000), p.126.

American victims, but the programme did not stop there. Rather, CBS' exploration of the events at Birmingham introduced a new framework that would determine how future news reporters perceived America's turbulent race relations: the danger of Black violence.

Newscasters underscored the possible future threat of Black militancy throughout the remainder of the documentary. *Eyewitness* picked out a clip of Martin Luther King outlining his fears that if African Americans did not channel their legitimate discontent into creative nonviolence they would turn to Black nationalism. 'I think that the approach that we advocate is a healthy alternative to what I consider a dangerous development,' the programme showed him telling reporters. King's statement suggested a dichotomy between two philosophies of struggle. Yet CBS did not position the events in Birmingham as a preferable alternative to violent resistance. Rather, *Eyewitness* positioned the mass demonstrations on Alabama streets as a barometer of African American feeling, which seemed poised to break the banks of peaceful resistance and surge towards militancy.

Charles Collingwood framed the events of Tuesday, 7 May as evidence of African American tolerance straining against its limits and the potential chaos that could ensue, were that particular dam to burst. Over footage of an armoured military vehicle moving through a road thronged on either side by African Americans, followed by the jet of a firehose surging into the crowd, Collingwood described how 'the Negroes gave vivid evidence that they would no longer accept the patterns of the last hundred years.' This time, unlike in the earlier segment, his narration made no comment about the segregationist police force's violent suppression tactics. Despite no clear evidence from the footage that the crowds on the street were doing anything aside from gathering, the narration focused attention on the African Americans in the frame and implied they would soon put their fury into practice.

In the next clip, *Eyewitness* again shifted focus from segregationist abuse to the threat of African American anger. The editors cut to a clip of firehoses once again slicing through crowds of Black Americans, this time on a packed street in the centre of the city. Interpreting the imagery to viewers, Collingwood did not highlight the violent use of firehoses against unarmed civilians, but repeated King's warning about African Americans turning to violence. 'The crowd surged into the downtown business district; they gave meaning to Dr. King's statement that the Negro is shedding himself of fear,' Collingwood explained. The programme then cut to footage of streams of Black townspeople running down the street as the narrator continued to relay King's words: 'and my real worry is how we will keep this fearlessness from rising to violent proportions.' By pairing his quoted statement about Black violence with film of white violence against African Americans, *Eyewitness* reshaped both the meaning of King's words and the significance of the footage. They showed African American Alabamians subjected to white brutality, yet *Eyewitness* used these images as evidence of dangerously bold Black resistance, rhetorically implying that these Black Americans were one step away from turning to violence. King warned about the possible alternative to peaceful protest, but the impression that *Eyewitness* suggested to its white viewers was that such violence was already becoming a reality.

In the final portion of the documentary, *Eyewitness* proved intent on highlighting the perceived shift towards potential African American violence throughout the country. 'There is speculation about a new Negro swing to increased militancy,' Collingwood warned viewers ominously as a segue from the increasingly bold resistance in Birmingham to a look at rising African American anger in the rest of the country. CBS then showed footage of African American congressman Adam Clayton Powell vigorously addressing a Black crowd at Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington. Collingwood's introduction framed Powell as a marker of the turn against whiteness: 'His critics have labelled him a demagogue and a racist,' the narrator informed viewers, 'but his audience liked what they heard.' Collingwood did not provide any counter

claims to the framing of Powell as an extremist, but instead let footage roll of Powell reaching the crescendo of an impassioned speech. To the roaring crowd he hollered:

> There's a new Negro today. And we got a new message. And there isn't anybody born going to be able to silence us…We're still going to keep on marching…let the drums roll, peal the bells, let the trumpets blare, there's a new negro now and he says come join me but if you won't, get out of my way because I'm coming through.

Powell's words in fact bore no mention of anything more aggressive than marching. However, introducing the idea of the congressman as a demagogue and a racist, having already mentioned 'a new Negro swing to militancy', transformed the footage of his fervent speech to cheering followers into a suggestion of impending revolt. Collingwood's connection of the concept of the 'new Negro' to militancy linked the congressman's use of the phrase to the threat of violence.

Eyewitness continued upon the theme of a shift towards Black aggression in the line of questioning it presented to the two interviewees that rounded out the end of the documentary. First, Robert Schakne questioned James Baldwin about the potential for African American violence. Then cameras took viewers to the lawns of Howard University, where correspondent George Herman interviewed a white Harvard sociologist about the apparent shift in America's Black community. 'Is there such a thing as the new Negro in America?' Herman asked Dr. Thomas Pettigrew. 'Has the Negro community started to undergo some kind of fundamental change of attitude, perhaps towards some advanced degree of racial pride and militancy?' Herman's question collapsed the distinction between Black confidence and violence. It also showed CBS' preoccupation with the threat of African American militancy. The sociologist's reply did not do much to calm these fears. He argued that African Americans had not suddenly become angry, but had always hated whites who oppressed them, and that they were finally acting on that hate.

In his concluding remarks for the entire programme, anchor Charles Collingwood framed the events in Birmingham as a flashpoint of change: 'The events in Birmingham have sent a chill through most Americans,' Collingwood told viewers at home, 'it's as though most people black and white recognise what has happened as the beginning of a new chapter in the relations between Negro Americans and white Americans.' Civil rights leaders, shown earlier in the documentary, heralded the accord in Birmingham as a victory. Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights leader Fred Shuttlesworth portrayed it as 'an example of progressive race relations…A promise for all men, a day of opportunity and a new sense of freedom for all Americans.' Yet in the documentary's conclusion, CBS positioned the change not as a step towards equality but as a move towards a racial crisis: 'The truce in Birmingham, if indeed there is to be a durable truce in Birmingham, implies no truce in this new phase of racial conflict,' Collingwood opined to viewers at home.

> The Negro is no longer following moderate white leadership in his fight for equality. He's taken matters into his own hands. And even the more moderate leaders like Martin Luther King are being forced into more militant action which trembles, as it did in Birmingham, on the verge of something like racial war.

In the final words viewers were left with, *Eyewitness* framed Birmingham as a portent of impending doom given African Americans' embrace of violent militancy. Historian Mark Walmsley has argued that early media support of civil rights activism was not based on an unequivocal commitment to Black liberation but confined to reporters' perceptions of permissible protest.[348] Network news reporters diagnosed in increasingly bold resistance a risk of rousing Black violence, which breached notions of acceptable dissent.[349]

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[348] Walmsley, "'First Draft of History'", p.231.

[349] For a consideration of the role that Black violence – both actual and potential – played in the freedom struggle and how the national press ignored or downplayed it in the late 1950s and early 1960s see Jenny Walker, 'A Media-Made Movement?: Black Violence and Nonviolence in the Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement' in Brian Ward (ed) *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Gainesville, 2001), pp.41-66. For more on the importance of armed self-defence in the Southern movement see Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville, 2007), Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York, 2013), Charles E. Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* (New York, 2014).

Eyewitness: Breakthrough in Birmingham marked a significant shift in how CBS News framed the issue of race relations in 1963. Previously, television newsmen had not spoken in terms of African American resistance to racial injustice, and they revealed no conception of a crisis. Their coverage in Birmingham ended the emphasis on respectable individual victims. While television news did report a dramatic morality play, where Bull Connor's forces used police-dogs and firehoses on African American peaceful protestors – a narrative which *Eyewitness* helped to frame as a story of victims and villains – this story was not the only one they told. Television newsmen did not laud Birmingham as a successful spectacle of nonviolent protest, but as a warning of imminent national racial war, brought on by a new African American militant impulse. This framing would continue in the months that followed.

Section Three

The President Faces the Racial Crisis: 'For the South, for the North, for the nation, this is the gravest domestic crisis since the depression.'

The themes that Birmingham introduced to television news coverage had crystallised in its aftermath. In the 14 June episode of *Eyewitness*, CBS News affirmed the narrative that the country had entered a state of racial crisis. *The President Faces the Racial Crisis* acknowledged that the problem of racism was not confined to the South. *Eyewitness* travelled beyond Dixie to detail how activists were fighting for equality in Northern cities, but once again reporters focused more on questioning the legitimacy of activist tactics, than exploring African American grievances. The programme also continued to apply a narrative of impending Black violence, warning Americans of the dangerous direction the future might take. Through these frames *Eyewitness* presented a story in line with that of the Kennedy administration. However, the programme did not present Kennedy's proposed civil rights programme as the solution to the problem,

highlighting how even the 'television president' did not have total control of the electronic news industry.

A National Crisis

Eyewitness: Breakthrough in Birmingham had positioned America as trembling 'on the verge of something like racial war'. A month later *Eyewitness* diagnosed a full-blown, national racial crisis. *The President Faces the Racial Crisis* opened with the nation's president uttering a line in his speech where he announced that America faced 'a moral crisis as a country and a people.'[350] The programme followed Kennedy's assessment of the situation with an introduction to the episode from host Roger Mudd, who did not hold back in declaring the magnitude and depth of the situation: 'For the South, for the North, for the nation, this is the gravest domestic crisis since the depression.' In the aftermath of Birmingham, newsmen would not return to respectable individuals at the centre of desegregation stories in the South as their dominant frame for reporting on the struggle for equal rights.

As evident in the title of the programme, *Eyewitness* chose to examine the racial crisis through the lens of Kennedy's reaction to it. Key to producing good television news broadcasting was the availability of powerful footage. The previous Friday, following his federalisation of the Alabama national guard to force Governor George C. Wallace to stand down from the schoolhouse door and allow African American students Vivian Malone and James Hood to register at the University of Alabama, Kennedy made a live televised address to the nation. The broadcast, in which the president asked Congress to enact legislation to protect civil rights, produced 14 minutes of the nation's, young, good-looking, and telegenic leader staring directly

[350] *Eyewitness: The President Faces the Racial Crisis*, [television programme] CBS, 14 June 1963. D. Television News Collection, MIRC, LOC. This programme was originally viewed onsite at the LOC MIRC in 2019. Later a copy became available on a youtube account hosted by 'Hezakaya Newz' which the author downloaded and has in personal possession. The Hezakaya Newz online copy has since been removed. Hereafter all references to *Breakthrough in Birmingham* relate to this programme.

into the camera lens as he appealed to the American public – in a powerful speech replete with soundbite gold – to fulfil its promise of freedom. *Eyewitness* made the most of this available footage, using Kennedy's words to open the programme and allowing the president to address the nation again several times throughout the documentary, by including multiple extended clips of the speech. 'We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American constitution,' American viewers heard once again in Kennedy's cool and commanding tones the rebroadcast helping to make such powerful lines iconic.

Commentators at the time, and scholars of politics and media ever since, have touted Kennedy's mastery of what he described to the National Association of Broadcasters in 1961 as 'the most powerful and effective means of communication ever designed.'[351] Through the study of taped copies of press interactions, and consultations with television professionals such as director Franklin Schaffner and producer Fred Coe, the glamorous young president practised his broadcast performance into a fine art.[352] Kennedy and his team also ensured that his well-crafted televisual image received maximum exposure during his presidency. The first administration to introduce live televised press conferences also frequently asked the networks for airtime to allow the president to speak directly to the American people. As press secretary Pierre Salinger's negotiations with the networks for his Friday 11 June address make clear, they did not automatically grant such appearances.[353] Robert Kintner, NBC's president told Salinger that 'formal requests from the White House to put them on air should be rare and generally reserved for major addresses when the President has an urgent message he wants to get to the people.' However, he assured the president's press secretary that his news department 'was always

[351] Quoted by Pierre Salinger in 'Pulse, Inc. Luncheon, New York' 18 October 1961, b.11, f. 'Speech Notes, 1961, 1963, 1964 and undated', PS. For the foundational study of Kennedy and Television see Mary Ann Watson, *The Expanding Vista: American Television in the Kennedy Years* (Oxford, 1990).
[352] Ron Simon, 'See How JFK Created a Presidency for the Television Age' *Time*, 29 May 2017 https://time.com/4795637/jfk-television/ (28 January 2022).
[353] News Conference Transcript 11 June 1953, 4:20PM, b.56, f.'Press Briefings June 4 – June 17, 1963. #1101-1120, PS.

anxious to cooperate'.[354] Rarely did the networks deny the president access to the airwaves when asked. The telegenic leader of the free world rarely made for bad TV.

Kennedy's live televised speech on civil rights supports television historian J. Fred MacDonald's assertion that the 35th president 'knew how to exploit the new medium to deliver the image of leadership.'[355] As movement scholars have shown, although the young Democratic candidate's electoral platform had been the most pro-civil rights in U.S. history, activists were frustrated that, by the start of 1963, the new president had not even come out in favour of the civil rights movement, let alone proposed legislation.[356] Birmingham, however, and the wave of protests in its wake made the issue too pressing to ignore and Kennedy used television to tell the nation he was doing something about it – ensuring that his words, ringing out through millions of television screens, spoke louder than his lack of action.

The strategy had some success. Presidential aide G. Mennen Williams, having called what he described as 'a good proportion of the Civil Rights leaders,' reported to Kennedy adviser and speechwriter, Theodore Sorenson, that he was impressed with 'the impact of sincerity and concern that the President's television statement had made' and 'the general recognition of action on the part of the administration.'[357] Through an urgent report to the American people, carried on all three networks, announcing the civil rights programme he was going to submit to Congress, the president could present himself to civil rights leaders and the wider American public as taking action long before his administration actually did anything to advance Black equality.

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[354] Letter from Robert E. Kintner to Pierre Salinger, 16 February 1961, b.170, f.'Radio/TV Policy – Presidential Press Conference, PS.
[355] J. Fred MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace: The Video Road to Vietnam* (New York, 1985), p.156.
[356] Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, p.290.
[357] Memorandum from G. Mennen Williams to Theodore Sorenson, 15 June 1963, b.53, RFKAGP

Moreover, Kennedy saw the valuable political potential television provided in allowing him to speak directly to the nation's citizenry inside their very homes. At the beginning of his presidency, ABC political commentator, Bill Shadel, in what proved to be a strikingly accurate prediction, described how the telegenic politician would utilise his command of the broadcast medium: 'I believe Kennedy has discovered he's a new TV idol. I have no doubts that he'll go on TV whenever he really wants something, such as a piece of legislation passed… He'll use television as FDR used radio, to get the people to go along with his policies.'[358] The networks, by providing the president with an opportunity to make his case for civil rights legislation via a medium he was uniquely suited to, no doubt helped the president gain public support for his civil rights programme.

There were, however, limits to Kennedy's ability to control the narrative on television news. Contemporary commentators – such as one critic who warned in *Variety* that JFK and the First lady were 'wrapping TV around their little finger' – and future scholars of America, have highlighted Kennedy's manipulation of the medium.[359] Yet, a close reading of *Eyewitness*' 14 June episode reveals that CBS News told a more ambiguous story than advocating wholesale support of the president's message. The episode made clear that the president's legislative plans were not a panacea and his appeal to America to reorder its relationship between white and Black citizens lacked an audience. Many who watched that *Eyewitness* episode may well have come away with the same conclusion that civil rights leaders had also made clear in their calls with presidential aide Williams: 'an intense feeling that much more had to be done.'[360]

The documentary's narrative suggested that Kennedy had acted too late. This charge was implicit in the wording of the title: 'The President Faces the Racial Crisis.' The choice of the verb 'faces'

[358] Quoted in MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace,* p.156.
[359] George Rosen, quoted in MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace*, P.157.
[360] Memorandum from G. Mennen Williams to Theodore Sorenson, 15 June 1963, b.53, RFKAGP

suggested a crisis that had already unfolded and that Kennedy was only now attempting to deal with it. In an interview with Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, Roger Mudd wondered on behalf of the nation's frustrated African Americans, 'Why did the president wait so long to make that major speech on Civil Rights?' The attorney general, deftly flipping the blame onto the public and implicitly the media, assured the correspondent that the president had been making civil rights statements since the beginning of the year, but that people hadn't been interested in the problem up until the last two months. Mudd's concluding remarks on the documentary, however, returned the onus of action back onto the president, suggesting that while John Kennedy was now stepping in to address the crisis, his previous silence implied he had hoped the matter would take care of itself.

Eyewitness also highlighted that Kennedy's speech had appealed to Americans on a personal basis, but through its structuring of the story, the documentary highlighted the limited impact of the president's words. In the introduction to the programme, Roger Mudd introduced how the president had asked America 'not only to change her laws but also to reorder the personal relationship between white and Negro citizens.' His next sentence, however, undermined the president's message: 'but even as he spoke, that relationship was strained and broken in countless communities across the nation.' Mudd then went on to detail incidents of racial injustice and conflagrations that had occurred across the country in the days following the speech. Despite providing the president's message more airtime, the documentary suggested how little both his administration and his televised address had achieved.

In its exploration of the racial crisis, *Eyewitness* explored the African American struggle for economic freedom in the North, yet the programme concerned itself more with sceptical interrogation of the tactics for fighting inequality, rather than an exploration of the causes and effects of that inequality. In introducing an interview with NAACP labour secretary Herbert Hill

at a demonstration for job equality at a Harlem construction site, Roger Mudd described how the NAACP was protesting what the correspondent described as 'alleged discrimination' in the building trade union. His next sentence then cast doubt on NAACP's strategy: 'but they threw their picket line around the site of the new Harlem hospital in the middle of New York's sprawling Negro slum.' The casual racism of Mudd's description of America's largest African American community aside, Mudd's presentation of the demonstration immediately called into question its legitimacy. His use of 'alleged' planted doubt about the reality of the discrimination and his description of the seemingly nonsensical location suggested incoherence in the organisation's strategy.

Throughout the documentary, even as *The President Faces the Racial Crisis* highlighted white brutality against African Americans, it questioned the nature of African American reaction and raised the spectre of Black violent retaliation. The documentary's first segment showcased positive African American reactions to the president's speech. It quoted Martin Luther King Jr.'s celebration of Kennedy's words as a 'masterpiece' and his opinion that the president's proposed legislative programme would 'bring the whole nation closer to the realisation of the American dream.' Yet *Eyewitness* made clear that in Roger Mudd's words, 'the approving voice of nonviolence wasn't the only voice.' CBS News cameras then took viewers to a Harlem street corner for a set of *vox pop* interviews, which highlighted that Martin Luther King did not speak for all of Black America. 'All these speeches and care don't mean nothing,' a fedora-donning African American man told a CBS microphone from behind a pair of dark sunglasses. His attitude towards responding to white brutality provided evidence for the documentary's message that African Americans were poised for violent retribution: 'The time has come when the white man takes a life you take two. Retaliation. That's how I feel. I don't listen to nothing no more but blood.' By juxtaposing Martin Luther King's praise of the president's speech with such interviews, the documentary made clear that the proponent of nonviolence did not reflect the

feeling on American streets. *Eyewitness* clearly favoured moderation but it continuously hinted at the danger of African American violence, as if worrying at a loose tooth.

In the final moment of the episode, Roger Mudd summarised the state of African American resistance:

> The Negro has abandoned legal respectability in the court room for civil disobedience in the streets. And the struggle to direct his march toward freedom is on. Whether that march remains generally peaceful or becomes violent, America has learned since Monday that its quiet century is over.

CBS News no longer portrayed an America undergoing a slow and painful desegregation of the South. It portrayed race relations in crisis across the country as a nationwide problem, one that was less about lawless white racism and more about the threat posed by potential Black violence. The pressing issue of the racial crisis proved a fertile topic for television news, which used coverage of this issue as a weapon in the networks' ongoing battle for prestige.

PART TWO

American Revolutions

In the Spring of 1964, *Broadcasting* magazine ran an article under the heading 'Minow finds something to praise about TV.'[361] The subtext of this sardonic title would not have been lost on the trade magazine's readers. Three years previously, Newton Minow in his first major address as head of the Federal Communications Commission had given an industry-shaking speech in which he denounced the electronic medium as a 'vast wasteland.' His indictment came at the height of 'The Big Debate' about the new technology: would television work as an enlightening force for cultural good? Or in catering to the lowest common denominator was it poisoning the nation on a diet of game shows, violence, and cartoons. Not one for under-exaggeration, the

[361] 'Minow Finds Something to Praise About TV', *Broadcasting*, 4 May 1964, p.70.

FCC head came down hard in the latter camp, declaring to the National Association of Broadcasters: 'When television is bad there is nothing worse.'[362] As an antidote to this sorry state of affairs, Minow's FCC urged television networks to increase news and public affairs programming.

Come 1964, Minow, although no longer at the FCC, was now more approving of the television landscape. The *Broadcasting* article reported his presentation of the American Jewish Committee's Institute of Jewish Relations award to NBC for its three-hour long prime-time special on the civil rights movement – *The American Revolution of '63*. Minow celebrated NBC's effort as 'an important stage in another revolution which essentially reflects television's growing recognition of its major responsibilities.' As television news conceived of Black America's struggle for equality as a revolution, commentators recognised a revolution within the broadcasting industry itself, in which news gained new prominence and news departments gained more power within the networks.

The American Revolution of '63 is one of the few civil rights broadcasts from this period that has garnered name recognition in general accounts of television and the fight for racial equality.[363] The documentary has even penetrated broader histories of the African American freedom struggle, for example making its way onto the pages of civil rights scholar Thomas Sugrue's sweeping account of Northern protest, *Sweet Land of Liberty*.[364] Yet as television historian David Greenberg has highlighted, in an article lamenting historians' neglect of television as a source,

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[362] Robert T. Bower, *Television and the Public*, (New York, 1973), p.101., Ponce de Leon, *That's the Way It Is,* p.44., Curtain, *Redeeming the Wasteland,* p.19.
[363] Watson, *Expanding Vista*, p.110., MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV*, Donovan and Scherer, *Unsilent Revolution*, p.17. Steven D. Classen's *Watching Jim Crow* considers briefly how the show's anchor Frank McGee equated civil rights with consumer rights and how NBC affiliate WLBT omitted parts of the special it deemed dangerous to white supremacy when it aired the documentary. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow*, pp.52-53. For an in-depth exploration of the documentary's framing of the freedom struggle see Gore, 'Civil Rights Television Documentaries', Chapter Four: 'Snags in the Almost Perfect Picture, pp.108-137.
[364] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, p.x Sugrue does argue that the documentary illustrated the national scope of the fight for racial equality. Cited in Gore, 'Civil Rights Television Documentaries', p.130.

Sugrue neither described the programme's content nor indicated whether he actually watched it.[365] Exploring exactly how television news offerings depicted the civil rights revolution, however, is critical to understanding how the nation came to understand the crisis it was undergoing.

The second part of this chapter reveals what those who watched *The American Revolution of '63* would have seen – that the conceptions about American race relations underpinning *Eyewitness: the President Faces the Racial Crisis* had taken over. NBC argued that the country was in the midst of a racial revolution as its Black citizens engaged in a fight for freedom, which upheld the nation's founding ideals. This struggle, the documentary illustrated, was both national in scope and varied in goals, as the South focused on the vote, while the North fought for equality in jobs and housing, and both struggled for desegregated education. Although the documentary allowed for a far more detailed analysis of how racism affected African American lives, the threat of Black militancy overwhelming moderate resistance loomed as its most urgent concern. This 1963 special, which NBC described as the 'definitive' exploration of the struggle, undercuts the historiographic truism that within popular culture nonviolent protest in the South defined the civil rights movement of the early 1960s.

To understand how NBC used *The American Revolution of '63*, the following section will begin by highlighting why the special managed to make such a permanent mark on history. The network embarked upon a massive advertising campaign publicising its civil rights programme. But it did so not to convince the American public to watch the documentary – many of the advertisements in fact came out after the special had already aired – rather, NBC positioned the prime-time special as a weapon in the network battle for prestige, using it as evidence of company's

[365] Greenberg, 'Do Historians Watch Enough TV?', p.185.

excellence and its lofty principles. In the struggle for African American freedom, the networks found the perfect story through which to demonstrate their commitment to public service programming, in an era when news departments were ascending to unprecedented levels of importance within the industry.

Section One

The Revolution Behind the Scenes

In a January 1961 article, *LA Times* writer Joan Walker reported on a change in the television industry. The eternal war for ratings dominance between ABC, CBS, and NBC waged on, but now news and public affairs had risen to such significance as to redraw the battle lines. That the networks were engaging in a new offensive for prestige was clear from a flurry of high-profile executive appointments. Nationwide publicity accompanied the naming of former Eisenhower Press Secretary, James Hagerty, as vice president of ABC's news and public affairs. CBS in turn moved its widely touted heir to the network throne, corporate vice president Richard Salant, to the news operation, and NBC president Robert Kintner took control of overall responsibility of NBC News. Through their corporate reshuffling the networks had polished news and public-affairs programming into the shiniest jewel in the broadcasting crown. 'It's as if the president of General Motors took over the administration of a parts division' the *LA Times* writer declared incredulously to her readers. As a result of the new competition for prestige, Walker forecast that viewers could expect more time and better scheduling for service programmes.[366]

Alongside expansion of the evening news, the networks, in their image improvement efforts, went heavy on documentaries and special reports.[367] With the broadcast journalists' new conception of America's racial crisis, they found the perfect story for this wave of programming

[366] Joan Walker, 'Battle of the Networks', *Los Angeles Times*, 22 January 1961.
[367] Gore, 'Civil Rights Television Documentaries', p.12.

aimed at public service. As television magazine *Variety* noted, in an article celebrating the networks' upcoming slate of civil rights coverage, 'the webs have not only given extensive straight news coverage to the struggle, but have devoted more time in special documentaries to the question than any other domestic issue.'[368] Although America's Black public were already well aware – as hinted at in the title of one article in the *New York Amsterdam News*: 'TV Networks Discover the "Revolution"'– white television viewers were unlikely to miss reportage on the struggle for Black freedom in late 1963.[369] As well as the wall-to-wall coverage of the March on Washington by all three networks, that summer ABC offered a five-part documentary series *Crucial Summer: the 1963 Civil Rights Crisis*, while CBS alongside multiple *Eyewitness* episodes devoted to the civil rights question aired a special on *The Press and the Race Issue*.[370] However, in the competition to prove public service through televisual exploration of civil rights, NBC ensured its position in first place with *The American Revolution of '63*.

NBC's special was unprecedented. Running from 7.30 to 10.30PM on Labour Day evening the programme brought American viewers an examination of the civil rights revolution twice as long as any scheduled public affairs programme that had ever been aired before.[371] With the exception of political conventions or election night returns, this was the first time any network had devoted virtually its entire evening schedule to one programme. Moreover, in a move that must have sent its accountants into a tailspin, the network cancelled its entire prime-time

368 'B'casters Divided on Civil Rights Issue But Webs Aren't Ducking It', *Variety*, 24 July 1963.
369 'TV Networks Discover the "Revolution"', *NYAN*, 17 August 1963, p.42., 'Radio-TV', *Jet*, 5 September, 1963, p.66.
370 'TV Networks Discover the "Revolution"', 'Lower Goes Into Action on Fullscale Coverage of Civil Rights March', *Variety*, 28 August 1963, '22 TV Cameras Will Watch Civil Rights March on Capital', *NYT*, 19 August 1963, p.39., Jack Gould, 'Television and Civil Rights: Medium Demonstrates Importance as a Factor in the Campaign to Achieve Racial Integration', *NYT*, 8 September 1963, p.X15., 'TV's Unprecedented Alert as 150,000 Civil Rights Advocates March on DC', *Variety*, 28 August 1963., For more on the networks' coverage of the March on Washington, see: Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, 'Chapter Four: The March on Washington and a Peek into Racial Utopia', pp.89-114., For more on the March on Washington, see: Thomas Gentile, *March on Washington: August 28, 1963* (Washington DC, 1983), Charles Euchner, *Nobody Turn Me Around: A People's History of the 1963, March on Washington* (Boston, 2010), William P. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (New York, 2013).
371 Donovan and Scherer, *Unsilent Revolution,* p.17.

schedule – the regular Monday night movie, the *Art Linkletter Show*, and its weekly television news magazine show *David Brinkley's Journal* – at a cost of half a million dollars. All to air a programme that had no sponsorship.[372]

Robert Kintner and William McAndrew, the NBC president and executive who were the masterminds behind the special, cared more about the headlines than the immediate bottom line the special would generate. The superlative scale of the show and its extraordinary position on the Labour Day television listings ensured the network's exploration of the country's racial crisis would cause a stir among television critics and audiences.[373] 'Regardless of whether it turns out to be good or bad,' TV and film critic Steven Scheuer told readers of his syndicated column ahead of the broadcast, '[*The American Revolution of '63*] is assured of a permanent rating as a landmark in the 15-year-old history of American network television.'[374] Such a remarkable show was sure to gain publicity for NBC to its long-term benefit.

The date of the special's broadcast ensured that the attention it received from the nation's press was at the expense of the network's competitors. For the evening of 2 September hosted another historic moment in television news: the premiere of CBS' new expanded *Evening News with Walter Cronkite*, which now ran for thirty minutes.[375] Most critics expended all their column inches on the *American Revolution of '63* and barely noticed the CBS innovation that would change the face of American television news. One of the few critics that did mention CBS' Evening News debut,

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[372] Wood, *Electronic Journalism*, p.100.
[373] 'Holiday's Pick of the TV Best', *Tarrytown New York Daily News*, 31 August 1963, 'Round Up Rights Shown on Channel 3 to Last 3 Hours', *PI*, 2 September 1963, Lawrence Laurent, 'Long Race Special Worth Time, Cost', *WP*, 4 September 1963, p.D10., Gould, 'Television and Civil Rights', Cecil Smith, 'The TV Scene: 'Revolution of '63' Fascinating Show', *Los Angeles Times*, 4 September 1963.
[374] Steven Scheuer, 'TV Keynotes: 'NBC to Explore '63 'Revolution'', *Herald Statesman*, 29 August 1963.
[375] For more on the expansion of the Evening News with Walter Cronkite, see Ponce de Leon, *That's the Way It Is*, pp.60-61.

Rick Du Brow of the *United Press International*, did so only to highlight how NBC had succeeded in stealing press attention from CBS.[376] NBC's power move had already started paying off.[377]

Just as the network had hoped, its affiliates, newspaper commentators, and professional associations applauded NBC for having set a new milestone for electronic journalism. In the words of NBC's Milwaukee affiliate, the special had 'opened new vistas in television responsibility and service to America.' Reviewers raved that NBC had pioneered a novel role for television in public life. Brent O. Gunts from the network's Baltimore affiliate declared that *The American Revolution of '63* 'struck a blow for freedom and better understanding.' James Schiavone of WWJ-TV in Detroit, Michigan opined it had 'stirred the people of our area to more serious thinking about a vitally important problem of our times.'[378] Television awards bodies felt the same. Among them the Peabody Committee rewarded *The American Revolution of '63* for being 'an eloquent contribution to an understanding of the American negro's long struggle for equality as well as handsome evidence of the stature of the television medium.'[379] By choosing the civil rights crisis as the topic for its prestige play, NBC almost certainly helped raise awareness of Black America's struggle against inequality. By exploring the subject in such a spectacular way, NBC made sure that its network reaped the rewards.

Any of those in doubt that NBC was positioning *The American Revolution of '63* as a weapon in the battle for network prestige, would have had such thoughts banished by the extraordinary publicity campaign NBC embarked upon following the special's release. From the days

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376 Rick Du Brow, 'TV in Review: Segregation Special Had Its Point', *United Press International,* 3 September 1963
377 CBS News President, Richard Salant in 1967 was irate to discover that Columbia School of Journalism Professor William A. Wood in his forthcoming book *Electronic Journalism*, had attributed to NBC the glory of pioneering the move to half hour news. 'Once again NBC propaganda has triumphed over fact. Actually, we led the way,' he wrote to CBS lawyers, asking them to 'write Professor Wood and straighten him out.' CBS Memorandum from Mr. Salant to Mr. Goldstein, 25 September 1967, b.2K132, f. 'Salant, Richard, 1965-67', CBSENA
378 All quoted in Full-page NBC Advertisement, 'A Mammoth and Magnificent Study,' *NYT* and *PI*, 6 Sept 1963.
379 Lawrence Laurent, 'CBS Beats NBC for Peabody Nod', *WP*, 29 April 1964, p.C8., ''American Revolution of '63 Wins Award', *Jet*, 14 May 1964, p.59.

immediately after the documentary aired, well into 1964, the network took out a series of full-page advertisements in national newspapers to remind the public, and presumably its competitors, of the special that had demonstrated both NBC's purported brilliance and integrity in covering such an important topic. One such ad placed in the *New York Times* (and repeated in both the *Washington Post* and *Broadcasting*) in January of 1964 crowed, that due to the innovation and thoroughness it demonstrated, *The American Revolution of '63* was 'so unmistakeably an NBC programme, it hardly seemed necessary to identify the network at station breaks. But we did. It's a matter of regulation. The programme itself, of course, was a matter of principle.'[380] Another advertisement a few months later, oozing with false modesty touted the special's success in a similar vein:

> If the American Revolution of '63 had not received a single award since its September 2 showing on NBC, we still would be proud of having brought this vital civil-rights special to the nation's viewers. For the satisfaction of such an undertaking lies in the doing. The fact is, however, that this broadcast – a three-hour, prime-time program which pre-empted NBC's entire evening schedule – is already one of the most honored specials in the medium's history.[381]

Covering the civil rights crisis provided NBC with a glorious opportunity for public self-congratulation.

At the end of the week in which *The American Revolution of '63* aired, the prominent *New York Times* TV critic Jack Gould, declared to his readers: 'The medium of television is proving an indispensable force in the Negro's pursuit of human rights.'[382] Referring to the saturation coverage of the March on Washington and *The American Revolution of'63* he argued that television was helping Black America reach the 'indifferent white millions for whom integration or

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[380] Full-page NBC Advertisement, 'How to Identify a Network', *NYT,* 21 January 1964 (Repeated in *Broadcasting*, 27 January 1964, and *WP,* 22 January 1964.)
[381] Full-page NBC Advertisement, 'The Year's Most Honored Program' *NYT*, 7 May 1964, See also 'Some People Would Call This an 'Image' Ad', *Broadcasting* 25 May 1964, and repeated *WP*, 1 June 1964.
[382] Jack Gould, Television and Civil Rights: Medium Demonstrates Importance as a Factor in the Campaign to Achive Racial Integration', *NYT*, 8 Sept, 1963.

segregation was of scant personal concern.'[383] Yet industry self-congratulation about furthering the freedom struggle obscured their underlying agenda in creating the documentary itself.

Section Two

The Revolution on Screen

White critics and network affiliates celebrated *The American Revolution of '63* for raising awareness of Black America's struggle against inequality, but the specific story the documentary chose to tell provides an entry point into understanding how white newsmen in late 1963 conceived of the issue as Kennedy tried to get his civil rights bill through Congress. As this section will show, in *The American Revolution of '63,* at the same time that NBC presented viewers with a narrative of nationwide struggle against racism, reporters warned of the danger of retaliatory Black violence.

The framing of the struggle for Black freedom in 1963 as an 'American Revolution' made an implicit argument so strong it nearly ventured into explicit territory: that the Black fight for inclusion within the democratic nation was at its core an act of patriotism. The documentary title could not have more clearly alluded to the American Revolution that founded the United States of America on ideals of freedom and democracy. Rhetorically therefore, NBC positioned African Americans fighting for equality as engaged upon the same struggle as those who had created the country itself. This narrative framework, which placed the freedom struggle in a wider story of triumphant progress, was reinforced in Frank McGee's introduction to the special. Standing godlike on a map of America that emblazoned the studio floor, the host intoned dramatically to the camera: 'There comes a time, there even comes a moment in the affairs of men when they sense their lives are being altered forever: that an old order is dying and a new

[383] Ibid.

one is being born…And then we know we are experiencing a revolution.'[384] As communications scholar Shannon Gore has argued, *The American Revolution of '63*'s attempt to contain and situate the civil rights revolution in an American tradition, demonstrated the Cold War considerations of the documentary makers. Aware of the contradiction between American racism and the nation's commitment to freedom and justice in the eyes of the rest of the world, especially the global South, producers sought to present the civil rights struggle as an extension of America's triumphant progress narrative.[385]

This framework served to hide the long history of the African American fight for freedom. In a rhetorical search for the beginning of the revolution, McGee posed a number of potential starting points: that year with Birmingham, or in 1955 in Montgomery or with the 1954 Supreme Court decision. However, the NBC host's recognition of African American history stopped there. McGee then skipped to the presidential proclamation of 1863, followed by a consideration of the Declaration of Independence of 1776, and finally suggested the year 52 with the preaching of apostle Paul. 'The truth is the American Revolution began in all of those years,' McGee declared to the camera. The documentary reinforced this obscuring of the revolution's real roots by presenting forays into the past which revealed the long history of inequality but only presented white actors who challenged it. A segment that took viewers back to 1619, the horrors of the slave trade, and its subsequent history, for example, focused only on white abolitionists Henry Ward Beecher, William Lloyd Garrison, and Julia Ward Howe. The special then detailed the impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, relaying that Abraham Lincoln would describe its author Harriet

[384] Also discussed in Laurie Hayes Fluker, 'The Making of a Medium and a Movement: National Broadcasting Company's Coverage of the Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1965', (PhD thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1996), p.248.
[385] Gore, 'Civil Rights Television Documentaries' pp.109-110. For an exploration of how the production of network news documentaries was linked to the politics of the Cold War, see: Curtin, *Redeeming the Wasteland*. For more on how Cold War politics shaped the worldview of network reporters see Kathryn McGarr, 'We're All in This Thing Together": Cold War Consensus in the Exclusive Social World of Washington Reporters' in Schulman and Zelizer, *Media Nation*, pp.77-95.

Beecher Stow as 'the little lady who started the war.' The segment wrapped up with an extended look at Lincoln and the civil war. In detailing this history, the documentary included no African American activists. Viewers heard nothing about Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington, or W.E.B. DuBois, thereby erasing even the most famous leaders in the long history of African American resistance.

While *The American Revolution of '63* presented an isolated movement shorn of its activist antecedents, it did make clear that the struggle was nationwide in scope. In the wake of Birmingham, *Eyewitness* had conceived of a national crisis in which both Southern and Northern demonstrations were taking place. *The American Revolution of '63* was even more explicit in presenting the revolution as occurring across the country. In setting out the specifics of their vision for the three-hour special, Northshield and Hagan explained to their production team, 'The set for the show will be a map of the United States. It must be designed to show adequately 90 or so cities, each with a part in the revolution.' The end product hewed close to the co-producers' original concept. The three-hour documentary did not quite achieve 90 cities but managed to show the nation stories from 75 different locations across the giant American floor map. The organising principle of this 'tour of the nation,' would be the alphabet. As Northshield and Hagan explained, 'the chronology of the events is of no interest; our point is that the situation is nationwide.'[386] Although they conceived of a mobile McGee guiding viewers from Albany through to Zanesville, the co-producers' dreams of a literal A-Z of the revolution never developed, but they did succeed in proving that this was not an issue confined to the South.

Furthermore, the documentary made clear through this geographic spread that the goals of Black activists were multiple and varied by area. The programme had begun by exploring protests

[386] Quoted Scheuer, 'TV Keynotes: NBC to Explore '63 'Revolution'

against segregation in Albany, Georgia, Birmingham, Alabama, and Cambridge, Maryland. Back in the studio, McGee explained that the question of what African Americans wanted depended in part on location. 'In the South,' he told viewers, 'an immediate goal is equal entrance to and service by places doing business with the public…The more basic goals of the Southern Negro are the vote, and education.' McGee then introduced the documentary's next location, Chicago by explaining how the situation above the Mason-Dixon line differed: 'In the North the Negro has his consumer rights and the vote…his goals reach beyond public benefits to private advancement, jobs, housing.' Throughout its three hours, the documentary explored African American demonstrations organised by both national and local organisations against discrimination in jobs in places such as New Jersey and Brooklyn.

The most surprising section of the three-hour special was a segment that took place in Los Angeles. This extended sequence explored how insidiously racism operated even after integration had been achieved. 'A Negro can aspire to raise himself out of the ghetto,' the segment began before introducing Dr Wendell Cotton, an orthodontist who, given his successful ascent into the professions and arrival in Los Angeles, presumably, 'would seem to have made it.' The narration went on to explain that Cotton with his wife, Lurline, and two children, Gayle and Wendell Jr., for seven years had lived and worked in Los Angeles' non-segregated world. 'But even here in this peaceful, liberated atmosphere,' McGee warned, 'there is still that subtle barely discernible yet essential difference between the world of the white and the negro.' Even where segregation did not shape the African American experience, the segment made clear, racism still constrained this successful and respectable Black family's attempt to achieve the American dream, whether they lived in the South, North, or even the far West.

NBC cameras followed Wendell and Lurline Cotton, showing their integrated lives. Viewers saw Wendell operating on white patients in his orthodontic surgery and Lurline playing tennis with

a friend whose whiteness she described as 'incidental.' Over footage of a cocktail party held in the pair's stylish home populated by predominately white guests, Lurline's voice described how she found herself 'enjoying friends for friends' sake. Race has nothing to do with it.' Implicitly the documentary made the argument that the Wendell family were a clear exemplar of colour-blind integration. They had fit seamlessly into the predominately white world they had entered and were not the type of troublesome Black Americans who played the race card or went looking for trouble.

Yet, even these paragons of successful integration experienced what Wendell Cotton Sr. described as 'snags in an almost perfect picture.' He described how, when the time came to expand his practice to a bigger premises, his Blackness would be judged, rather than his financial capability to meet the payments. Moreover, he felt that, should he desire to purchase a home in Bel Air, Brentwood or Beverley Hills, the family's race would block such an ambition due to discriminatory realtors and neighbours. The orthodontist's final words: 'I still feel that I do not have the right of free choice in a so-called free society,' concluded the segment. *The American Revolution of '63* through these many different vignettes across the country attempted to provide its viewers with insight into how African Americans continued to experience racism, even where integration had, on the face of it, been achieved.

While the documentary framed the revolution as being part of an inevitable march towards progress, stories such as that of the California Cottons cast doubt on the possibility of true equality. Where *The American Revolution of '63* displayed more certainty was in the conviction that Black militancy was not the way. Mirroring CBS *Eyewitness*, the special warned of the danger of African American militants tipping the scale of resistance towards violent conflict. In his description of the Cambridge, Maryland, riot which had brought in the national guard that June, McGee implied that militant influence was driving the city's Black and white communities

further apart. The 'so called Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee,' he explained 'was headed by Gloria Richardson, a militant leader.' Categorising the leader of the group organising the protests as a militant implied its peaceful tactics had been compromised and rhetorically suggested where the fault of the unrest that ensued lay. 'Along the way nonviolent action too often became violent,' McGee opined. Violence, the NBC host made clear, was not the solution.

Later in the documentary, NBC's reporters, at the same time as covering segregationist brutality, positioned white violence as a result of increased Black activism and alerted viewers to the threat that African Americans would turn violent. Situating the piece which addressed the assassination that summer of Mississippi civil rights leader Medgar Evers, Frank McGee explained that a civil rights movement which had 'mushroomed' had embarked upon a 'massive campaign of direct action.' Reinforcing his implication that the movement's growing militancy risked spinning out of control and into dangerous territory he argued: 'sometimes the campaign strains its limiting policy of nonviolence and sometimes it exacts of its leader the highest price: death.' McGee's introduction to Evers' assassination thereby placed the blame for his death on increasingly bold Black activism.

In the subsequent report, correspondent Richard Valeriani explored the Jackson movement's fight against the city's near total segregation and the NAACP leader's murder. Reporting on Evers' funeral, Valeriani emphasised how African American anger had erupted into violent chaos. After a peaceful march, the tension rising since Evers' murder reached the point of explosion. He explained, 'a crowd of Negroes charged wildly towards the main street yelling and shouting.' Then the image on screen shook and veered to the floor, as the crowd presumably knocked down NBC's cameraman. The camera's loss of control reflected the breakdown of public order, as Valeriani highlighted how the African American crowd threw rocks and bottles

at the city police and state troopers who had moved in.[387] The segment ended by re-emphasising that African Americans' turn towards militancy would result in violence. 'The voices of moderation are stifled here, even afraid,' Valeriani warned viewers, 'the danger is that between the new Negro determination and the old white resistance lies enormous potential for violent conflict.' While recognising the persistence of segregationist racism, Valeriani framed Black militancy as equally responsible for America's racial crisis.

The American Revolution of '63, like *Eyewitness* before it, did not only present the civil rights story as one of nonviolence and peaceful protest which took place as a result of America's Southern bigotry. NBC's 'definitive' documentary on the civil rights issue, which explored the revolution as it was still unfolding, presented a nuanced picture of a nationwide, multifaceted struggle fought against many different forms of American racism. Underpinning this exploration, however, was NBC's warning of the danger of African American anger erupted into violence.

Conclusion

The story that television news told the American public changed decisively over the course of 1963, and the Birmingham campaign was the tipping point. Before, television news reported on how the Supreme Court desegregation ruling was slowly bringing Southern states in line with the rest of the country. Individual confrontations might flare up from time to time, but the networks did not conceive of this as part of a wider story. After Birmingham, television news informed America the entire country was undergoing a racial crisis as a new generation of African Americans initiated a wave of active resistance. In the rising tide of activism in 1963,

[387] For a consideration of how such 'crisis coverage' informs an audience of the loss of political control, see: Torres, *Black, White, and in Color*, p.35.

television networks recognised a story which they could use to bolster their reputations and therefore maximise the publicity potential of their programming on civil rights.

Despite the institutional and geographic nuance this coverage presented, television news offered an easily digestible message to American viewers: Black protest was only acceptable as long as activists engaged in respectable nonviolent demonstrations. Reporters feared, however, that even these exemplars could turn violent. Television news reports did not place nonviolent direct action in contradistinction to violent militancy, they suggested a continuum where the former signalled the potential for the latter. The spectre of violent militancy had now entered reporters' framework for covering the struggle for Black freedom and correspondents continued to warn of the potential danger that lurked in an uncertain future.

The networks may have presented the national dimension of the civil rights revolution in 1963, but white Southerners still complained that the news media unfairly targeted them. As the next chapter will explore, covering the civil rights story forced network television news operations to interrogate internally and declare publicly what constituted fair and responsible coverage of this explosive issue.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FREE MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS

'Don't you care about white people?' demanded Senator Strom Thurmond of Dr. Frank Stanton. 'I didn't say that,' the CBS president replied. Testifying in 1963 before the Senate Communications Subcommittee, Stanton, in the words of *Variety*: 'almost got a hotfoot trying to dance around the Dixie segregationist melody.'[388] The trade magazine described how Thurmond, a Democrat from South Carolina, had 'blasted' Stanton with the charge that the New York based networks were producing 'slanted news,' accusing them of 'following the NAACP line' in their coverage of the civil rights story.[389]

The industry journal *Broadcasting,* in its reporting on the heated exchange on the Senate floor in July of 1963, emphasised the irony of Thurmond's allegations of network prejudice. *Broadcasting* placed an article about the Southern senator's accusations in the middle of its report on the NAACP's plans for a new campaign against the racial inequality perpetuated by the unfair practices of Hollywood and the television industry.[390] Under the title: 'A view of discrimination from the other direction' *Broadcasting* declared: 'In the same week that Negroes were complaining about discrimination against them by broadcasters, a conservative Southern senator accused broadcasters of discrimination against whites.'[391] Rhetorically and visually – the Thurmond article appeared in a large, red-lined box that filled nearly half the page – *Broadcasting* showed how white supremacists took up space in the national conversation about racial inequality. Capturing the narrative of victimhood – and casting the national news media as their

[388] 'Stanton Raps House Probe Into Web Coverage of Civil Rights Issue As 'Perilously Close to Censorship', *Variety*, 3 July 1963, p.20.
[389] Ibid.
[390] 'NOW A NEGRO PUSH ON RADIO-TV' *Broadcasting*, 1 July 1963, p.27.
[391] 'A View of Discrimination From the Other Direction', *Broadcasting*, 1 July 1963, p.27.

persecutors – segregationists like Thurmond inverted African American arguments about racism to paint themselves as the injured party.

In response to the Southern senator's allegations of bias, network heads asserted their impartiality. *Variety* reported that during an earlier day of the hearings, Robert Sarnoff, the head of NBC, in anticipation of a grilling from Thurmond during his testimony, had his NBC staffers prepare figures to show his network was airing both sides of the crisis.[392] When Frank Stanton was in the hot seat, he 'repeatedly defended the objectivity and responsibility of his news staff.'[393] Stanton also argued that senatorial investigations of network handling of news coverage in and of itself impinged upon freedom of the press, coming 'perilously close' to censorship.[394] The networks' objectivity, Stanton's remark made clear, was not a response to regulatory imposition but the result of the professionalism of his news organisation.[395]

In part prompted by Thurmond's accusations of bias during the Congressional hearings, in late July of 1963, the Federal Communications Commission for the first time set out guidelines as to how broadcasters should handle the contentious issue of racial inequality.[396] In a public statement the FCC reminded the broadcasting industry of its obligation to 'offer spokesmen for all responsible groups within the community similar opportunities' to express their views. The directive highlighted that 'in particular the views of the leaders of the Negro and other

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[392] 'Stanton Raps House Probe'
[393] Ibid.
[394] Ibid.
[395] The FCC's regulation affected the networks indirectly through their affiliates who were the holders of broadcast licences and directly only in terms of their broadcast licenses for their Owned and Operated stations.
[396] The FCC directive, according to an FCC official quoted in the *New York Times*, stemmed in part from Strom Thurmond's attack on the networks for 'following the NAACP line' during the senate hearings. The specific mention of the race issue in the directive had also grown from an FCC investigation into Southern broadcasting about James Meredith's enrolment at the University of Mississippi. Nan Robertson, 'Let Negroes Give Views, F.C.C. Says: Directive Issued on Devoting Fair Air Time in Disputes', *NYT*, 27 July 1963, p.45. In Jackson, Mississippi the NBC affiliate WLBT-TV functioned as a mouthpiece for white supremacists. Station manager Fred Beard ensured that his station's newscasts only provided time for segregationists and denied civil rights leaders like Medgar Evers any opportunity to respond to attacks on him and the NAACP. For more on the FCC and WLBT-TV, see: Perlman, 'Chapter 2: 'The Black Freedom Struggle and the Broadcast Reform Movement', *Public Interests,* pp.46-64.

community groups as to the issue of racial segregation…must obviously be considered and reflected in order to insure [sic] that fairness is achieved.'[397] When one reporter questioned an FCC official whether White Citizens' Councils should receive time on American airwaves, he enunciated his belief that newsmen could easily ascertain responsibility. 'Well let's put it this way,' the Commission spokesman reasoned, 'if you had a group that went on the air to speak about temperance and non-drinking you wouldn't put on the town drunk to talk for the opposite side.'[398]

Yet determining how to report fairly on the explosive topic of race relations was not quite so straightforward for those in network television news. The Commission failed to take into account a fact that news executives could not ignore: fairness and responsibility lay in the eye of the audience. While many agreed with the FCC, that civil rights leaders should receive airtime and White Citizens Councils should not, millions in the white audience sided with segregationists and thought it imperative the networks broadcast their views. From the time the Supreme Court first handed down its *Brown vs. Board of Education* desegregation ruling, the nation's networks grappled with the demands of a divided public on how to cover both sides of the race issue.[399] These debates became louder and more urgent as television news seized upon the story of racial crisis in the Summer of 1963.

Behind the closed doors of Black Rock and 30 Rock, however, reporters and executives struggled with how to cover the evolving and volatile story in such a way that aligned with their professional beliefs in the ethics and purpose of network news in American democracy. Whether and how television news slanted its coverage of civil rights developed into a central

[397] Robertson, 'Let Negroes Give Views', James E. Clayton, 'Broadcasters Told to Present Both Sides', *WP*, 27 July 1963, p.A4., 'Negroes Must Get Time For Replies', *Broadcasting,* 29 July 1963, p.9.
[398] Robertson, 'Let Negroes Give Views'
[399] Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, p.62.

issue for all of the actors involved in this story. Rather than exploring those biases, though, what proves illuminating for understanding the relationship between television news and race in America is examining the discourse about bias that surrounded network news coverage of the fight for Black equality – both in the public realm and behind the scenes – in 1963. In doing so, this chapter shows how ideas about fairness and balance shaped network news decision-making about the race story that year.[400] To the public, network newsmen asserted the objectivity of their race relations coverage. Television news, executives argued, in the tradition of American journalism, should function as a free marketplace of ideas. This concept held that differing perspectives could compete and through the process of robust debate the public would discover the truth or at least learn to make informed decisions about the best solutions to society's problems.[401] Given the scarcity of the spectrum, the networks functioned as the gatekeepers who determined which people, facts, and ideas reached a public that increasingly relied on them for information. Mid-century broadcasting executives therefore believed that they had a duty to ensure that the marketplace remained neutral to allow viewers to make their own judgements.

In reality, however, the journalistic ideal of true objectivity was unachievable.[402] By proclaiming that their reporting upheld this idealised professional mandate, the networks gave segregationists a political tool with which to attack them for news coverage which inevitably fell

[400] This exploration builds on Aniko Bodroghozy's examination of the struggles over 'equal time' and 'balance' waged by both sides of the Black empowerment movement throughout the civil rights years. Bodroghkozy, Chapter Three: Fighting for Equal Time: Segregationists vs. Integrationists, *Equal Time*, pp.61-88.
[401] Stanley Ingber, 'The Marketplace of Ideas: A Legitimising Myth', *Duke Law Journal*, 1984/1 (1984) p.3. For a history of the concept of 'the marketplace of ideas', see: Gregory Brazeal, 'How Much Does a Belief Cost? Revisiting the Marketplace of Ideas', *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 21/1 (2011–2012), pp.1–46.
[402] For the history of objectivity as a journalistic ideal, see: *Richard L. Kaplan, Politics and the American Press: The Rise of Objectivity, 1865– 1920* (New York, 2002), Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York, 1978), David T. Z. Mindich, *Just the Facts: How Objectivity Came to Define American Journalism* (New York, 1998), Matthew Pressman, 'Objectivity and Its Discontents: The Struggle for the Soul of American Journalism in the 1960s and 1970s' in Schulman and Zelizer *Media Nation*, pp.96-113., Matthew Pressman, *On Press: The Liberal Values That Shaped the News*, (Cambridge, 2018). See also, Candis Callison and M.L. Young, *Reckoning: Journalism's Limits and Possibilities* (New York, 2020), Raven Lewis, *View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity* (Chicago, 2019).

short of this ideal.[403] Executives' attempts to refute Southerners' accusations of bias meant that they began to embrace balance more actively as a means to prove the objectivity of their news coverage.[404] At the same time, reporters on the ground covering the movement in the South challenged whether balance was responsible – or even possible – in a story that seemed so clearly to pit good against evil. The pages which follow consider first public debates about coverage of 'the race issue,' before turning to the discussions which took place behind the scenes at the networks.

Section One

On Screen: *The Press and the Race Issue*

As historian David Greenberg has argued, by the late 1950s, frustrated at finding themselves losing the battle for national public opinion, segregationists blamed the messenger.[405] In Aniko Bodroghkozy's words they distrusted television 'for being little more than electronic modern carpetbaggers publicising and propagandizing a second Reconstruction on a beleaguered and misunderstood region.'[406] Southern whites continued to use the tactic of accusing Northern television networks of bias ever more forcefully in the 1960s. As television news covered the rising tide of African American protest against racial inequality, Southerners amplified their accusations of press bias to bolster their claims that white Southerners were the true victims in

[403] In making this argument I build on David Greenberg's 'The Idea of 'the liberal media' and its Roots in the Civil Rights Movement.' This article highlights that the conservative populist charge that national journalistic institutions were part of a cultural liberal left-wing elite that slanted the news grew from segregationist critiques of the Northern press's bias in favour of African Americans. David Greenberg, 'The Idea of 'The Liberal Media' and Its Roots in the Civil Rights Movement', *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, 1/2 (2008), pp.167-187.

[404] There is a growing body of scholarship in the field of media and politics which shows how activists on the right pushed for balance over objectivity as a way to gain a voice in television and radio. See Nicole Hemmer, 'From "Faith in Facts" to "Fair and Balanced": Conservative Media, Liberal Bias, and the Origins of Balance' in Schulman and Zelizer (ed) *Media Nation*, p.127., Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics*, (Philadelphia, 2016), Hendershot, *What's Fair on the Air?,* Nicole Hemmer, *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s* (forthcoming Basic Books: 2022)

[405] Greenberg, 'The Idea of 'the Liberal Media".

[406] Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, p.6.

American society. The segregationist critique by 1963 had made the press a player in the drama. Attacking the networks' professionalism proved a successful strategy for getting their grievances aired on television as news executives felt obliged to defend the objectivity of their organisations.

Southern accusations of network bias came from all directions: politicians, the Southern press, and the public. Alongside Strom Thurmond's performance on the Senate floor, Southern editors had lambasted the Northern press for failing to meet its journalistic obligations in coverage which, they argued, was oversaturated with the struggles of Southern Blacks. They believed television news was neither fair, full, nor responsible. The *Columbus Georgia Enquirer* indicted the Northern media for 'heaping coals on the fire with the type of reporting that is clearly calculated to further inflame emotions.' Southern viewers had also continued to write to CBS and its rivals complaining of distorted coverage. 'It is so hard to understand how you reporters can be so warped and brainwashed in your thinking on the race issue,' wrote one CBS viewer, 'You report to the nation on every move that is made in the South as if we are barbarians.'[407]

The Southern refrain of network bias reached such a volume in 1963 that CBS decided to tackle the issue on national television. In the middle of a wave of programming by all three networks devoted to America's racial crisis that summer, the network put together a panel discussion which it aired in prime-time on 21 August 1963: *The Press and the Race Issue*.[408] In light of the growing criticism, host Charles Collingwood made clear in the programme's introduction, the discussion aimed to address the question of whether during the racial crisis the press had been

[407]Quoted in *Transcript: The Press and the Race Issue,* 21 August 1963, b.2.325/F91,WC. All further analysis of discussion on this programme is drawn from this transcript.
[408] *Transcript: The Press and the Race Issue,* 21 August 1963, b.2.325/F91,WC. All further analysis of discussion on this programme is drawn from this transcript.

guilty of distorting the news by bringing together in discussion four experts on journalism from within the industry. Baiting the network into dedicating airtime to a self-examination of its reporting was a small success in the segregationist battle to control the narrative. CBS in dedicating prime time coverage to the issue of press bias dignified white supremacists with an answer. Moreover, any airtime dedicated to the topic of press bias was time televisions were not beaming out evidence of Southern racism to American living rooms.

In addition, the panel line-up demonstrated how white Southerners had successfully commandeered the narrative of media bias leaving little oxygen in the national conversation for Black complaints. The composition of the panel showed that the discussion that evening would only focus on slanting the news in one direction. Collingwood highlighted in his introductory remarks that 'on both sides of the controversy there are those who charge that the press is actively supporting one side or the other.' To weigh in on the issue, CBS brought together four men the host described as journalistic authorities who held strong views on the matter. To speak for the Southern perspective, CBS invited two segregationist newspaper editors, James Kilpatrick of the *Richmond Virginia News-Leader* and Grover Cleveland Hall of the *Montgomery Alabama Advertiser*.[409] For the defence, alongside Salant, CBS picked broadcaster, media critic, and curator of the Nieman Fellowships at Harvard University, Louis Lyons. All four men were white. None represented a Black viewpoint on the national press coverage of the race issue. No prime-time panel discussion of how a white-owned and operated national media discriminated against African Americans appeared on CBS programming. Segregationists had successfully captured the critique.

[409] For more on both Kilpatrick and Hall, see: Roberts and Klibanoff, *Race Beat*.

The opening remarks of panellist Richard Salant, CBS News' own president, however, intimated another motivation behind the network's putting on such a programme. 'I think it's good for all of us…to have this kind of discussion among colleagues,' Salant announced to the assembled panel of veteran news industry professionals and the American public. He continued: 'I believe this is the way the accountability should go, not to any federal government or any government agency, but to each other.' Salant hinted that it may not have been just segregationist critiques of civil rights coverage that had prompted CBS to organise the panel. The programme aired less than two months after the Senate Communications Subcommittee hearing where Frank Stanton had railed against the government's probing into the networks' handling of civil rights coverage as verging on censorship. A few weeks later, the FCC had issued its directive reminding broadcasters of their obligations to the fairness doctrine. CBS's panel discussion – a demonstration of the correct way to determine journalism's responsibilities in reporting the race issue according to Salant – functioned as a public show of network defiance against government involvement in its news judgements.

In front of a national audience Hall and Kilpatrick expressed segregationist complaints on a national stage. Firstly, the segregationists alleged slander. Kilpatrick claimed that Northerners prejudiced against white Southerners had twisted the truth. 'We charge that over the past nine years, since the Supreme Court decided *Brown v. Board of Education*, the major media communications media of the country… systematically have misrepresented the South, maligned its people, distorted truth,' Kilpatrick announced to the panellists in the studio and the prime-time viewers across America. The picture that Northern media painted of the South for viewers across America, he argued, was inaccurate.

Accusing the Northern media of defamation had become a favoured weapon in the segregationist arsenal for waging the war for public opinion. As Greenberg has shown, when

the *New York Times* published Harrison Salisbury's investigative report on racism in Birmingham, 'Fear and Hatred Grip Birmingham', in April 1960, the city's segregationist press and power structure declared defamation. *The Birmingham News* answered with the article 'NY Times Slanders Our City.' The city's public safety commissioner, Bull Connor filed a libel suit against the *Times* seeking $400,000 in damages, and a local grand jury indicted Salisbury on 42 counts of criminal libel.[410] The following year CBS aired its documentary *CBS Reports: Who Speaks for Birmingham?* which investigated Salisbury's claims about racial hatred in Birmingham just as the Freedom Riders came to town, welcomed by the baseball bats and bicycle chains of a mob of local segregationist vigilantes.[411] Declaring defamation once again Bull Connor returned to the courts joined this time by former Birmingham Mayor James W. Morgan and Commissioner James T. Waggoner. The trio attempted to sue the network for a total of $1,500,000 on the grounds of 'falsely and maliciously publishing matter with intent to defame.'[412] By charging misrepresentation on *The Press and the Race Issue*, therefore, Kilpatrick invoked a favoured segregationist strategy.

In framing the accusation of slander, the Southern editor couched his argument in rhetoric that pierced through to the very heart of journalism; he argued that the Northern media had obstructed the proper functioning of democracy. Northern reporters had not just portrayed the South in a negative light. Their unfair coverage, he claimed, prevented Southern segregationists from presenting their perspective to the American public, thereby denying their viewpoint a fair

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410 Cited in Greenberg, 'The Idea of "the liberal media"', p.177.
411 Howard K. Smith, *Events Leading Up to My Death: The Life of a Twentieth Century Reporter* (New York, 1996), pp.270-272. CBS management fired Smith for editorialising on the final segment of *Who Speaks for Birmingham* in which he took a seemingly anti-segregationist stance. For more on the filming of the documentary and the circumstances surrounding his censorship and firing, see: Smith, *Events Leading Up to My Death*, pp.268-275. Fred Friendly, *Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control* (London, 1967), pp.126-128., Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York, 2001), pp.183-187,246., Ralph Engelman, *Friendlyvision: Fred Friendly and the Rise and Fall of Television Journalism* (New York, 2009), pp.153-162., Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, pp.75-88.
412 Supreme Court Hears Birmingham Libel Case', *Broadcasting*, 13 January 1964, p.68., '3 in Birmingham Sue CBS for $1,500,000', *NYT*, 9 December 1961, p.54. '3 Birmingham Libel Suits Against CBS Quashed', *NYT*, 2 August 1962, p.53., 'Three in Birmingham Press Plea on Suit Against CBS', *NYT*, 14 August 1962, p.63.

trial in the court of public opinion. National television, radio, magazines and newspapers, Kilpatrick maintained, had 'suppressed a fair point of view that is widely held and that we believe in a free country should be entitled to a free and fair examination in the marketplace of ideas.' The segregationist perspective, Kilpatrick argued, was a valid one which many American citizens held. By censoring the white South, Northern reporters had failed to uphold the professional duties of the fourth estate. It was not their place as the news media to wield a blue pencil on public discourse. Through overstepping the bounds of responsible journalism, he argued, Northern news media were inhibiting rather than facilitating free and fair debate. The crime was not simply slander; it was tantamount to treason.

In response, Richard Salant used his opening remarks to defend the lofty ideals of his news department. He argued that a commitment to objectivity lay at the very core of CBS News. 'We've had a tradition…that there must be fairness, accuracy and balance,' he explained. 'This has been articulated from the beginning of our operations, by the first director of CBS News, Paul White, who many years ago said, that any story of genuine news interest must be handled, no matter who or what it affects.' By harking back to the origin story of CBS News, Salant positioned the noble quest of impartial reporting as a kind of foundation myth for the organisation. The head of the news department highlighted that independent unbiased reporting was also an ideal that had continued to be promoted from the very highest of CBS heights. 'The Chairman of our board, William S. Paley, has called this to our attention many, many times since,' he continued. Infused into the foundation of the organisation and advanced from above, objectivity was the objective at the heart of every CBS newsman: 'It's a way of life to us. We try to live by it,' he declared. A dedication to striving for objective reporting at CBS News was not just a professional obligation, Salant made clear, it was a fundamental tenet of the identity of a CBS Newsman. Southerners, by calling into question the Northern press's impartiality in the

civil rights story, were attacking CBS News' very definition of itself – a strategy sure to entangle Northern journalists in debate and useful for deflecting public attention.

By asserting the network's commitment to fairness so fervently, Salant provided a strategy for his Southern critics to point out hypocrisy in any instance they sniffed out imbalance. 'Mr. Salant mentioned the fairness and balance that CBS seeks,' Kilpatrick highlighted. He then explained his own experience of CBS News' apparent dishonesty in proclaiming such ideals. Kilpatrick had been invited to appear on CBS News' *Eyewitness* episode covering the Birmingham story, but producers had given James Baldwin three times the airtime. He then compounded the critique by highlighting a further instance where he alleged CBS had clearly fallen short of its claims to impartiality. Referring to Strom Thurmond's charges on the Senate floor, Kilpatrick highlighted that the senator had asked about the amount of time CBS had given three Black killings of white people in the South in comparison to coverage of the Medgar Evers story.[413] The totals of 23 minutes for the former and one hour fourteen minutes and 51 seconds for the latter 'seems to me also a little short of fairness and balance,' Kilpatrick argued. Salant had claimed that fairness served as a fundamental principle guiding CBS News reporting. But Kilpatrick provided seemingly incontrovertible proof that the network had been imbalanced in its airtime allocation to each side.

In addressing these accusations Salant brought to bear the skills acquired in his former life as a lawyer, defending CBS by politely and systematically laying out the rhetorical twisting, elision, and straightforward falsity involved in Kilpatrick's argument. He countered the claims of imbalance in the *Eyewitness* broadcast first by pointing out that *Eyewitness* was a hard news programme. Kilpatrick had made an argument based on equal time. Although Salant did not

[413] Medgar Evers, a civil rights leader and Mississippi state field secretary for the NAACP, had been shot in the back and murdered in the driveway of his home by white supremacist Byron De La Beckwith hours after President John Kennedy gave a televised speech on civil rights.

spell it out, in drawing attention to the programme's categorisation as hard news he highlighted the show did not fall under the rubric of Section 315 of the Communications Act, the equal time provision. Section 315 was not applicable to a "bona fide newscast" – whether it was on-the-spot coverage, an interview, or documentary.[414] In terms of technical regulation, therefore, Kilpatrick's argument was invalid.

However, Salant – who had already made abundantly clear his feelings towards government regulation of broadcast journalism – did not dwell on this defence. Rather, he continued by arguing that fairness was a value judgement not a tangible quality that critics could, or the network should, measure in minutes and seconds. Next Salant tackled Kilpatrick's reiteration of Strom Thurmond's example of unfair coverage. He highlighted that the claim was factually incorrect but more importantly that in making it Kilpatrick, like Thurmond, had drawn a false equivalence. First the lawyer turned news executive pointed out that there had only been one killing in the South: that of Fred Link in Lexington, North Carolina. Injuries in Cambridge, Maryland and a car accident in Washington did not three killings make. The more fundamental point, however, was that not all killings were equal in the eyes of the news. As Salant underscored: 'the Medgar Evers story was an extraordinary story.' The event had enormous news value he continued, firstly because of who had been killed and what it represented: 'Medgar Evers was a leader of the Negro cause in Mississippi. It was the climax of many, many years of events,' he pointed out. Furthermore, he highlighted, the intention behind the Medgar Evers case had been different from the other deaths: 'It was, unlike the other unfortunate occurrences, by all indications a deliberate murder. None of the others were.'

[414] *CBS News Standards* p.16., Commonly misunderstood at the time and ever since, the equal time requirement had no application to the fairness doctrine.

Lyons then joined the defence to point out the timing of the Evers murder lent it an even greater significance: 'He was a symbol of integration at a time when national attention was focused on Mississippi'. 'Absolutely,' Salant agreed, 'that was an occurrence that happened the very night of the President's address…He was going to testify before the Interstate Foreign Commerce Committee two days later.' Kilpatrick had not been comparing like for like in his argument that the networks' unequal exposure was unfair. The causes, implications, and timings of the different situations, Salant and Lyons made clear, simply weren't comparable. One was an enormous story that warranted a large amount of attention, the others did not have the equivalent news value. Equal time did not apply.

Kilpatrick's response to Salant's defence, however, demonstrated the rhetorical tactic of countering an argument based in fact with an assessment based in feeling. 'Well, of course it was a big story.' Kilpatrick admitted. He continued:

> I don't question that it was a big story…much bigger newswise than the others were. But it does seem to me that this points up a part of the pattern that has existed over these years, that violence committed by whites upon Negroes is great big news, but violence committed by Negroes upon whites, somehow isn't.

The segregationist accepted that that his argument had been invalid. Yet in the same breath he continued to use the case as evidence of a wider pattern of Northern network slanting. Kilpatrick's charge appealed not to fact but feeling. He ignored the social and political context to make an argument that appealed to the emotions of white Southerners convinced that the national news media were purposefully ignoring them. Salant's reasoned response could address Kilpatrick's arguments in the particular but likely had little effect on the affective power of the segregationist's general accusations.

Aside from slanting in favour of the African American cause, the segregationists had another complaint. Kilpatrick and Hall argued the Northern press was not just unfair in how they chose to cover the race issue but in what they chose to cover, or more precisely, where. '*The New York Times* would think nothing of sending a task force to Montgomery, Alabama, if Dr. King sneezed or got a traffic ticket,' Hall argued, 'but never would they send a task force to the south side of Chicago or Detroit.' Kilpatrick similarly accused the Northern news media 'of playing up the race disturbances when they occur in the South and suppressing them or playing them down when they occur in their own back yard.' Six years after Chet Huntley had addressed on the Evening News Southern viewer complaints about the networks' failure to cover racial violence in the North, the criticism had only increased. 'You have done an excellent job in keeping the people of the North, East and West informed about what's going on in the South. But you don't seem to consider it important to keep the people of the South informed of what is going on in the North,' a viewer in Georgia wrote to CBS News correspondent Ned Calmer in a complaint typical at the time. 'You are constantly telling them about events taking place at Macon, Birmingham, Albany, and Mississippi,' he wrote, 'but, Mr. Calmer, a rumour has reached the deep South that all is not well in our national capital, in Harlem, Chicago, and other cities.'[415] Unbalanced coverage, white Southerners argued, allowed Northern viewers to believe the fiction that racism was a peculiarly Southern phenomenon and let them ignore the racial turmoil in their own cities.

As Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff's the *Race Beat* has revealed, Kilpatrick and Hall had been early progenitors of this critique with editorial campaigns that highlighted race discrimination in the North and reproached Northern editors for overlooking it as a result of their myopic focus on the South.[416] This contention, that racism was an American not just a Southern

[415] Quoted in *Transcript: The Press and the Race Issue*
[416] Roberts and Klibanoff, *Race Beat*, pp.213-214.

phenomenon, was the same argument civil rights historians would make years later, if for very different purposes. Historians have argued that Northern journalists helped create the myth of a Southern movement which responded to a regional problem by ignoring the inequality and struggles occurring in their own neighbourhoods.[417] Hall, on the other hand, back in 1963, highlighted that racism also existed in the North and that Northern journalists were failing to cover it, to highlight Northern hypocrisy. By his estimation, the white American public outside the South, if compelled to confront its own racial issues, would be forced to leave the South alone.

In the CBS studio that evening Louis Lyons and Richard Salant mounted a defence against the charge that Northern journalists were failing to cover the civil rights story in the North. In his opening remarks Lyons highlighted that the claim that the Northern press was ignoring the story in the North did not stand up to scrutiny. 'Well, if Mr. Kilpatrick had been reading the Northern newspapers this month,' he argued 'he would find they've been giving several times as much attention to the race issue in their own cities as to all of the South combined.' Salant offered that over the previous 'six weeks on radio and television network news broadcasts, [NBC had] devoted three hours and 22 minutes to demonstrations and disorders in the North, one hour and 49 minutes to demonstrations and disorders in the South.' Armed with evidence to counter segregationist claims of geographical imbalance, Lyons and Salant provided clear proof to the contrary. Facts, however, did not trump Southern grievances about disproportionate bias.

Lyons also highlighted that the nature of the civil rights story had changed in 1963. He did not accede that Northern coverage had overlooked racial problems in the North (he in fact

[417] Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History*, p.102.

highlighted that the *New York Times* in the wake of the Supreme Court decision had immediately begun a series on school segregation in the suburbs of New York.) But Lyons did claim that Northern reporters had simply followed the story, which only that year had grown to a nationwide phenomenon. 'It has suddenly this year become a national story that has reached into every city. It has accelerated in its momentum and its dimensions and it has become the great story I am sure of 1963,' he argued. Salant was of the same mind: 'The focus has shifted. There's no question about it,' he told the panel. Northern press and network coverage of the civil rights issue, Lyons and Salant argued, was not motivated by prejudice but professional news judgement. Implying the objectivity of Northern reporters, they claimed the press simply covered the stories with greatest news value.

The segregationists remained unconvinced by claims of impartiality, however, arguing that the networks used this defence to mask the ways in which they used their power to intentionally influence the public. Kilpatrick, apparently unphased by exactly which network he based his arguments upon, reiterated a complaint he had made in an editorial about an NBC documentary he accused of insidious editorialising. NBC, he argued, had 'proceeded under a spurious cloak of objectivity and forced its own opinion on the public that regards television as a news medium and cannot be expected to distinguish editorial bias.' In response Salant repeated his claim that CBS enforced strict objectivity operating a fixed policy that banned commentary. 'We don't report our own views in our news broadcasts or in our documentaries. It's forbidden.' He announced. 'We got to know Mr. Huntley's eyebrows real well though,' came Kilpatrick's sardonic reply, '…he wasn't publicly taking sides either but his eyebrows were.' The segregationist's accusation laid bare a vulnerability in network defences of objectivity. The more television news professed its impartiality, the more any evidence to the contrary called its credibility into question. This problem became particularly acute in the 1960s as many journalists found it difficult to mask their sympathy for the African American cause.

Section Two

Behind the Scenes: Memoranda on Morality

Where once reporters on the ground had felt sympathy for both sides of the integration issue, by the mid-sixties many balked at white Southern racial brutality and questioned the wisdom of a network policy which balanced equal rights with racism. Network executives, however, continued to subscribe to their belief in a free marketplace of ideas, no matter how difficult practising this preaching had become.

On screen Richard Salant had made clear that any newsman working for his organisation was a faithful adherent to the gospel of fairness and balance. Behind the scenes, however, reporters covering the race issue were less convinced about CBS News' approach to handling the story. In early August, as CBS prepared for *The Press and the Race Issue*, a correspondent took advantage of the news president's open-door policy to register his disagreement with CBS News management. Perturbed by the line and minute-counting of civil rights coverage executives had tasked CBS News staffers to undertake, this reporter sent a memorandum to Richard Salant to express his dismay at how he felt executives were handling the question of the organisation's objectivity in covering the civil rights story.[418] Aware that this correspondent's feathers weren't the only ones that measurement by stopwatch had ruffled, Salant circulated the memo and his reply to the entire news department about CBS News approach to the civil rights story.[419]

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[418] CBS News Office Communication from Anonymous to Richard Salant, 8 August 1963, b.2M685, f. 'Interoffice Memoranda Correspondence Fred Friendly', WC. The name of the staff member who wrote this letter to Richard Salant has been left blank in this copy which Salant distributed to the CBS News Department.
[419] CBS News Office Communication from Mr. Salant to CND ORGANISATION, 23 September, 1963, b.2M685, f. 'Interoffice Memoranda Correspondence Fred Friendly', WC. In 1963 the CBS News department had no codified compilation of news standards and ethical guidelines. Circulated memoranda therefore were a common means of determining the CBS News approach. Richard Salant did not frame his opinions in this exchange as an official news standard but in circulating them to the entire CBS News department he made clear that CBS newsmen in their handling of the civil rights story should align themselves with his views in this exchange.

Chief among the reporter's concerns was his fear that CBS was trying to demonstrate its objectivity to segregationist critics by providing evidence that the network had given equivalent coverage to both civil rights activists and white supremacists. 'It is, may I suggest, ridiculous for us to try to 'prove' that we've given equal time to the segregationist viewpoint because, for one thing, it isn't true,' the reporter wrote to his boss. He continued, 'And if we argue it is true, we're going to fall into the very trap dug for us by the various segregationist spokesmen who are pestering us – because we'll be accepting their basically false premise that this is an equal time issue.'[420] To accede to the segregationist framing of the issue would be an error according to this CBS newsman.

In the first instance he claimed that segregationists and civil rights activists did not warrant equal attention from reporters because of the fundamental difference in the news value of their missions. Segregation was not news. Stretching back to 1865, or even 1619, he declared, it represented the existing condition of the South and therefore not a pressing issue for television news reporters to cover. Attempts at integration on the other hand, he told the CBS News President, were 'new, and interesting, and significant. They are attempts to alter the status quo which is the essence of news.' He continued: 'Strom Thurmond and Ross Barnett are continuing types on the American scene, and their base of support is a continuing base. Martin Luther King is a phenomenon, his success phenomenal, and both he and his success are news.' Segregationists did not deserve an equivalent amount of attention from television news simply because they offered an opposing point of view to that of civil rights activists. 'So if anybody directed me…to give equal time on air to the integrationist and segregationist points of view, I'd refuse' he declared, 'not in the first instance, as a moral being, but as a newsman. When a man refrains from biting a dog, that's not news.'[421]

[420] Anonymous to Salant.
[421] Ibid.

Salant in his response assuaged the correspondent's concerns that the network was playing into the hands of the segregationists. The CBS News president assured his staffer and the rest of the organisation that neither he, Frank Stanton nor anyone else at CBS believed that objectivity, fairness, balance, and accuracy could be measured by a stopwatch. Any line-counting and minute-counting had simply been a tool to disprove false statements about network coverage.[422]

Moreover, he affirmed what he had emphasised in the panel discussion, that there was not and never had been 'a proper issue of equal time.' In the case of hard news, the equal time argument was 'wholly inapplicable.' What should guide the news department in its coverage, he agreed, was news value. However, his judgement on what constituted news lay more in action than in the novelty of a position: 'If one side makes all the news,' he proclaimed, 'then that is the side that will get all the time in the news broadcasts.' But, Salant pointed out, this meant at times that segregationists warranted the majority of coverage. 'We can't have it both ways,' he told the staffer, 'even if the side with which we disagree happens to be making all the news at a given moment, that side will get the time on the news broadcasts.'[423] He highlighted that in CBS's specials on James Meredith's admission to Ole Miss. and Vivian Malone and James Hood's desegregation of the University of Alabama, since Governors Barnett and Wallace were the main actors they had received the most airtime.[424]

The second qualm with the equal time argument the CBS reporter had raised with Salant went much deeper. He objected to providing balanced coverage of the segregationist position on moral grounds:

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[422] CBS News Office Communication Mr. Salant to Anonymous, 26 August 1963, b.2M685, f. 'Interoffice Memoranda Correspondence Fred Friendly', WC.
[423] Ibid.
[424] Ibid.

> We are not dealing with two equally valid points of view; this is not a Nixon-Kennedy debate. CBS is not bound to give illegality time with legality, or immorality equal time with morality. And in legal terms and, only slightly less clearly, in moral terms, the general proposition is now established that racial segregation and the denial of civil rights are wrong.[425]

The author of this memo gave voice to an assessment shared by many of his colleagues in the news business that as a moral question it was clear segregation and racial inequality were wrong and the law of the land confirmed this evaluation. Howard K. Smith, for example, in his autobiography echoed the sentiment described in the memorandum, arguing that when it came to reporting on CBS News documentaries: 'Giving equal weight to Bull Connor and to Earl Warren…was equivalent to saying that the truth is to be found…equidistant between good and evil…the Civil Rights issue was not one over which reasonable minds might differ. One side was clearly constitutional, the other clearly not.'[426]

Trying to balance the segregationist position – which was both wicked and lawless – with the struggle for African American freedom – which was the exact opposite – some reporters argued was a fundamentally nonsensical endeavour they struggled to pursue. ABC reporter, Paul Good wrestled with this conundrum: 'Reporters are supposed to revere objectivity…I tried to tell both sides as far as there were sides to tell. But how would you report a Dachau or a Buchenwald?'[427]

Not all reporters felt the same way as Smith, Good, and the CBS memo writer, however. Richard Valeriani for example, an NBC correspondent who was hospitalised after a segregationist attacked him outside Selma, Alabama in 1965, later recalled that he had no problem maintaining professional distance from the issues involved: 'I see that as part of

[425] Anonymous to Salant.
[426] Smith, *Events Leading Up to My Death*, p.269.
[427] Quoted in Torres, *Black, White, and in Color*, p.18.

journalists' professionalism to remain emotionally detached from the story. I never lost sight of my role as a reporter, not as an activist or an editorial writer,' Valeriani opined. He maintained that this impartial perspective helped him to successfully execute his job as a reporter. In the wake of Selma, he counted civil rights activists John Lewis and Andrew Young as friends. At the same time, he remained the only reporter that the villain of the Selma story, Sheriff Jim Clark, would talk to – evidence in Valeriani's eyes of his successful adherence to the professional principles of journalism.[428] Nevertheless, the many reporters Clark refused to talk to suggests Valeriani may have been in a minority in maintaining such a degree of impartiality.

CBS News executives did not share this perspective. Richard Salant argued that personal beliefs about morality should not extend into judgements about news. 'We must be very careful in news and public affairs,' he warned this employee (and through the circulation of the memo exchange, the network's entire news department), 'about how far we go in translating our personal (and perhaps wholly justified) passions, emotions and convictions into certainty that anything that opposes us is so wrong, so irresponsible and so lacking in substance that we can ignore or suppress it.'[429] It was not the place of newsmen, he argued, to act as moral arbiters no matter how clear-cut they perceived the situation to be.[430]

According to the CBS News president, assessment of legitimacy was a numbers game. Kilpatrick had argued in the panel discussion that the segregationist perspective was a fair view that was widely held and therefore in a free country should be entitled coverage. By Stanton's argument, it was not relevant whether or not the view was fair, what mattered was that vast numbers of Americans believed it. 'A point of view, an emotion, a conviction or a movement

[428] Nancy Doyle Palmer, 'Selma and Richard Valeriani: A Reporter's Story', *Huffpost*, 5 January 2015, *https://www.huffpost.com/entry/selma-and-richard-valeria_b_6414664* (28 January 2022).
[429] Salant to Anonymous.
[430] Ibid.

must be pretty minimal and pretty far out before we can justify ignoring it all together,' he argued. 'If the segregationist point of view were all that minimal,' Salant reasoned, 'President Kennedy wouldn't be in danger of losing the South; there would be no civil rights march on August 26; and we wouldn't have the major domestic news story that we have now.'[431] By 1963, civil rights activists had begun to turn the tide of national opinion to shift racial justice from the realm of legitimate controversy to the sphere of consensus. But as news executives were all too aware, the enormous resistance the civil rights movement continued to face was evidence of the number of people both above and below the Mason-Dixon line who clung on to different definitions of these boundaries. The mere numbers of people who ascribed to the white supremacist viewpoint meant that news outlets like CBS had an obligation to cover their perspective. 'The fact is that millions of people, to a greater or lesser degree, share some of the views of the anti-integrationists. And so, we must provide them an opportunity to state the facts as they see them and to state their viewpoints,' Salant reasoned.[432] He continued: 'It is never a question of equal time by the stopwatch. It is a question of fairness, balance and respect for points of view held by a substantial number of people, no matter how much you may disagree with them.'[433]

The CBS News President's commitment of his organisation to the quest of objectivity was not simply an outward show for the public. He was convinced that television news had no business in making moral judgements; their role was to facilitate the American people in making their own decisions. The evidence of the success of this approach, Salant believed, lay in part of the dissenting CBS staffer's own argument. The final point of his memo declared: 'frequently the most damaging thing that can be done to the segregationist cause is to let its spokesmen talk

[431] Ibid.
[432] Ibid.
[433] Ibid.

for themselves.'[434] Salant held that such an assessment was the epitome of the news functioning within a democracy as it should. 'If you are right in believing that allowing Bull Connor or George Wallace on the air "makes about ten thousand converts to Martin Luther King," then you have proved the very point with which you quarrel,' the CBS News president argued in his reply. 'Because it means that in the free marketplace of ideas, when neither side is suppressed and each is given an opportunity to say what it wants to say in its own words, the public will make a proper choice on an informed basis.'[435] Objectivity, fairness, and balance, Salant argued, meant covering both sides – no matter how distasteful an argument appeared to reporters – to allow the American people to make up their own minds. 'I am persuaded that that's the right way. And that's the way we are going to do it,' Salant decreed to his organisation.[436] The role of CBS News, its president believed, was to act not as the prosecution or defence but as the courtroom itself – it was the American public who should act as judge.

Both the complaining correspondent and Salant's convictions revealed mid-century network news departments' lack of understanding of the ways their industry and medium functioned within a society structured by white supremacy. The CBS staffer's argument rested on a modernist faith – indeed one held by many civil rights activists – that exposure to racist bigotry in and of itself would change the American public's attitudes towards racial inequality. Such a belief failed to take into account how different audiences made meaning out of what they watched, decoding messages depending on what communications scholar Todd Gitlin has called their own 'interpretive prisms.'[437] A vested interest in white supremacy would have shaped the way that many white viewers received the messages of a Bull Connor or George Wallace.

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[434] Anonymous to Salant.
[435] Salant to Anonymous.
[436] Ibid.
[437] Todd Gitlin, Todd Gitlin, 'Spotlights and Shadows: Television and the Culture of Politics', *College English*, 38/8 (1977), p.796.

Moreover, in his commitment to the free marketplace of ideas, the CBS News president did not take into account the way whiteness operated in America. A television news industry operated overwhelmingly by white newsmen could never function as a truly neutral courtroom. Salant's arguments that both sides of an issue should be given a fair hearing regardless of reporter's personal values suggested that it was possible for newsmen to make neutral judgements about who represented a 'responsible' spokesperson for each side of a topic, what constituted those sides, and which topics were of public importance. That *The Press and the Race Issue* had no Black panellists demonstrated how race played into newsmen's implicit value judgements. No matter how objective professional newsmen attempted or believed themselves to be, their judgements would necessarily be informed by their perspectives as white Americans.

Furthermore, the other news values at play which affected newsmen's judgements prevented television news from facilitating a truly egalitarian exchange of ideas. As television historian Lynn Spigel has pointed out, 'the so-called 'public sphere' had historically been less an ideal place for democratic debate than a space occupied by particular empowered publics.'[438] Network newsmen reinscribed these dynamics by relying overwhelmingly on 'official' sources and viewing those in positions of power in politics, government and important organisations as responsible spokespeople.[439] Segregationists like safety commissioner Bull Connor, governor George Wallace, and senator Strom Thurmond had much more access to power in American society given America's history of racial inequality than many Black Americans. Thus the networks were more likely to give them airtime. African American activists would have to work harder to render themselves and their ideas newsworthy in the eyes of white reporters. The free marketplace of ideas was therefore an inadequate ideology given the inequality that still defined American society.

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[438] Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, 2001), p.6.
[439] Ponce De Leon, *That's the Way It Is*, p.67. Gans, *Deciding What's News,* p.39. Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*, p.28.

That the networks gave credence to segregationist criticisms of bias was nowhere more evident than in their news documentaries. Discussions surrounding NBC's *The American Revolution of '63* (which aired a fortnight after *The Press and the Race Issue*) revealed how white supremacist arguments about reportorial bias had found purchase in public discourse and at the networks. 'The ideological aspects of merely scheduling a three-hour telecast on the desegregation issue are obvious,' television critic Rick Du Brow declared from his column. For anyone who had missed the argument, Mississippi governor Ross Barnett – on *The American Revolution of '63* itself – claimed that the media had blown the race issue out of proportion that summer. 'Information media including the TV networks have publicised and dramatised the race issue far beyond its relative importance in today's America,' he opined, arguing that the very documentary for which he was speaking, as well as the March on Washington coverage, 'underlined the fact that the American public is being propagandised by overemphasis.'[440] In an inter-office memo which guided the production, executive producers Robert Northshield and Chet Hagan anticipated such backlash. 'We begin with the strongly-held belief that there is a revolution and that it is very important,' they asserted to their team upon embarking on the project.[441] Their need to justify their conviction that the story was worth covering in a summer which witnessed more than 1,400 separate demonstrations revealed the impact that segregationists' claims had made.

In their memo Northshield and Hagan also demonstrated their desire to counter segregationists' criticisms that their coverage was slanted in favour of African Americans. 'I would be amazed and pleased, in view of the networks' past performance on this issue, if this program showed objectivity and fairness in its presentation,' Strom Thurmond declared upon hearing of NBC's plans for the special.[442] Demonstrating an awareness of such charges, in laying out to their team

[440] Rick Du Brow, 'TV in Review: Segregation Special Had Its Point', *UPI,* 3 September 1963, Watson, *Expanding Vista*, p.110.
[441] Quoted in Scheuer, 'TV Keynotes: NBC to Explore '63 Revolution'
[442] Quoted in Watson, *Expanding Vista*, p.110.

what ground the documentary would cover the producers made clear the necessity of providing a platform for white supremacists: 'We'll find balance for our report in Jackson, Miss., where the executive secretary of the Citizens Council will appear, in Montgomery Ala., where Gov. Wallace will present his interpretation of the Constitution, in Greenville, NC., where Sen. Sam Ervin will present his.'[443] While an FCC official had determined that providing airtime to the White Citizens Councils was akin to giving the town drunk a platform in a debate about temperance, Northshield and Hagan deemed airing the views of the WCC executive secretary a desirable way to prove their documentary was not biased. The producers conceded to white supremacist arguments that balance meant ensuring the pro-segregation viewpoint received airtime.

Not everyone in the journalism industry believed NBC's concessions to the racist white South were necessary to demonstrate neutrality. Some critics did applaud the documentary for including the segregationist spokesmen. 'Robert Northshield and Chet Hagan have been scrupulously fair in presenting spokesmen representing virtually all shades of opinion,' gushed a local New York newspaper. *The Washington Post's* television critic Lawrence Laurent, however, was more critical. 'Since NBC sometimes leans over backwards to accommodate Southerners,' he told his readers, 'there were special interviews with segregation advocates.'[444] From Laurent's perspective the network had gone far beyond what was necessary to demonstrate neutrality: a clear demonstration that they were acquiescing to the demands of the South. What constituted fairness and objectivity was clearly a subjective determination.

Laurent's review also highlighted how NBC, in attempting to appease white Southerners, was in fact ensuring that their complaints against network television received an even larger audience. 'NBC even permitted Gov. Ross Barnett of Mississippi to take a punch at the medium

[443] Quoted in Scheuer, 'TV Keynotes: NBC to Explore '63 Revolution'
[444] Laurent, 'Long Race Special'

of television,' Laurent highlighted.[445] Providing men like Barnett with the opportunity to criticise the news media, Hagan and Northshield believed, demonstrated that the network provided the balance those white Southerners accused them of lacking. But airing Barnett's comments, which were picked up and repeated in numerous reviews of the documentary, also meant his arguments reached millions of Americans across the country, even those who didn't watch the special.[446]

In accusing Northern news media of bias, segregationists held news organisations to standards they themselves had set. While white supremacists often made these accusations in inflammatory, emotional terms that did not stand up to scrutiny, there was a kernel of truth in their claims. Reporters tried to cover both sides of the race issue objectively but by the early 1960s many had sided with the civil rights movement. Believing segregationist arguments fell within the sphere of deviance they found it impossible to try to balance racism with equal rights. Management, however, disagreed. News executives like Richard Salant both publicly and privately held on to the belief that enlightenment could only be achieved through allowing both sides to express their points of view. Although news departments had never committed to providing equal time, executives believed television news should function as a free marketplace of ideas. In the cracks between professed impartiality and evident reportorial sympathy for the civil rights cause, white supremacists found a foothold from which they could support a narrative that rendered white Southerners as the true victims in the civil rights story. At the same time segregationists' extant positions in American society meant newsmen privileged their perspectives in a marketplace that rather than being truly free, replicated American inequality.

Conclusion

[445] Ibid.
[446] Aside from Laurent's review, Barnett's comments were covered in 'Holiday's Pick of the TV Best', Du Brow, 'TV in Review: Segregation Special Had Its Point', 'NBC Televises 3-Hour History on Civil Rights', *Schenectady NY Gazette*, 3 September 1963.

Television news coverage of the race issue in the mid twentieth century was not straightforwardly sympathetic. Many factors shaped the way network television newsmen made their decisions in how to cover the leading domestic news story of their time. Chief among their concerns was a professional commitment to objectivity, understood as the necessity to cover both sides of controversial issues. Mid-century network executives believed that television news should operate as a free marketplace of ideas. Yet the men behind television news could never achieve the impossible goal of truly neutral news. In styling themselves as purveyors of 'unbiased' reporting, the networks provided a weapon for segregationists to discredit the news media as slanted when they failed to uphold the false equivalency between equal rights and racism.

The criticism by white Southerners in positions of power dominated network concerns about the neutrality of their news product. Over the course of the 1960s, however, Black activists had grown increasingly disillusioned with how news coverage filtered through a white lens distorted the story of American racial injustice. As the next chapter will explore, at the same time that network television seized upon Black Power as a sensational fresh chapter in the race relations story in 1966, proponents of Black Power viewed the white institution of television news as an enemy.

CHAPTER SIX

BLACK POWER, WHITE BACKLASH

'We want Black Power!' shouted Stokely Carmichael. Camera lights illuminated the new young chairman of SNCC against a backdrop of inky darkness. 'We want Black Power!' he repeated, each word accompanied by an emphatic index finger that cut through the air with fervent passion. 'We want Black Power!' Carmichael hollered for a third then fourth, fifth, and sixth time as his electrified crowd amid cheers and cries echoed back 'Black Power!' 'What do you want?' Carmichael called out spurring the crowd's energy with a new variation. 'Black Power!' the young African American men and women responded from the darkness.[447]

The scene, which had originally taken place on a hot night in Greenwood, Mississippi during James Meredith's March Against Fear in the July of 1966, now played out again two months later on television sets across the country as the opening footage of *CBS Reports: Black Power, White Backlash*. Immediately after opening with the footage of the Greenwood rally, CBS Reports juxtaposed Carmichael's clarion call for Black Power with a declaration of white hatred. The dark footage of the chanting African American crowd cut to a crucifix pendant hanging against the background of a brilliant white T-shirt. 'Nobody in the town has any use for 'em,' the T-shirt's wearer spat before the camera panned up to reveal a young white man speaking to a reporter's microphone. He continued: 'Nobody likes 'em'. Nobody wants 'em.' Rhetorically, by presenting these two clips side by side the documentary intimated that the white interviewee's

[447] *CBS Reports: Black Power, White Backlash*, [television programme] CBS, 27 September, 1966. MRC Vault, Media Resources Center, University of California, Berkeley, CA. and PCM. This programme was originally viewed onsite at the UC Berkeley archive and again at the PCM in 2017. Later a copy became available on a youtube account hosted by 'Hezakaya Newz' which the author downloaded and has in personal possession. The Hezakaya Newz online copy has since been removed. All further reference to *Black Power, White Backlash* relates to this programme.

clear hatred of African Americans was the inverted mirror image of Stokely Carmichael's call for Black Power.

As the documentary progressed, CBS Reports also exposed viewers to very different understandings of Black Power. 'It means dignity. It doesn't mean violence,' Adam Clayton Powell, the African American congressman for New York informed host Mike Wallace later in the show. Leaning back in his leather office chair as a cigar burned from his hand the congressman continued: 'It means integrity, it doesn't mean anti-white. It means pride in being Black. It means you're willing to co-operate with your white brother and sister if they're gonna co-operate with you in terms of giving you the same things that they have. That's what it means.' The documentary also included an extended interview with a calm and composed Carmichael, who, clad in a dashiki given to him by Sekou Touré, the president of Guinea, expounded upon the economic and political principles of the ideology.

Carmichael would later argue from the pages of his autobiography that activists had 'been talking about nothing else in the Delta for years.'[448] Yet in the eyes of the national news media which had assembled to document the Meredith March, his declaration of the slogan on that June evening in Greenwood seemed to mark a turning point in the African American Freedom Struggle. Television news had warned in 1963 that the potential for violent militancy haunted the civil rights movement. In June of 1966 reporters believed that this threat had materialised

[448] Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael*, (New York, 2004) p.507. The term 'Black Power' had been used before by notable figures such as controversial congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Paul Robeson, and Richard Wright. Its ideology which was, as historian of Black Power Peniel Joseph has pointed out, although both broad and flexible, was characterised by the promotion of Black self-determination and political, economic, and cultural empowerment had been preached and enacted by activists both within and without the civil rights movement from Gloria Richardson to Malcolm X. See Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power*, (New York, 2006), Tom Adam Davies, *Mainstreaming Black Power* (California, 2017), p.4.

in the form of a new generation of SNCC activists led by Carmichael and the incendiary slogan, Black Power.

In the following months, television news and the print press made what they perceived as a new wave of African American militance one of the biggest stories of the summer, fuelled by and in turn fuelling liberal and moderate overreaction.[449] Reporters found in the charismatic, eloquent, and telegenic Stokely Carmichael a natural spokesman. The decision to open a documentary about Black Power with the footage that marked the phenomenon's entry into wider American consciousness, therefore, was a choice that made perfect narrative sense. The sensational clip also provided drama. Viewers were sure to be captivated by the powerful sight of Carmichael's performance and unlikely to switch channels. This imagery, however, presented America with the version of Stokely Carmichael – fierce, charged, and confrontational – that most provoked white American fear of a Black uprising. As introductory footage, it was this imagery which would shape how viewers interpreted the rest of the documentary. Presenting the young white man's hatred of African Americans as the flipped side of the Carmichael coin refracted his Black Power message into reverse racism. The documentary's presentation mirrored and helped to confirm news media coverage which in the words of scholars Wayne E. Brockriede and Robert L. Scott, filtered 'a complex and ambivalent Carmichael into a simple and satanic Stokely.'[450]

The plurality of definitions evident in CBS's documentary made clear that ambiguity surrounded the concept of Black Power. As SNCC organiser and Black Power thinker Julius Lester, highlighted: 'Literally, it meant power for black people, and everyone had his own definition of what that power was to consist [of] and how it was to be obtained.'[451] There was a multiplicity

[449] Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought To Be*, p.303.
[450] Wayne E. Brockriede and Robert L. Scott, 'Stokely Carmichael: Two Speeches on Black Power', *Communication Studies*, 19/1 (1968) p.8.
[451] Cited in Davies, *Mainstreaming Black Power*, p.4.

of possible ways, therefore, that the nation's news media could have interpreted the ideology. As the documentary revealed, television news reporters had access to, were in dialogue with, and at times broadcast the exposition of activists and proponents who made clear that Black Power was an expansive ideology which centred on the promotion of Black self-determination and political, economic, and cultural empowerment. Yet television reporters overwhelmingly adopted a singular understanding of Black Power as violent, aggressive reverse racism which marked a clear departure from nonviolent civil rights activism. This interpretation coloured their reporting and therefore distorted the American public's understanding of the African American freedom struggle in the late 1960s. Only in the past three decades have historians begun to recover the political substance and deep roots of Black Power ideology, and the expansive reach and impact of its community programmes.[452]

This chapter seeks to provide an in-depth exploration of the reasons behind the television news industry's representation of Black Power when they first covered the phenomenon in the summer of 1966. Scholar of media and race Herman Gray has argued television is a medium of slippage and contradictory meanings.[453] Television news brought into American living rooms multiple and conflicting narratives about Black Power, but overall, the networks emphasised the portrayal of a simplified and villainous ideology responsible for America's apparently worsening Black-white relations and elevated Stokely Carmichael into its spokesperson. The pages below reveal that the deteriorating relationship between activists in the freedom struggle and the reporters responsible for bringing their stories to the nation's television screens helped influence the formation of this narrative. Stokely Carmichael and other members of SNCC who

[452] Alongside the work of Peniel Joseph, see for example: William L. Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975 (Chicago, 1992), Stephen Tuck, 'We Are Taking Up Where the Movement in the 1960s Left Off': Proliferation and Power of African American Protest during the 1970s' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43/4 (2008), pp.637-654. Paul Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution: The History of the Black Panther Party* (Tuscaloosa, 2007), Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore, 2014), Farmer, *Remaking Black Power.*
[453] Cited in Acham, *Revolution Televised,* p.xv.

had grown disillusioned with the national news media and in line with their principles of Black self-determination, no longer prioritised communicating to white America and pulled away from white reporters. Such treatment served to make those white reporters – many of whom had enjoyed a history of good working relationships with civil rights activists – even less inclined to try and understand an ideology which they instead interpreted through their pre-determined frame of aggressive racist violence. Black Power therefore was not simply a story that took place in the America on which television journalists reported. This phenomenon shaped how activists and reporters interacted with each other.

At the same time, the exigencies of television as a technology and the news as a format for explanation influenced and compounded the ultimately damaging ways television news portrayed Black Power. Television was a medium which best suited to portraying short, easily digestible narratives; it did not lend itself to communicating complex topics. The few minutes allotted to an evening news story or the hour available for a documentary was not sufficient to provide the white American public with an adequate examination of an ideology which demanded them to radically reinterpret how race operated in America.

Reporters themselves were not in a position to understand the ideology. The fast-paced and demanding world of television news production did not provide these white journalists, who had no personal connection to or in-depth understanding of the Black community, with the time to understand the evolving dynamics of Black activism. Their limited comprehension of Black Power's roots, combined with the news industry's incentive to privilege fresh stories with the goal of keeping audiences interested, meant that reporters told a story of change rather than continuity. At the same time, television reporters, as SNCC workers recognised, were not geared towards covering the unglamorous grind of grassroots organising. The news industry's traditional inclination for the dramatically personal merged with the visual medium's powerful

amplification of good looks and charisma to motivate producers to focus on interviews and speeches with telegenic activists as the way to cover the story.[454] This approach individualised and masculinised Black Power, elevating the importance of rhetoric and obscuring the community activism largely undertaken by everyday Black women that historians have begun to uncover.[455]

To make these arguments, this chapter first considers the perspectives of SNCC and its chairman Stokely Carmichael, revealing how they saw relationships with television news and the wider news media as a site upon which to enact their Black Power politics. The second section analyses the decisions made by television newsmen in reporting the Black Power phenomenon in the summer of 1966. It shows how the white perspectives of these reporters combined with the demands of the medium and the news industry to distort those messages activists did try to share with the wider American public.

PART ONE

The Disillusionment of SNCC and Stokely Carmichael

'Mr. Carmichael, you have said over and over again that the white press has distorted your use of the slogan "Black Power,"' Lawrence Spivak put to the SNCC chairman on the 21 August episode of NBC's news interview programme, *Meet the Press*.[456] Continuing, the show's lead interviewer offered an opportunity to Carmichael to put the record straight: 'Will you tell us

[454] Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*, p.149., Gans, *Deciding What's News*, p.62.
[455] See for example, Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – A New History of the Civil Rights Movement From Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York, 2010), Tuck, 'We Are Taking Up', Keisha N. Blain, *Until I Am Free: Fannie Lou Hamer's Enduring Message to America* (New York, 2021).
[456] In this special extended edition of the programme dedicated to civil rights, Carmichael appeared for questioning alongside Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Floyd McKissick of CORE, Whitney Young of the National Urban League, and James Meredith. The network received over 15,000 requests for transcripts of the show. 'Transcript Requests Break NBC Record', *CD*, 24 October 1966, p.11. *Transcript: Meet the Press Special Edition*, 21 August 1966, b.5, f. 'Meet the Press', 21 August 1966, SNCCP. Hereafter all mentions of this programme refer to this transcript.

here and now exactly what you mean by "Black Power," so that all of us can understand your meaning without misquoting you or distorting you?' Carmichael declined. 'I am sorry you asked the question now,' he informed Spivak and the other reporters on the interviewing panel, 'because two days ago the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee decided we are not going to define the term "Black Power" anymore.'

Two months had passed since American television screens had brought Stokely Carmichael's shout of Black Power from the Mississippi Delta into the nation's living rooms. In that time the news media had reported extensively on SNCC's new slogan and had made Carmichael a regular fixture on television news. Yet the concept had become as confused as it was controversial in American public discourse. SNCC's decision, therefore, may have seemed irrational. Given the opportunity to clarify Black Power, Carmichael refused, seemingly opting to keep America in the dark.

His choice becomes understandable when placed in the context of activists' developing beliefs in public communications as a site upon which to enact Black Power. In August of 1966, SNCC and Carmichael saw the American news media as an enemy rather than an ally. They held that their purpose in communicating to the American public was to reach Black America. 'The debate about [Black Power]' Carmichael argued later in the interview, 'was arranged among white people and the white press, and it is in fact an attempt to smear and distort SNCC, and it is crystal clear in my mind that any white man in this country knows about power.' Trying to explain Black Power to the white news media therefore was neither the organisation's priority, nor, it seemed by the end of August, a productive use of its time.

Appreciating how SNCC's communications department and Stokely Carmichael interacted with national journalists is key to understanding how network news covered the emergence of Black

Power. As this section will show, this refusal to cater to white reporters was the product of the recent history of the relationship that SNCC as an organisation and Carmichael as an individual had experienced with the national news media. As SNCC communications workers through their efforts in trying to attract coverage from national news outlets became familiar with how the white news media operated, they grew disillusioned with mainstream journalists whom they found distorted SNCC's message and demonstrated little regard for Black lives. At the same time Carmichael, having come of age watching television, had learnt that appearances on public broadcasting and interactions with white reporters were a political act in which Black activists needed to privilege Black rather than white America.

SNCC Communications

In the early 1960s, SNCC organisers were cognisant of the important role news media attention could play in their mission. 'Public awareness was crucial to our strategy,' recalled Mary King, a core member of the SNCC's communications department.[457] In the organisation's first years, SNCC workers, in line with the SCLC, believed that national publicity was key to gaining support for their struggle against injustice. SNCC organisers in the early part of the decade believed that exposing Southern racial brutality would raise the consciousness and prick the conscience of the wider American public.

In the early 1960s SNCC members also viewed the national news media's attention as a safety imperative for civil rights organisers in the Deep South.[458] As NAACP veteran Ruby Hurley highlighted, working in the South had been far more dangerous before television news began to cover the civil rights story. 'The fifties were much worse than the sixties,' she later recalled.

[457] King, *Freedom Song*, p.213.
[458] Walmsley, 'First Draft of History', pp.111-113.

'When I was out there by myself, for instance, there were no TV cameras with me to give me any protection…when the eye of the press or the eye of the camera was on the situation it was different.'[459] The presence of reporters and television cameras could act as a safeguard for civil rights activists, preventing segregationist violence by signalling to white Southerners that the entire nation would bear witness to their actions.[460] The SNCC communications department therefore considered convincing the national news media to cover their work in the South as an essential security tactic. 'Our job, in mobilising the press,' King recalled, 'was to make local law officers feel that they were under scrutiny, thereby providing a measure of safety for civil rights workers.'[461] In the early years of their organising, SNCC recognised clear incentives for attracting the national news media.

As the 1960s progressed, however, SNCC organisers grew increasingly disillusioned with national news reporters who to them proved not to value Black life or Black perspectives and instead imposed their own beliefs onto their reporting.[462] Internal documents reveal that the communications department increasingly recognised that news outlets were guided by news values that did not align with their beliefs in what really mattered and therefore warped coverage in directions away from what SNCC saw as the true story. 'Because the press in this country is set up to deal with incidents, events and leader figures,' King wrote to chairman John Lewis in 1965, 'it has managed mainly to distort our message all along and will continue to do so.'[463] The communications secretary recognised that the national news media's approaches to framing

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[459] Ruby Hurley in Howell Raines, (ed), *My Soul is Rested: the Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South* (New York, 1977), p.136.
[460] For more on the inhibiting effect of television cameras on segregationist violence, see: Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America,* p.228., Adam Fairclough, 'Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Quest for Nonviolent Social Change', *Phylon*, 47/1 (1986) p.11.
[461] King, *Freedom Song*, p.215.
[462] For more on SNCC's beliefs in the implicit racism of the national news media see: Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, p.38., Say Burgin, 'SNCC, the Media and the Myth of an Antiwhite Black Power Movement' [article under preparation], Lewis with D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, pp.248-249., Hollis Watkins in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer with Sarah Flynn (eds), *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York, 1990), pp.182-183., Walmsley, 'First Draft of History', p.209.
[463] Letter from Mary King to John Lewis, b.2, f. 'Lewis-King, Mary', SNCCP

stories were antithetical to SNCC's democratic approach to leadership and grassroots community organising. Writing later in her autobiography, King also pointed out that the job of the communications department in trying to get gain publicity for their operations in the national news media became more difficult as SNCC's 'strategies diversified from the assimilationist direct action of the sit-ins and Freedom Rides to [its] subsequent pursuit of more political objectives.' Long-term organising to build up local Black community confidence and political power was far more difficult to sell to national reporters. The short-term goals of news teams clashed with the long-term project of the civil rights movement.

SNCC's disenchantment with the national news media intensified as national outlets' coverage of the organisation grew increasingly negative. As the mid 1960s edged into the twilight years of the decade, SNCC members detected that reporting on the organisation had become actively hostile.[464] In May of 1966, an indignant James Forman, SNCC's Executive Secretary, called a staff meeting due to the 'unfavourable publicity' resulting from the appointment of Stokely Carmichael to the position of chair. A number of news outlets had framed Carmichael's election as a coup organised by radical elements of the organisation to oust the existing leadership of John Lewis. In a declaration of the organisation's bitter feelings towards the news media, Forman argued that the slander to which SNCC had been subjected was 'understandable, because the American press is not our friend.'[465]

Three months later a report on the 'Nature of SNCC Communications' from the communications section of the Atlanta office marked the final breakdown in the relationship. The report argued that a new philosophy should be developed for SNCC communications

[464] Mark Walmsley's research has highlighted how as divisions within SNCC became more apparent and the organisation became more outspoken – taking public stances on controversial issues such as the Vietnam War (which they had avoided in earlier eras) – national news outlets painted ever more negative pictures of the organisation. Walmsley, 'First Draft of History', pp.162-165.
[465] Quoted in ibid., p.165.

commanded by an 'acceptance of the fact that the press is doing us no favour by their stories on SNCC.' With a note of frustrated resignation, the report declared 'in fact they write what they want (as they always have done.)'[466] SNCC workers' earlier reservations about trying to work with the national news media by the summer of 1966 had developed into a full-blown rejection that any benefits to be had in courting white reporters. The Atlanta office therefore moved to abandon this strategy.

SNCC's disavowal of the national news media coupled with its rising scepticism that there was anything to gain in trying to communicate to a white audience. Through his experiences of working in the communication section, Charlie Cobb, who succeeded Julian Bond as head of the department, came to believe that having been socialised into a racist society, white Americans were incapable of understanding SNCC's message. 'Meaningful communication to whites breaks down over culturally integrated white supremacy that effects [sic] every person at every level,' the new director argued in a position paper entitled 'TOWARDS A THEORY OF COMMUNICATIONS.' Continuing, he explained: 'the basis from which white people proceed blocks any art of real understanding of what we as black people must do.' Cobb recognised that effective communication required certain shared assumptions. Without a shared belief in the oppression African Americans experienced, Cobb held that white audiences fundamentally could not grasp the reasons for nor the methods necessary in the fight for Black equality. To appeal successfully to the conscience of white America required not just making white Americans aware of the injustices African Americans faced but fundamentally altering the white worldview. SNCC's new communications director held it was pointless for SNCC to engage in this seemingly unachievable task.

[466] Report of the Communications Section of the Atlanta Office, 1 August 1966, b.36, SNCCP.

Instead, Cobb argued that the Communications Section should 'gear the department to the black community.'[467] In the years leading up to 1966, SNCC had focused its efforts on fostering self-determination and political power within Black communities – a mission Stokely Carmichael crystallised into the slogan of Black Power. To align the organisation's approach to publicity with its politics, the report had several recommendations which outlined how SNCC could exert Black Power through its communications strategy. Among them it advised that '[a]ll formal press conferences be held in the Black community.' With its new belief in privileging dialogue with African Americans, SNCC recognised that to reach Black people they needed to go to where Black people were. At the same time this instruction revealed a recognition that the location of public communications pronouncements made implicit statements that tacitly endorsed or challenged assumptions about social value. By holding press conferences in Black communities, SNCC demonstrated that those communities mattered. This imperative would also put into practice the organisation's new commitment to eschewing the white news media, making clear it no longer prioritised trying to make white journalists' jobs easier. Recognising that the white reporters also benefited from their relationship with and access to SNCC workers in gaining sources for stories, the report argued that the organisation should take control of the power it could exert in the information economy.

While the frequency with which Carmichael appeared on network television in the summer of 1966 revealed that SNCC did not commit fully to shunning the national news media, the organisation had clearly adopted a new set of priorities. Where once SNCC, believing in the value of reaching the wider American public, had tried to work with white reporters, by the summer of 1966 the organisation had abandoned this approach. Enacting Black Power, the communications section had come to realise, meant speaking directly to Black America.[468] This

[467] 'TOWARDS A THEORY OF COMMUNICATION' [n.d.] Charlie Cobb, b.24, SNCCP. For more on the change in direction and audience of SNCC's rhetoric, see: Walmsley, 'First Draft of History', pp.166-170.
[468] See also Walmsley, 'First Draft of History', pp.283-284.

evolution of SNCC's attitudes towards the national news media and its change in goals meant the organisation adopted a new approach to how it engaged with national journalists. This change is crucial context to understanding how television news reporters perceived and interpreted Black Power.

Stokely Carmichael

Unlike the older movement leaders, Stokely Carmichael – born in the early 1940s – was part of the generation that came of age alongside the new medium of television. TV news had only just begun to proliferate when Martin Luther King Jr. began his career as a civil rights leader with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. King had a natural affinity for the medium, possessing both a charisma that translated telegenically and an understanding of what news producers needed. He had not, however, grown up watching TV. For Stokely Carmichael, on the other hand, 'the magic of television was very present' in a childhood where the new sets were becoming a permanent feature of American homes – including the South Bronx apartment he moved to from Trinidad at age eleven. 'It was television and more television,' Carmichael recalled in his autobiography of the first summer he spent in America.[469] Over a decade later, when Carmichael went to college in 1960, evenings in the dormitory TV room had become a feature of student life at Howard University.

By the time Carmichael entered activism, joining the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG) at Howard, he already possessed a sophisticated understanding of how the politics of representation on screen affected Black America. 'The exclusion of racial minorities generally, and militant and intelligent black voices in particular, was near total,' Carmichael recalled of this era. The young student activists recognised both the effects of this broadcasting white-out in

[469] Carmichael with Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, p.52.

perpetuating the oppression of African Americans and the television industry's role in maintaining it. 'We used to say in NAG, "A free black mind is a concealed weapon,"' Carmichael remembered. 'And someone would always add, "Yeah, an' the media going make darn sure it stay concealed too."'[470] As students, NAG members were keenly aware of the role a biased media played in the war of ideas at the heart of the struggle for Black Freedom.

The few African American leaders whom the networks did occasionally allow onto American airwaves, Carmichael and his Howard peers discerned, were only those interested in addressing the white establishment.[471] Such 'responsible Negro spokesmen' as Roy Wilkins or Whitney Young who came on TV in the dorms at Howard, were not speaking to Black America. 'We'd sit there and watch them talk right over and across us, addressing the white establishment... Keeping themselves, and us, firmly in our place,' he recalled.[472] By engaging in what Carmichael described as 'preemptive self-censoring' he argued that these moderate leaders ensured their messages would be deemed palatable by white America. By doing so however, they gutted their arguments of any political power and extinguished any revolutionary spark that might have existed amongst their Black audiences. Catering to white audiences meant preventing effective communication to Black America. Carmichael began to identify the weaknesses inherent in the approach of trying to speak to white America in a way that made white audiences and therefore the white power structure comfortable, through watching television at Howard.

Two African American spokesmen stood out dramatically to Carmichael and his college peers in this period through their defiance of the white media frame. 'Whenever *Jet* gave a heads up that either of two young black men would be on, you had to push and wedge your way into the TV room. Standing room only, bro,' he recalled of the enthusiasm in his Howard dorms that

[470] Ibid., p.253.
[471] Ibid., p.254.
[472] Ibid., p.543.

greeted the appearance of either Malcolm X or James Baldwin on television. While each man put forward dramatically different messages, according to Carmichael, they left Black students enraptured for the same reason:

> Unlike the "responsible" spokesmen, unable or unwilling to risk offense to white patrons whose support they hoped to win, Malcolm and Jimmy were black men. They spoke the truth as they saw it. They never apologised for us. They attacked, eloquently, every demeaning definition imposed on our people. They made no concession to racist arrogance or ignorance. They never backed down. And they took no prisoners.[473]

The unwillingness of these Black spokesmen to bend to the will of white America, inspired the Black student activist and his peers: 'I don't know if these two brothers ever fully understood just how much they meant, how crucially important, how painfully necessary, their kind of bold representation in those times was for our age set.'[474] Carmichael understood by virtue of his own experience the power that television appearances by African Americans leaders could hold for young Black audiences.

Carmichael's history as a television viewer shaped his communicative choices when he became a regular fixture on television screens as the media-anointed spokesman of Black Power in the summer of 1966. SNCC's new chairman chose purposefully to speak primarily to the Black community and aimed to identify first and foremost with that audience. In doing so, he personified the ideology he advanced.[475] By enacting these beliefs in his televisual appearances Carmichael followed the example that had been set for him by Malcolm X and James Baldwin who refused to censor themselves or cater to a white audience.

Such a strategy carried an inherent risk. In not gearing public communication towards a white audience, Carmichael gave the white media vast room to misinterpret his message and

[473] Ibid., pp.254-255.
[474] Ibid., p.255.
[475] Brockriede and Scott, 'Stokely Carmichael'.

sensationalise Black Power into its most confrontational and controversial form. But Carmichael was willing to take this risk: 'I remember only too well those Negro leaders who used to come on TV when we were at Howard… Saying only what was permissible, expected and inoffensive to white folk…That I refused to do. What's the point of saying anything if you ain't going to tell the truth?'[476] Even when his television appearances prompted media professionals offering unsolicited advice on how toning down his manner would market his message more effectively, the SNCC chairman refused to compromise. As he relayed in his autobiography, such industry insiders would attempt to offer the new TV star tips on his comportment: 'Look, you are a media personality now. Don't waste it. You're convinced you have a message then don't blow it. You gotta cultivate a different image…TV is a "cool" medium…be cooler, less confrontational…less angry.' Carmichael pushed back: 'Lord, I wasn't about cultivating some image to make whites more comfortable. Hell no. I took the same position on speaking that Malcolm took on nonviolence: "We are calm and [non]confrontational with those who are calm and [non]confrontational with us.'[477] Having come of age in the era when television began to redefine how public life and politics played out, he understood that how one communicated on television was fundamental to enacting one's ideological principles.

As part of his sophisticated approach to communication, Carmichael adapted his style and delivery to suit his immediate audience. In front of a largely Black non-college educated crowd, the SNCC chairman employed a mode of address he described as 'a down-home, nitty-gritty idiom in a style I mostly borrowed from the Harlem street-corner nationalists and the Southern black preachers,' which he 'saved for the brothers and sisters on the block.'[478] When addressing predominately white college student audiences, however, he deployed the scholarly language of

[476] Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, p.543.
[477] Ibid.
[478] Ibid., p.546.

his university education.[479] As Carmichael affirmed in his autobiography, he had both a 'standard-English speech reserved for the merely affluent and curious' as well as a 'harder, more analytic, and ideological argument for more serious political and intellectual forums.'[480] It was an amalgam of these two vernaculars that the SNCC chairman used when invited into television studios. Carmichael may not have censored the content of his message, but he adapted his delivery for maximum impact.

To understand how the national news media reported a distorted version of Black Power to its American audience it is necessary to understand how SNCC and Carmichael's espousal of Black Power was not aimed at either white audiences or white reporters. When national television seized upon Black Power as an urgent news story in the Summer of 1966, SNCC and its chairman Stokely Carmichael chose to address the working-class Black community rather than trying to appeal to white television viewers. The disillusionment of Black Power's proponents with the national news media, however, explains only half of the story. How white reporters approached Black Power is the subject of the next section.

PART TWO

The Television News Industry

Black Power, White Backlash was not the first title the production team behind the CBS Reports special on Black Power considered. 'One of the executives said we should call it 'Black Power or White Power,' co-producer Sam Roberts recalled of the early planning stages of the project in September 1966. Yet the suggestion to investigate white power alongside Black Power proved contentious. 'There was a big argument about that,' Roberts remembered. Outlining the

[479] Charles J. Stewart, 'The Evolution of a Revolution: Stokely Carmichael and the Rhetoric of Black Power', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 83 (1997), p.434.
[480] Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for a Revolution*, p.546.

majority of the team's objections he continued: 'because we said, you know, if you really want to get into white power you've got to do the whole structure of the American economy and sociology and everything else.' Instead, the team decided to limit the programme to only focusing on Black Power and white resentment to it. 'What television does best is little slices,' Roberts explained of the thinking that ultimately swayed the argument.[481]

This decision process behind the production of *Black Power, White Backlash* illuminated the intersecting dynamics at play in television news coverage of Black Power that summer. Everyone involved in the conversation had been white. Although all three networks had desegregated by the end of 1963, in the Summer of 1966 the network television news industry remained an overwhelmingly white and male institution.[482] The white perspective of television newsmen limited their ability to understand Black Power and informed a framing which, whether newsmen were conscious of it or not, tacitly implied that white feelings were the ones that mattered. From a Black point of view, as African American activists from Martin Luther King Jr. to Stokely Carmichael tried to express, Black Power was itself a backlash to white racism and continuing injustice against Black Americans.

However, focusing on how whiteness shaped newsmen's coverage provides only part of the explanation of how why television news portrayed a distorted version of Black Power to American viewers. As Roberts' recognition of television's strengths implies, reporters' decisions were also informed by the demands of the medium and the imperatives of the news industry. The following section will show how the white viewpoint of producers combined with their considerations of the exigencies of their medium and the news industry to determine their framing of Black Power. From a nuanced and multifaceted ideology white reporters brought

[481] Author Interview with Sam Roberts, 17 April 2020
[482] One of the few women who made it into a network television newsroom in this period was Alice Bigart, a co-producer with Sam Roberts on *CBS Reports Black Power, White Backlash.*

their viewers a simple message of aggressive reverse racism that represented a fundamental break with the past.

Section One

White Reporters

SNCC and Carmichael's approach to the news media marked a significant departure from the relationship with civil rights activists to which white reporters had become accustomed. Many of the newsmen covering Black Power that summer had reported on earlier eras of the movement. During the previous decade, white newscasters had benefited from the cooperation of African American activists who had facilitated their work. When Frank McGee went from covering the Montgomery Bus Boycott for local station WSFA-TV to becoming one of the first national NBC network correspondents he maintained his relationship with activist and lawyer Fred Gray. Gray, who played a vital leadership role during the boycott, later noted that he and McGee worked together in Montgomery and beyond to get stories of the freedom struggle to the public.[483] Symbiotic professional relationships with civil rights activists, like that which McGee and Gray developed, were a common feature of white reporters' experiences covering the Movement.

Yet as scholars Mary Blue and Vanessa Murphree have highlighted, white reporters who had been central to the civil rights movement found themselves ostracised by Black Power.[484] Accustomed to positive treatment from African American activists, for television newsmen like Frank McGee, SNCC and Carmichael's new approach to the white news media likely stung. According to Carmichael, resentment towards the changed relationship informed the negative

[483] 'Attorney Fred Gray talks about his relationship with WSFA's Frank McGee', WSFA 12 News, 2 December 2015 *https://www.wsfa.com/story/30645298/attorney-fred-gray-talks-about-his-relationship-with-wsfas-frank-mcgee/* (28 January 2022). McGee would also go on to anchor NBC's 'The American Revolution of '63'.
[484] Blue and Murphree, 'Stoke the Joke', p.211.

coverage of Black Power that summer. 'Hey, our approach minimised their role, but SCLC's entire strategy centred around the media,' Carmichael highlighted in his autobiography. 'So of course stories about "young SNCC organisers, jealous of Dr. King,' began to appear nationwide."[485] From Carmichael's perspective, negative coverage was the means by which white reporters retaliated against SNCC for refusing to cater to the national news media.

Such sentiments perhaps informed Frank McGee's derisive treatment of Black Power on his weekly NBC newscast the *McGee Report*. In the episode devoted to the Meredith March on its final day Sunday 26 June, the anchorman's dismissive tone was marked enough to lose him Black fans. Mrs Marguerite Barnett from Chicago wrote in to complain to NBC that McGee's 'antipathy toward Stokely Carmichael and any discussion of 'Black Power' was open, obvious, and hardly in the best journalistic tradition.' Continuing she lamented his 'one-sided, snide reporting' and 'not to[sic] subtle hostility to the 'new' civil rights movement'. 'McGee's determination that the march was not necessary was the last supercilious straw. Frankly the only explanation I have for such a one-sided shoddy bit of reporting is that it reflects the white Northern fear of a civil rights movement that is getting too close to home,' Mrs Barnett declared.[486] Black viewers quickly picked up the antipathy that inflected white reporters' coverage of SNCC and Black Power.

Newscasters' hostility influenced their negative portrayal of Black Power even as it led them to fundamentally misunderstand the ideology. Viewing the world from a white, male perspective, they had grasped the message of a civil rights movement that intentionally tried to speak to white America in a language it would understand. But few reporters had an in-depth knowledge of Black America or connections to the Black community and in the context of a fast-paced

[485] Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, p.445.
[486] Letter from Marguerite Barnett to NBC, 26 June 1966, b.296 f.14 'McGee June 26, 1966', EFPF.

news environment, they had limited opportunities to further their knowledge. As Sam Roberts recalled: 'I could cover civil rights today and cover brain surgery tomorrow and baseball the next day...10 o'clock in the morning [a producer could be told] you're gonna be on the air tonight at six. You don't have time to do any research.' White television newsmen under extreme time-constraints did not appreciate the evolving dynamics within the movement as a younger generation moved away from centring whiteness. While news reporters did not understand this positional displacement they felt it keenly and interpreted the shift in the context of their repeated warnings about future Black violence.

At his first press conference as chairman, Carmichael was struck by 'how little [the journalists] seemed to understand, as though they were stuck in 1960 with the student sit-ins and we were speaking in unknown tongues.'[487] When it came to the concept of Black Power, the white media's inability to comprehend, he felt, verged on the absurd:

> Two simple, clear, very commonly used English words. One an adjective, the other a noun. Basic. Nothing the least obscure or academically pretentious about them. Nothing mysterious or even slightly ambiguous either. Just two ordinary, unthreatening, everyday words in common usage, black and power. What could be simpler? But in combination? He'p us, Jesus!…[488]

White reporters, having grown familiar with the civil rights movement's adherence to the strictures of nonviolent protest, saw any form of resistance that fell outside of this rubric as a call for African American aggression. Television newsmen from the networks whether in a studio setting during a panel discussion or out interviewing Carmichael in the field for a news report continuously framed the conversation about his beliefs around the topic of African American violence.

[487] Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, pp.487-488. Cited in Walmsley, 'First Draft of History', p.266.
[488] Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, pp.523-524.

When Carmichael appeared on CBS's interview programme *Face the Nation* on 19 June during the Meredith March, interviewers Martin Agronsky, James Doyle, and John Hart asked Carmichael about little else. 'Do you reject the ultimate use of violence as a final, last resort in bringing down the power structure?' John Hart inquired of the SNCC chairman.[489] A few minutes later, when Carmichael had still resisted the interviewers' attempts to force him into an admission that he promoted the violent overthrow of white America, Martin Agronsky rephrased the question again: 'Are you advocating a violent way if you can't get [power] legally?' he pushed. In response Carmichael pointed first to America's use of force in Vietnam purportedly to ensure democracy and, drawing a parallel with SNCC's efforts towards the same goal, he highlighted the American government's 'responsibility to the black people in Lowndes County to assure them of free elections.' Continuing, he pronounced that if the country failed to uphold this duty, those illegally denied fair franchise were justified in using any means possible to ensure their ability to participate in the democratic process. Yet this answer, which once again was not a clear declaration of his advocation of Black aggressive violence, did not satisfy Agronsky. So he prodded again: 'Under those circumstances, then, you feel there is a justification for violent means?' To which Carmichael responded: 'I think its justified whatever they do. If they have tried every legal means and this country does not respond.'

After another few minutes, following a brief foray into Carmichael's opinion that Black soldiers should refuse to serve in Vietnam, James Doyle once again steered the conversation back to the issue of hypothetical Black violence. Having repeated Carmichael's words at the Greenwood rally, 'every courthouse in Mississippi should be burnt down tomorrow so that we can get rid

[489] *Face the Nation: Stokely Carmichael* [television programme] 19 June 1966, CBS viewed at the Ark Media Production Offices, New York, compiled for *Hope & Fury: MLK, the Movement and the Media,* [dir. Rachel Dretzin and Phil Bertelsen] NBC, 24 March 2018, A copy of this programme became available on a youtube account hosted by 'Hezakaya Newz' in 2018 which the author downloaded and has in personal possession. The Hezakaya Newz online copy has since been removed. *Transcript of Face the Nation*, 19 June 1966, https://www.crmvet.org/nars/660619_sncc_stokely_ftn.pdf (28 January 2022). All further references to Carmichael's appearance on Face the Nation refer to this programme.

of the dirt,' he cut off Carmichael's response about Mississippi's appalling record of white violence and asked of the young activist, 'can you register voters if you burn down courthouses? Are you going to burn down Courthouses?' This query won an exasperated eye roll from Carmichael who – the frustration now evident in his delivery – made clear that he meant such language figuratively. 'That analogy is used in this country all over by many people,' he pointed out. Doyle, not content with this response persisted: 'Are you talking in violent analogies because you want to see a Negro violent uprising?' Can you answer that question?' With another roll of his eyes Carmichael continued his battle with the three white reporters to determine the most salient issues surrounding Black Power. 'I told you the question of violence and nonviolence to me is irrelevant,' he repeated to the panel, 'that is not what I am working for. I am not organising for riots. I am not organising to make Black people nonviolent. I am organising for them to get the things they are supposed to have in this country – that every other group has in this country.' But before he could continue, Agronsky cut in. 'Yes but you can't dismiss the method as irrelevant,' the interviewer insisted with an incredulous smile. 'Well I certainly do, Mr Agronsky,' Carmichael retorted lightly. This brief flicker of levity did not last. The three white reporters continued to fixate on the topic of African American violence.

For Carmichael, the question of violence or nonviolence distracted from the public conversation that should concentrate on the reality that white violence continued to prevent African Americans from enjoying the same freedoms as the rest of America. Preoccupied with their literal interpretation of Carmichael's provocative rhetoric at the Greenwood rally, the white reporters clearly approached the interview determined to show that Black Power meant a belief in the use of force by African Americans to bring down the white government. Focused on trying to elicit an affirmation from Carmichael that this was the case, their relentless rephrasing of the same question sent the discussion around in circles and limited the

opportunity for Carmichael to present the American audience with more detail and nuance about the ideology behind the slogan.

White Americans viewing America from the same standpoint as the *Face the Nation* interviewers may well have seen the reporters' questioning as a reasonable and neutral attempt to get Carmichael to admit to the violent intent behind his provocative rhetoric at rallies. On the other hand, African Americans who shared Carmichael's conception of the realities of America for Black people saw deliberately obtuse white reporters intent on hounding a Black man. Former SNCC organiser Judy Richardson, for example, looking back at this *Face the Nation* interview for a 2018 documentary, observed: 'Three white male journalists as the panel and they're saying to him: 'Well don't you really mean it's about violence?' And he's saying, very calmly… 'We just want what everybody else has.'…They know what we're talking about. They had to make themselves not understand him.'[490] Continuing, Richardson argued that Agronsky, Hart, and Doyle misinterpreted Stokely Carmichael's beliefs on *Face the Nation* because, 'They wanted to see us as only passive.' White reporters could not process Carmichael's position outside of their dichotomy of passive resistance and aggressive violence. 'The media tends to be stuck in the narrative they understand,' Richardson concluded.[491] Having already adopted the narrative framework of potential Black aggression in 1963, television news reporters could not understand an ideology that did not explicitly reject violence in any other way.

Alongside their difficulty in conceiving of Black Power's encouragement of self-defence as anything but the promotion of violent aggression, white reporters consistently drew a false equivalence between the ideology's concept of self-determination and anti-whiteness. Journalists held that Black Power meant an inversion of racial inequality. 'Mr. Carmichael, do

[490] *Hope & Fury.*
[491] Ibid.

you have any good reason to believe that black power would be more just or less corrupt, in time than white power is?' Frank McGee asked during the Meredith March as he interviewed the SNCC chairman and Martin Luther King Jr. [492] Carmichael answered that he advocated for the restoration to Black Americans of the power that rightfully belonged to them. Despite Carmichael's attempt to refocus the conversation, McGee persisted with his framing: 'Isn't it just racism in reverse?' [493] From a white perspective, the emphasis on African American empowerment presumed an active hatred of white people.

Writing in the *New Republic* in the September of 1966, Bruce Detweiler reflected on how the filter of whiteness distorted newsmen's view of Black Power: 'It may be that white liberals, because they approach color too much from a white frame of reference, have thought too much about Negroes being anti-white and not enough about the ramifications of being anti-Negro.'[494] One of the few white reporters of the period to appreciate that Black pride did not equate to white hate, he presented his readers with a viewpoint that proved an exception in the national news media's coverage of Black Power in the summer of 1966: 'Being pro-Negro has not made [Stokely Carmichael] anti-white.'[495] Television news reporters, however, rarely recognised this distinction.

Appreciating the difficulty Carmichael had in trying to communicate with white reporters who did not move beyond the frames of reverse racism and violence helps make sense of his occasional refusal to engage. The CBS Special *March in Mississippi*, which aired a week after *Face*

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[492] *The Frank McGee Report*, [television programme], NBC, 26 June 1966, *Transcript: The Frank McGee Report*, [television programme], CBS, 26 June 1966b.296, f.14 'McGee June 26, 1966", EFPF.
[493] Ibid.
[494] Quoted in Burgin 'SNCC, the Media and the Myth', p.1.
[495] Ibid., Historian Lawrence Glickman has shown how false equivalences between pro-Black and anti-white sentiment are rooted in rhetoric advanced during Reconstruction. Lawrence Glickman, '3 Tropes of White Victimhood', *The Atlantic*, 20 July 2021. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/07/three-tropes-white-victimhood/619463/ (28 January 2022).

the Nation on the final day of the Meredith March, showed one such instance of Carmichael's decision not to answer a reporter's question. In a segment of the special which addressed Black Power, CBS reporter John Hart asked Martin Luther King Jr and Stokely Carmichael about their thoughts on Black Power. After enquiring whether Black Power might be 'a type of racism in reverse', the same John Hart who had interviewed Carmichael on *Face the Nation* the previous week returned again to the topic of the potential for African American violence.

> HART: Well, let's talk about violence. Mr. Meredith in whose name this march is being made stood mute when asked if he would resort to violence. Where do you stand?
> CARMICHAEL: I stand mute.[496]

To any viewer who had not watched *Face the Nation* the previous week Carmichael's opting for silence may have appeared nonsensical. Yet when considered in the context of that previous conversation his decision makes more sense. Having spent half an hour with this very reporter just days before unable to have a constructive dialogue on this topic, Carmichael probably viewed revisiting the issue as a futile expenditure of time and energy. The SNCC chairman opined later, 'whites get nervous when we don't keep talking about brotherly love. They need reassurance. But we're not about to divert our energies to give it to them.'[497] The approach of white reporters combined with Carmichael's privileging of a Black audience explains his instances of recalcitrance with the white news media.

The framework for discussing Black Power that reporters adopted during the Meredith March persisted throughout that summer. Mike Wallace's choice of questions in his interview with Stokely Carmichael during *CBS Reports Black Power, White Backlash* in September 1966 revealed how little the perspective of white television newsmen had changed in the four months since

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[496] *CBS News Special Report: The March in Mississippi* [television programme] CBS, 26 June 1966, *PCM*. This programme was originally viewed onsite at the PCM in 2018. Later a copy became available on a youtube account hosted by 'Hezakaya Newz' which the author downloaded and has in personal possession. The Hezakaya Newz online copy has since been removed.
[497] Quoted in Brockriede and Scott, 'Stokely Carmichael', p.10.

Carmichael's *Face the Nation* appearance and the coverage of the Meredith March. Where Carmichael tried to assert that Black Power stood for political and economic self-determination, Wallace pushed the SNCC chairman to admit he advocated for the use of force. 'And you're saying fight violence with violence?' he asked when Carmichael described incidents of racial terror that African Americans endured in America at the hands of white people. 'I am saying,' Carmichael responded, 'that we must build a movement of Black people, that will protect ourselves, so that we are willing to stop that by any means necessary.' Once again he refused to acquiesce to this framing of Black Power: 'I'm not concerned about the question of violence. It seems to me that will depend on how, in fact, white people respond. If white people in fact, are willing not to bother with black people because they are black, then there's going to be no question of violence.' By the time of this interview in September, Carmichael had repeatedly outlined to the news media that violence was not the focus of Black Power. Yet white newsmen refused to see in Black Power anything other than an avowal of an African American desire for violent retribution against racism.

Alongside shaping their perceptions of the ideology, the white perspective of television newsmen also informed their understandings of the connection between Black Power and the uprisings that surged through American cities that summer. Black Power's advocacy of self-defence shifted when shone through a white lens into a call for African American aggression. They interpreted the violence in the nation's urban centres as a direct result of the new ideology. Mike Wallace expressed this interpretation in the introductory commentary to the documentary. Describing how in the summer of 1966, 'as riots crackled through his cities the Northern white man came to realise the depth of his confusion, his animosity, and fear,' Wallace asserted 'Black Power was the catalyst.'[498] Defining the slogan as 'a rallying cry to Northern blacks mired in

[498] For more on how the news media blamed Black Power for urban insurrections, see: Peniel Joseph, 'The Black Power Movement, Democracy, and America in the King Years', *American Historical Review*, 114/4 (2009), p.1013.

frustration and bitterness,' the documentary then cut from Wallace in the studio to a montage of scenes of urban disorder implying a direct cause and effect. In referencing the 'frustration and bitterness' of African Americans in the North, Wallace gave the subtlest of hints to the continuing oppression, injustice and inequality that defined Black life despite the apparent legislative successes of the civil rights movement.[499] But rather than framing both Black Power and the inner-city rebellions as products of this same cause, Wallace portrayed the former as responsible for the latter. In rendering Black Power militancy as the culprit, the documentary created a scapegoat that negated any need to examine further the reasons for African American protests.

The producers' white perspective also undoubtedly shaped their next step in the documentary's narrative framework, which argued that such violent protest had incited a backlash from white Northerners. 'The most serious casualty of all,' Wallace concluded with no trace of irony after outlining the fatalities and property damage wrought by the unrest, 'was the relationship between the black man and the white man.' Over footage showing protestors brandishing a swastika, he informed viewers that 'by summer's end the Northern white was counter-marching, counter demonstrating.' As their inclusion of the Nazi symbol evidenced, producers did not shy away from showcasing the white Notherners' bigotry. Yet in framing it as a response to African American protest, the documentary blamed this show of white racism on Black Americans who objected to the oppression they experienced in America.

By privileging white fears about potential violence over African Americans' actual experiences of injustice, CBS News teams concluded that the struggle of the summer of '66 had failed. To explore the phenomenon of white backlash further, producers included in the documentary a

[499] For more on lasting inequalities, see: Hinton, *America on Fire*, Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement', Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be.*

segment on Cicero, Illinois. This all-white working-class suburb comprised of largely of Czech, Polish, Lithuanian, and Italian immigrant communities, was infamous for its racial hostility. When Martin Luther King Jr.'s fair housing demonstrations in Chicago that summer stopped short of the infamous town, local neighbourhood activist groups and Chicago's CORE chapter continued the campaign into the streets of Cicero without King's commitment to nonviolence. The outraged white inhabitants of the town met the marchers with bricks and bottles. The reporting on this segment consisted primarily of Mike Wallace's interviews with Cicero residents and speeches from representatives of white housing organisations who outlined the imagined threat that hypothetical African American neighbours posed to their property values. The documentary followed the piece on Cicero with a concluding segment discussing public opinion pollster Louis Harris's findings that white sympathy for the movement had evaporated and his predictions that white backlash could cost the Democrats the upcoming election. *CBS Reports: Black Power, White Backlash* therefore framed the summer of 1966 as a backward step in the struggle for African American freedom.

Had producers explored Black sentiment surrounding Cicero they would have exposed a different interpretation of events. Although Mike Wallace did interview one or two African Americans who worked in the town, the documentary did not include the perspectives of any of the community activists involved in planning the march. In a 1989 interview for documentary series *Eyes on the Prize*, Chicago community activist Clory Bryant described her evaluation of the Cicero march. 'It was one of the most outstanding things that I have seen accomplished in the Civil Rights movement,' Bryant informed interviewer and civil rights activist Judy Richardson. 'You don't know what Cicero meant to people in Chicago,' she elaborated. 'You just didn't go in Cicero if you were Black.' According to Bryant, the march therefore 'let the world know that together we can do anything we want. If you can march through Cicero, you know, you can accomplish almost anything. And I think people felt that. And from that point on, there was no

turning around.'[500] To grassroots activists like Bryant, the Cicero march did not signify backlash. Instead, it represented a milestone in African American advancement.

White reporters struggled to comprehend a philosophy that deliberately decentred whiteness. Having already begun to warn in 1963 that African Americans were on the verge of violent retaliation to racial injustice they were unable to understand Black Power outside of this framework. As a result, white news coverage distorted the ideology to the American public. These limitations skewed the version of Black Power that appeared on American television screens. Focusing on white fears rather than Black feelings of empowerment led reporters to characterise the movement as a disastrous development which risked reversing the gains of the civil rights movement. Yet whiteness was not the only factor that influenced reporters' news judgements. As the next section will show the exigencies of television news also shaped how reporters chose to report Black Power.

Section Two

Producing Television News

Sociologists have found that news consumers are prone to lose interest in a story once it has become too familiar. Daniel J. Myers and Beth Schaefer, have shown that 'attention cycles reflect changing demands from an audience, which shift from excitement to fatigue as a topic is reported repeatedly.'[501] By the summer of 1966 some members of the American public had begun to tire of reporting on the civil rights struggle. One New Jersey viewer wrote in to complain to CBS's owned and operated New York station, 'your news editor has given us more

[500] Interview with Clory Bryan, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on February 17, 1989, for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads 1965 to 1985*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection. http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop;cc=eop;rgn=main;view=text;idno=bry5427.0218.025 (28 January 2022).
[501] Quoted in Walmsley, 'First Draft of History', p.94. See Walmsley, 'First Draft of History', 'Chapter Three: News Pegs, Media Waves, and Fatigue', pp.92-137.

than a tummyful of Civil Rights…Once in a while we could take it, but not night after night.'[502] The awareness of their audience's short attention span played a significant role in reporters' news judgements. CBS News reporter Ed Rabel, describing how reporters established newsworthiness, summed up this conception succinctly with the explanation: 'we weren't in the business of olds.' As early as 1963, ABC reporter Paul Good had begun to get the impression that the editors and producers at his news department, 'were weary of civil rights stories.'[503] Even the dramatic topic of police brutality against African Americans – which in the early 1960s could serve as a leading story – a decade later no longer roused network reporters' attention. 'A white officer shooting a black man is not news,' one NBC producer told activists in Talbot County, Georgia who had called him to report the story, 'It has lost its sexiness.'[504] This NBC reporter's candid response indicated how conceptions of news value had changed.[505] Once the narrative of white brutality against African Americans had become too familiar, journalists lost interest in covering incidents that fit this trend.[506]

However, by the late 1960s, as Stephen Tuck has argued, 'what was sexy – and got on the news – was black aggression.'[507] Fatigue with the topic of civil rights combined with the journalistic tendency to privilege new stories helps to explain why reporters seized on Black Power as 'the hot media topic of the moment.'[508] Television newsmen saw in a new cast of characters and a seemingly novel ideology an opportunity to present a fresh story to the American public. This journalistic imperative to privilege new narratives also helps to explain why producers portrayed

[502] Letter from R. Q. Sharpe to Robert Trout, 5 February 1964, b.4Ze358, RT.
[503] Quoted in Leigh Raiford, "Come Let Us Build a New World Together': SNCC and Photography of the Civil Rights Movement', *American Quarterly*, 59/4 (2007), p.1131.
[504] Stephen Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens, 2001), p.201., Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be,* p.330.
[505] SNCC communications workers, however, as Mary King has highlighted, had always struggled to convince the white news media to pay the same attention to Black lives as they did to white. King, *Freedom Song*, p.243.
[506] Gary Younge, 'Sometimes, "Dog Bites Man" Really is the Story', in Fred Harris and Alan Curtis (eds) *Healing Our Divided Society: Investing in America Fifty Years After the Kerner Report* (Philadelphia, 2018), pp.384-392.
[507] Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought To Be*, p.330.
[508] Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, p.542.

Black Power as a fundamental break with the past. Journalists had an underlying incentive to present Black Power as the starkest departure possible from the earlier movement narrative.

The particular affordances of television as a medium were also a factor that influenced the version of Black Power that network news brought to American screens in 1966. Television news was well suited to covering incidents and events. As SNCC workers had lamented, the national news media was less well set up to recognise the slow work of building up self-confidence and power in Black communities, as news.[509] Unlike the conflict-generating demonstration-based organising of the civil rights movement – which producers knew how to translate into compelling televisual stories – in the summer of 1966 there were no easily discernible events or incidents upon which to focus reports on Black Power.

Television producers working in the rapid realm of breaking news therefore had to rely on another means by which to produce stories quickly and easily to cover the seemingly new phenomenon. They did so by excerpting speeches about Black Power and conducting interviews on the topic with seemingly relevant figures. An example of this decision – and the high-pressure environment that influenced it – was demonstrated by the conversations that initiated the production of *CBS Reports: Black Power, White Backlash*. Co-producer, Sam Roberts, recalled that the special on Black Power was 'a rush job'. Despite being in the middle of production on a different project, in September of 1966 the 'uproar' building around Black Power meant that producer of prime-time news and head of the *CBS Reports* unit, Les Midgely, determined the team needed to produce a special on the subject rapidly. 'Look we've got too much on our plate,' Roberts remembered Midgely telling the *CBS Reports* team, 'the way to do this program and get it done properly and quickly is to do it as interviews.' For producers on

[509] King, *Freedom Song*, p.247.

tight deadlines, filming discussions about the topic of Black Power was an expeditious means by which to report the phenomenon.

Relying on interviews meant that producers determined whose opinion mattered: who were relevant experts and who were representative leaders. These decisions shaped the image of Black Power that programmes like *Black Power, White Backlash* presented viewers. The CBS producers included segments with white experts and government officials, ensuring that white opinions on Black Power – which were largely negative – received significant airtime on the documentary. To present Black perspectives they chose only Black men. While reporters interviewed some women as part of their interviews on the streets of Cicero, producers did not seek formal interviews with any women to explain Black Power. Throughout the interview panel shows that focused on the topic of Black Power in the summer of 1966 the networks did not host any women as guests. Production decisions such as these helped to obscure the essential role of women's organising and activism in both the civil rights and Black Power movements.[510] Arguing that television missed the real story of the movement by overlooking women, Carmichael highlighted: 'If you follow the mass meetings, not the stuff on TV, you'd find women out there giving all the direction.'[511]

Television's combination of sound and moving image also influenced whom producers chose to cover. Telegenic and eloquent subjects made for good TV, therefore it was those subjects whom producers sought to put on air. Focusing on individual people also proved the best way to communicate a story. Sam Roberts explained about his decision to centre a report on one

[510] Scholar of women in the movement Lynne Olson highlighted how historians oversight of women's roles in the movement were rooted in contemporary news coverage which focused only on male civil rights leaders. Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters* (New York, 2001), p.15.
[511] Quoted in Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon 'Introduction: Recovering Women's Voices from the Civil Rights Movement' in Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon (eds) *Women and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965 (*Mississippi, 2009), p.xiv.

individual during his time in Mississippi covering Freedom Summer in 1964, 'you always look to make it personal.' One day in the Mississippi Delta during Freedom Summer, Roberts recalled finding the perfect person around whom he could hang the story he wanted to tell: 'At the home of Fannie Lee [sic] Hamer I met a man. A young black man, who was absolutely charismatic. Articulate, smart, strong, tough. It was Stokely Carmichael.'[512] In coming across Carmichael – a personality perfect for television – he found a vehicle through which to tell his narrative about long-term Black organisers in Mississippi who would stick around after white Summer volunteers left: 'When I realised the dimension of this story I got ahold of Les Midgely…and I said look there's an interesting story to be done here aside from the day to day coverage …and I found this guy yesterday who would be perfect to centre our story on.'[513] Even before Carmichael had ascended to a position of prominence, as a relatively anonymous student organiser in Mississippi his charisma had been potent enough to shift the attention of at least one news outlet from the white students upon whom they had been focused.[514]

By 1966, with the added prestige of a leadership role as SNCC chairman, Carmichael became the ideal candidate for television news producers to focus on in their coverage of Black Power. Although as historians have highlighted, Carmichael was not the first to use the words Black Power, his magnetism in front of a crowd and a camera meant that, in Peniel Joseph's words, 'television and print media found a fascinating persona in the handsome activist,' who according to *Ebony* magazine 'walks like Sidney Poitier, talks like Harry Belafonte and thinks like the post-

[512] Roberts' reference of Fannie Lou Hamer's house as the location where he first encountered Stokely Carmichael alludes to the crucial role that women played in the movement. For more on Hamer's activism, see: Blain, *Until I Am Free.*

[513] Interview with Sam Roberts.

[514] SNCC activists often lamented the white news media's overwhelming focus on Northern white volunteers and their lack of interest in the Black organisers and local people during the Mississippi Freedom Summer. Roberts appears to be one of the few reporters who saw news value in the long-term organising Black activists were engaged in. For example, see: King, *Freedom Song*, P240., Laura Visser-Maessen, *Robert Parris Moses: A Life in Civil Rights and Leadership at the Grassroots* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2016) p.166 and Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, p.38.

Muslim Malcom X.'[515] By Carmichael's own recollection the sudden focus on him was 'a kind of instant media celebrity.' CBS had Carmichael as its guest on *Face the Nation* just two days after the Greenwood rally – with a week of the Meredith March still to go. As a result of such attention Carmichael became synonymous with the new slogan. 'Thanks to the media mine was the name and face associated with Black Power in the public mind,' he later determined.[516] Television newsmen's appreciation that televisual communication worked best through making stories personal and Carmichael's star quality helped magnify their focus on Carmichael in coverage of Black Power.

Yet the focus of Mike Wallace, the *Face the Nation* interviewers, and many other white reporters in the summer of 1966, on Carmichael's provocative rhetoric during rally speeches revealed a distinct problem for the SNCC chair. While television producers relied heavily on interviews to cover the Black Power story, they also covered Carmichael's speeches. Therefore, while Carmichael adopted a polite, refined, and intellectual mode of speech to attempt to define Black Power in political and economic terms to white reporters, television cameras also captured his fiery rally cries designed specifically for his Black supporters. Carmichael may well have differentiated between his audiences, but the mass medium of television did not. By excerpting clips of these speeches on network broadcasts to the entire nation or by plucking quotes from them and repeating these words in interviews television newsmen divorced Carmichael's words from their context. Failing to appreciate the intended audience's perspective and instead interpreting his rhetoric from a white viewpoint it was not aimed towards caused reporters to misinterpret the SNCC chairman's words and the ideology he was advancing. Writing to the editor of the *New York Times* at the beginning of August in 1966, political scientist and Black Power theoretician Charles V. Hamilton lamented this phenomenon, showing how what had

[515] Peniel Joseph, *Waiting for the Midnight Hour*, p.149. Stewart, 'The Evolution of a Revolution', p.435.
[516] Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, p.542.

occurred on *Face the Nation* was endemic in the news media's coverage of Black Power that summer:

> When a Stokely Carmichael tells an enthusiastic audience in a Negro church in Mississippi that they should organise and exercise "Black Power," that the Mississippi courthouses contain filth and dirt and should be burned to the ground, he is speaking symbolically. All mass leaders do. He is addressing the specific audience on a specific occasion, and they understand him.
> Few, if any, hear it as an immediate call to aggressive physical violence. But it is reported in the press as a call for racism, violence, and armed revolt. Thus reams of senseless dialogue must follow to clarify, elaborate, explain.[517]

Continuing, Hamilton explained the communications theory one needed to grasp to understand properly why the same words could be interpreted entirely differently by different audiences.

> One language reaches many different audiences (press, public officials, other group leaders, etc.), all interpreting that language in the context of their own experiences, understanding and expectations. And more than likely these interpretations are fundamentally different from the context in which the specific language was spoken.[518]

Hamilton closed his letter by concluding: 'It would help if the public were attuned to this, and if the mass media could somehow become a bit more sophisticated and "responsible."' If television news was going to expand the audiences of speech that had been designed only for one specific demographic, Hamilton argued, audiences needed to become more advanced in their media literacy. It was the job of media professionals to understand the slippage that occurred when exporting speech to a wider public and their duty to ensure they did not confuse style for substance. In the summer of 1966, however, television news professionals did not employ the level of sophistication that Hamilton longed for. Carmichael's adoption of different

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[517] Charles V. Hamilton, 'Civil Rights Reports', Letter to the Editor, 1 August 1966, *NYT,* 7 August 1966, p.159., At the time of writing Hamilton was the chairman of the Department of Political Science at Lincoln University. The next year he would co-author with Stokely Carmichael, the landmark treatise 'Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America' which provided according to Peniel Joseph the most important theoretical and political definition of Black Power. Peniel Joseph, 'Black Liberation Without Apology: Reconceptualising the Black Power Movement', *The Black Scholar*, 31/3/4 (2001).
[518] Hamilton, 'Civil Rights Reports'

styles for different audiences therefore proved problematic when television news catered to a single mass audience.

The issue became more acute given the propensity for television news producers to favour easily digestible narratives with attention-grabbing footage. For a television producer with at times only a matter of seconds available for a story on the evening news, the dramatic imagery of Carmichael yelling violent sounding declarations told a clear story that fit easily into the frame of violence as deviant militancy that television news had established in its coverage of civil rights. Footage of Carmichael calmly and politely trying to redefine to white reporters how to understand American society was less straightforward and required far more time for both the white television newsmen and their audiences to understand. Writing in *Look* magazine in 1967, editor T. George Harris highlighted how white publics preferred to consume and television producers were more likely to cover the threatening firebrand incarnation of Carmichael:

> White ears discriminate. The public hears Negroes best when they sound wild…or beg for welfare…[When Stokely Carmichael] tries to define his Black Power motto in terms of economic and political development, he finds himself shouting into deaf ears. But when, pacing like a panther, he twists himself into a trance, snarling terror, he makes the evening TV news for millions of very alert people.[519]

While other versions of Carmichael were available to the white news media it was the most dramatic version of Carmichael, which seemed to fit easily into a pre-determined narrative about angry Black men that television news could communicate most easily.

The evening news privileged the visual drama of Carmichael's rally speeches to Black audiences over footage of his more calm and collected white media-facing interviews. Longer specials, public affairs programming, and documentaries, however, ensured that both made it on to the

[519] Quoted in Brockriede and Scott, 'Stokely Carmichael', p.9.

airwaves. Although the framing of white interviewers' questions limited Carmichael's ability to define Black Power on his own terms, programmes which provided Carmichael longer opportunities to speak allowed audiences to hear more than just the sensational soundbites that made it on to daily news shows. For the keen-eyed viewer open to the ideology, these more in-depth programmes allowed for glimpses of a way to understand both American race relations and Black Power outside of the framing of aggressive violence and reverse racism that white newsmen imposed.

Moreover, while television news in its focus on Carmichael helped to reinforce a perception of the SNCC chairman as the voice of Black Power, longer forms of programming ensured that other voices also appeared on television to define the issue. Some provided an interpretation that in line with Carmichael's arguments subverted the white perspective of Black Power as a violent and racist ideology. On the special extended edition of *Meet the Press* in August, Floyd McKissick, for example, appeared as a guest alongside Carmichael, and several other civil rights leaders. Asked by interviewer Edwin Newman to define his concept of Black Power, the leader of CORE had the opportunity to present his organisation's interpretation to the American public. McKissick informed the interview panel and the nation that CORE's philosophy of Black Power centred on the right and necessity of Black people to determine for themselves 'the direction and the pace in which they will become total citizens in this society.'[520] Continuing, he outlined the 'six basic ingredients' needed:

> One, political power. Two, economic power. Three, an improved self-image of the black man himself – as you well know that this is not in the history books, what we have done and the contributions we have made. Four, the development of young militant leadership. Five the enforcement of federal laws, abolishment of police brutality. And six the development of a black consumer bloc.[521]

[520] As historian Lawrence Glickman has shown white critics often deputised themselves as the judges of what was an acceptable scope and pace of social change and method of protest. Lawrence Glickman, 'How White Backlash Controls the American Public', *The Atlantic*, 21 May 2020 https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/white-backlash-nothing-new/611914/ (28 January 2022).
[521] *Transcript of Meet the Press*, 21 August 1966, b.5, f. "'Meet the Press," Aug 21, 1966 Carmichael', SNCCP.

Viewers of *Meet the Press*, therefore heard nuanced and sophisticated interpretations of Black Power. Other figures reinforced Carmichael's framing of Black Power as a response to continuing African American oppression. One such individual in the Summer of 1966 was James Meredith. His March against Fear having won him renewed relevance in the eyes of the media as a spokesman for Black America, Meredith also appeared as a guest on *Meet the Press*. When asked by interviewer Lawrence Spivak about his beliefs regarding African American violence, Meredith tried to reframe the issue as a tactic necessary in light of continuing white supremacy. 'The negro has never in his history engaged in the type of violence that people are talking about,' he argued. 'The whites have always engaged in this type of violence.' Highlighting that the whites who had killed African Americans in Mississippi – including those who had shot into his own home – were known by both the Black and white communities, and yet had not been apprehended, he declared: 'This is what white supremacy does.' Continuing, Meredith highlighted that 'most of the whites in Mississippi are good whites. They don't like this but they condone it…And we've got to stop this.' While Spivak protested that Meredith's seeming proposal of vigilante justice was nonsensical, Meredith argued that the continuing injustices perpetuated against African Americans and ignored by the law were going to require them to take matters into their own hands. Meredith therefore presented American viewers with a challenge to a white perspective which feared potential Black violence yet ignored the continuing unimpeded and unpunished white violence to which African Americans were responding.

Similarly, when Mike Wallace asked Martin Luther King Jr. about the increasingly vocal minority who disagreed with his tactics in an interview shown on *Black Power, White Backlash*, the civil rights activist redirected the conversation to the causes of continuing African American protest. 'I contend that the cry for Black Power, is at bottom a reaction to the reluctance of white power to make the kind of change necessary to make justice a reality for the Negro,' King argued.

Throughout the summer of 1966, extended television news specials and public affairs programming, therefore, provided moments when alternative narratives about Black Power were visible to those viewers receptive to them.

And yet white reporters never drew out this angle when they analysed Black Power. *CBS Reports: Black Power, White Backlash*, for example, presented both the sensational Greenwood rally footage of Carmichael shouting to the crowd to burn down Mississippi courthouses as well as the cooler extended interview with Mike Wallace. Significantly, however, the programme introduced Carmichael with the footage of his rousing speech. By placing this clip first, divorced of its context, *CBS Reports* primed those viewers who did not interpret Carmichael's words symbolically to believe that this fierce figure seemingly inciting an uprising was the true version of Carmichael. To such viewers the polite and poised Carmichael who tried to discuss the political and economic elements of Black Power ideology calmly with Mike Wallace might appear to be inauthentic.

Broadcaster and television critic Robert Lewis Shayon in the summer of July 1966 posited just such a reaction from his readers to the presentation of these two seemingly opposing Carmichaels in public broadcasting.[522] 'You may argue that the civil rights leader, speaking in a white man's studio, was making white man's talk in sweet reasonableness, but that the television cameras saw more truly when he was pep-talking down South,' Shayon told his readers. Continuing, he made the case for an alternative: 'It is also possible that the real Stokely Carmichael embraces both images (which of us talks singly in all roles?).'[523] Like Charles V. Hamilton, Shayon encouraged the American public to become more sophisticated in their

[522] Shayon in this article was not referring to *Black Power, White Backlash* which at his time of writing had not yet aired. Rather he was lamenting the 'monster treatment' given Carmichael on two network news broadcasts in comparison with a more sympathetic treatment on a radio broadcast by station WBAI-FM which presumably included an extended interview with Carmichael. Cited in Brockriede and Scott, 'Stokely Carmichael', p.9.
[523] Ibid.

reception of mediated presentations of Carmichael and Black Power. Even when producers presented both sides of Carmichael and viewers were exposed to more nuanced interpretations therefore, white audiences who feared Black Power might still come away with a distorted impression of both the man and the ideology.

As CBS producer Sam Roberts highlighted, television worked best at taking small slices of a topic. The medium was far less suited to tackling larger more complicated issues. Black Power, an ideology that challenged white America to reconceptualise its relationship to African Americans was just such a complicated issue. White television newsmen's choice of which small slice to take of the phenomenon – the part that made its proponents appear to advocate for a violent form of reverse racism – was informed by their white perspective and the demands of their medium and industry which called for a fresh and dramatic story.

Conclusion

In his 1967 book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, Martin Luther King Jr. reflected on why in the wake of the Voting Rights Act the American social and political landscape showed a terrain of reversals in civil rights victories. 'A simple explanation,' he told his readers, 'holds that Negroes rioted in Watts, the voice of Black Power was heard through the land and the white backlash was born; the public became infuriated and sympathy evaporated.'[524]

While King made short shrift of 'this pat explanation', it was the one which television news advanced in its coverage of Black Power in the summer of 1966. Television news distorted a complicated and expansive ideology into a simplistic cry for violent reverse racism. The tenor

[524] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston, 1967), p.3.

of network news reporters' approach was contingent on the changing nature of the interactions between civil rights activists and television news professionals as the late 1960s saw a new stage in the evolving relationship between the freedom struggle and the television news industry. The narrative television news reported of a breakdown in the relationship between Black and white America as a result of Black Power, formed in part because of the deterioration in relations between a new generation of African American activists and TV news. A medium and industry dominated by a white perspective and the need to communicate simple narratives was particularly poorly placed to report on a movement that had determined it should no longer cater to the white news media.

The patterns in this new chapter in the relationship between television news endured throughout the 1960s as Black activist groups continued to recognise and resent the news media's distortions and increasingly chose to pull away. By 1968 an article in the *Columbia Journalism Review* which highlighted that a militant group in Washington, the Black United Front, planned to bar the white press from future meetings noted how commonplace this approach had become. 'Such episodes of black antagonism toward the news media are not new and not even rare. They have become commonplace for reporters who regularly cover civil rights affairs,' the article declared.[525]

The uprisings in cities throughout the country in the latter part of the decade further fractured any still existing alignment between news reporters and civil rights activists. At the same time an increasingly sophisticated audience grew more and more cynical about the integrity of Black protestors and the responsibility of network news coverage as the next chapter will explore.

[525] Eric D. Blanchard, 'The Poor People and the 'White Press', *Columbia Journalism Review*, Fall 1968, pp.61-65. b.22, f.12 'Poor People's Campaign – Publicity', AY.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'RIOTS' AND RESPONSIBILITY

In September of 1967, the President of ABC News, Elmer W. Lower endeavoured to defend the professional reputation of television as a news medium. As *Broadcasting* magazine reported, in a talk before members of the professional journalism society Sigma Delta Chi, 'Mr. Lower disputed the contentions of some critics that television and radio coverage of [racial unrest] had contributed towards intensifying the riots or had assisted in magnifying beyond proportion the roles of such civil-rights leaders as H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael.' Network and station newsmen, Lower argued, had exercised considerable restraint in their coverage of racial outbreaks that past summer, evidence of 'a creditable, responsible record.'[526]

In the years immediately following 1963, in the words of historian of urban violence, Elizabeth Hinton, 'every major urban center in the country burned,' as the United States 'endured internal violence on a scale not seen since the Civil War.'[527] Hinton's research has revealed rebellions occurred in every city throughout the country where Black residents endured the persistence of segregated, unequal conditions despite the promises of the 1964 and 1965 civil and voting rights acts. The most well-known of these disorders were the ones that television news teams brought to American living rooms: those which erupted in the Watts district of Los Angeles in 1965, in Chicago in 1966, in Detroit in 1967, and throughout the country in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968.

In the same period, television's ascent to dominance in the realm of American news consumption shifted how those inside the industry considered television news' obligation to its

[526] 'Riot News 'Responsible,' Says ABC News' Lower', *Broadcasting*, 25 September 1967, p.78.
[527] Hinton, *America on Fire*, p.2.

audiences. In the early 1950s television news producers viewed their programmes as a supplement to the information provided by newspapers and radio.[528] From the early 1960s onwards, however, because television had become Americans' primary source of news, the men in charge of television news departments recognised the burden of responsibility they now shouldered. As CBS News President Richard Salant highlighted to an audience of CBS affiliates in 1967, 'we cannot read the TIO Roper studies, showing the increasing reliance and dependence of the American public on television news, without the sobering realisation that our responsibility is incalculable.'[529]

As the following chapter will explore, covering civil rights demonstrations and racial unrest over the course of the 1960s forced networks news departments to determine what constituted responsible reporting in such volatile situations. For television news executives this boiled down to two imperatives: the professional obligation of the fourth estate to cover newsworthy events and the journalistic ideal that reporters documented the news without influencing the stories which they covered. In an era where televisual publicity had become fundamental to the functioning of public life, achieving these conflicting goals in any true sense was impossible. The heads of news departments, however, determined the solution to this dilemma lay in divining the difference between authentic protest and contrived performance for television cameras and operating a policy of caution and restraint which avoided inciting exhibitionism. The operational guidelines news departments developed to inform reporting on 'demonstrations, riots, and other civil disturbances,' however, favoured those in American society in positions of power such as elected officials and rendered only the performances of those resisting inequality as illegitimate.

[528] Conway, *Contested Ground*, p.100.
[529] Remarks of Richard Salant, Conference of CBS Television Network Affiliates 6 June 1967, b.2K132, f.Richard Salant, 1965-1971, CBSENA.

Television news executives formulated these policies of restraint in a climate where the television networks were subject to conflicting critiques about their irresponsible reporting on Black America. Some in the public realm argued that the racial crisis was an invention of television. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Southern segregationists complained that television news journalists colluded with publicity-hungry African Americans. This strategy shifted focus from racial injustice to the role of television news in covering it. As the decade progressed, politicians on both sides of the political spectrum and members of the print press adopted the narrative that the television news industry was to blame for racial unrest. Anti-racist activists and Black Americans, however, levelled the opposite criticism against television news, arguing that through coverage which ignored and misrepresented their communities, television news functioned as a tool of white supremacy. Executives evinced an understanding of responsible reporting which responded to the beliefs of their white critics in positions of power in American society, rather than the complaints made by Black Americans protesting persistent inequality.

The first part of this chapter takes as its focus network newsroom policy exploring how newsrooms developed policies of restraint in response to the complex questions of how to cover Black militants and racial unrest. The second section considers the public debate around television's irresponsibility to illuminate the context in which the networks made their decisions. It charts how the argument that the racial crisis story was a product of reckless reporting and attention-seeking African Americans which originated with segregationist white Southerners, tapped into wider anxieties about the new medium's effect on public life. By the end of the 1960s, faced with widespread rebellion against white supremacy in the nation's cities, politicians across the country argued that irresponsible reporting was to blame.

Section One

Grappling with the Gap Between the Theory and Practice of News Reporting

Reflecting in the 1990s on covering civil rights, Walter Cronkite remembered how his news team while reporting on the unrest which erupted in the Watts district of south-central Los Angeles in 1965, 'got a lesson on the impact of our presence.' Filming protestors on the night-time streets of LA, Cronkite and his team realised:

> Our camera lights were attracting demonstrators like moths to a flame. They would demonstrate for the cameras if you turned the lights on. They'd know they were on air. So we established a policy that if people were performing for the camera, we would turn lights and camera off.[530]

Cronkite's team had collided with a concept in theoretical physics: the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. First articulated by German physicist Werner Heisenberg in the early twentieth century, this principle holds that the present state of the world cannot be known in full detail in part because the process of observing the world inevitably disturbs it.[531] Literature scholar John Tuttle described the social corollary of this principle to be that the act of observing an event changes the nature of that event because, amongst other reasons, 'observing the behaviour of people who know they are being observed changes their behaviour.'[532] As Cronkite's team discovered trying to report on the Watts rebellion, rarely is a person more aware of being observed than when the conspicuous eye of a large television camera is directed towards them.

In the decade that television achieved dominance in America's news industry, the politics of being seen had become central to the achievement and maintenance of power in American

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[530] Walter Cronkite, Walter Cronkite Remembers Test Anecdotes Draft, 'THE MEDIA AND CIVIL RIGHTS', p.15, b.2.325/F91, f.REMEMBERS, WC

[531] Aya Furuta, 'One Thing is Certain: Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle Is Not Dead, *Scientific American*, 8 March 2012 https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/heisenbergs-uncertainty-principle-is-not-dead/ (28 January 2022)

[532] John Tuttle, 'How You Get That Story: Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and the Literature of the Vietnam War', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 38/6 (2005)

society. Aware of the potential audience that television cameras could reach, everyone participating in the public sphere, from presidents to protestors, acted in anticipation of and performed in front of the eye of the television camera. Yet television news departments believed that the job of the television journalist was to report the news without influencing the story. They therefore determined a need to distinguish between authentic protest and contrived publicity-seeking in response to their experiences reporting on the racial crisis. As the racial confrontations of the early 1960s gave way to urban rebellions later in the decade, executives argued that responsible reporting meant capping cameras rather than contributing to the creation of events for the benefit of cameras.

In their policies cautioning restraint, therefore, news departments determined which types of performance were legitimate and which were illegitimate venues for mere publicity. To explore how network news departments upheld their journalistic ethics in a way that marginalised Black critics of American racism by deeming them irresponsible, this section considers first network news executives' position on covering Black militants before considering the policies they developed to guide reporting on 'riots'.

The Question of 'Extreme' Newsmakers

In the late 1960s network news departments grappled with the complex quandary of how to square their duty to cover the news with the danger of providing airtime to those they considered to be extremists. The topic proved pressing enough to feature in CBS News president Richard Salant's speech at the 1967 Annual Conference of CBS Television Network Affiliates. 'As we look ahead to what may be a very difficult summer,' Salant told the audience of assembled broadcasters a month before the Detroit uprising, CBS News had 'spent a great deal of time trying to find the right answers' to the question of 'how to handle some of the

more extreme newsmakers who are not exactly palatable to the majority of Americans.'[533] The CBS executive argued that the press, both print and electronic, by providing publicity to figures such as Stokely Carmichael helped to build their reputations. 'And so, we at CBS News have discussed among ourselves just how we should exercise our responsibilities,' he informed the conference.[534]

Salant and his news team had concluded that their guiding principle of whom and what to cover should be whether they were 'legitimate news.' As a journalistic organisation, the CBS News president made clear, it was not up to his newsmen to assign moral or social value, but to determine 'newsworthiness' based on 'what the issues are to which these people are addressing themselves and what impact they are having on the flow of events.'[535] According to this professional rubric, his news department had a duty to cover Black militants.

> These people and these events are part of today's history. What they do, what they say and what the reaction to them is – those things are news; as a responsible news organisation we cannot pretend to the contrary. It is our obligation to put these men and these events in context. And so for example…you may recall our special of last fall entitled 'Black Power, White Backlash,' where we tried to examine what Stokely Carmichael and others like him were doing and what the reaction was.[536]

Salant framed reporting on African American militant leaders like Carmichael – whom he deemed as having an impact on American society – as not a sign of reportorial irresponsibility, but rather evidence of CBS News' commitment to upholding its professional duties.

The CBS News president argued that acting on news rather than personal value judgements and therefore covering such figures was fundamental to America's founding ideal of government by

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[533] Remarks of Richard Salant, Conference of CBS Television Network Affiliates 6 June 1967, b.2K132, f.Richard Salant, 1965-1971, CBSENA.
[534] Ibid.
[535] Ibid.
[536] Ibid.

the people. 'What better assurance is there of a sound and solidly grounded democracy than letting the American viewers see people and events for themselves and make up their own minds,' he argued. Ignoring or suppressing people and events which might pose a threat to American society was not the way to effectively deal with them. He continued:

> It is better to bring them to the surface and let them compete in the free market-place of ideas and let the viewer make the final judgement – instead of unilaterally aborting that judgement by withholding the facts and the faces and the voices from the public so it can never make an informed choice.[537]

In 1967, CBS News took the same approach to the question of covering Black militants as they had taken towards covering segregationists in 1963. Salant positioned the decision to allow leaders whose views they personally disagreed with access to the airwaves as proof of the proper functioning of the press.

The following month, days after the rebellion in Detroit had subsided, CBS president Dr. Frank Stanton publicly defended his news department's position on interviewing militant spokesmen. 'The frequent broadcast of appeals to riot by extremists raise a serious question as to the editorial responsibility and discretion of the media,' Republican senator from Pennsylvania Hugh Scott had declared in an open letter to Stanton. In his lengthy reply to Scott, the CBS President reiterated his news department's arguments, informing the senator that those at his network had discussed the exercise of their responsibilities and had concluded that news value rather than their personal approval should determine coverage: the only value that mattered was news value. Stanton reasoned with the senator that the American public was best served by a press that presented it with the facts thereby allowing fully informed citizens to make their own judgements. Suppressing information and censoring spokesmen who may be a menace, he averred, posed a greater danger to society than the possible inflammatory effects of their speech.

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[537] Ibid.

'Only by fully reporting all the aspects of the situation, alarming as well as reassuring, presenting all the voices, cynical as well as hopeful…and providing free and open discussion of every point of view,' he argued, could journalism help society treat the causes of the uprisings that summer. According to Stanton, American citizens needed to remain fully informed to be best equipped to take part in decision-making about their own governance.

Yet the CBS head did not advocate completely equal access to the airwaves, and it was here he reached agreement with the senator. Scott argued that the antidote to the negative effects of broadcasting extremists like H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael lay in tempering militancy with moderation: 'balancing' inflammatory statements with 'appeals for law and order and reasonable conduct' from responsible leaders.[538] Stanton revealed that CBS News had in fact provided significantly more airtime to proponents of integration and nonviolence than militants, and Stokely Carmichael he pointed out, had not graced CBS television news at all.[539] The CBS president went even further to prove the responsibility of his network's reporting by providing a list of officials and other spokesmen of law and order or moderation who had been shown at least once on news broadcasts on the CBS television network. The list of governors, mayors, representatives, and senators amounted to 23 names without including the six appearances of President Lyndon Johnson. 'Total appearances of militant versus moderates and government officials on news broadcasts on the CBS Television Network,' Stanton declared, 'amount to: militants (including anonymous men in the street), 15; moderates and officials, 66.'[540] CBS News had argued that responsible reporting meant not censoring Black militants. Its president and broadcast record made clear, however, that their definition of responsibility

[538] Letter from Hugh Scott to Frank Stanton, 29 July 1967, b.2K132, f.Dr. Frank Stanton, 1966-1971, CBSENA
[539] Letter from Stanton to Scott. Amongst the 'responsible leaders' that both Hugh Scott and Frank Stanton referenced was Roy Wilkins, head of the NAACP. Wherein the early 1950s Southern segregationist had pointed to the NAACP as an extremist organisation and the networks had treated them as such, by the late 1960s both conservatives and the networks viewed the civil rights organisation as an example of moderation and responsible African American leadership.
[540] Ibid.

also encompassed a conception of balance that meant outweighing the airtime they gave figures like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown with the time they broadcast moderate leaders and government officials.

Despite Stanton and Salant's declared commitments to covering Black militants, over time the CBS News department had revised its stance. In April of 1968, in response to a viewer's accusation that television news over-played the public appearances and statements of people like Stokely Carmichael, Walter Cronkite did not invoke the rhetoric of the free marketplace of ideas to defend his news programme's decisions. Rather he admitted that their initial approach to coverage of militants may have been flawed. 'I believe it is possible in the very early days of the Black Power movement we may have 'over exposed' Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown and others of their persuasion,' Cronkite confessed. Their attitudes towards covering such extremists, he continued, had been amended in the previous couple of years. 'We came to the realisation, as others have more recently, that their statements were not news unless they reflected a change in their position, policy, or tactics,' he revealed.[541] Continuing, Cronkite disclosed his 'intention to only report their statements and not show them, if the pictorial representation could be considered inflammatory.'[542] Both Stanton and Salant had argued publicly that television news should present to the American public such potential threats as the former and current SNCC chairmen in full view, allowing them to speak in their own words. Yet Walter Cronkite stated in 1968 that CBS News had determined it was no longer responsible to provide what he described as 'the radical fringe' of Black leadership with direct access to the airwaves.

[541] Letter from Walter Cronkite to Stuart C. White, 29 April 1968, b.2K65, CBSENA
[542] Ibid.

That same year NBC went one step further: refusing to air Carmichael or Brown at all. The 15 April episode of the *Huntley-Brinkley Report*, which covered accusations made by Whitney Young that the news media had over-exposed Stokely Carmichael, stated that NBC News had not carried Carmichael or Brown 'for several months.' The announcement precipitated a flurry of internal memoranda amongst CBS' News executives – evidently intrigued by their competition's apparent capitulation to censorship. Salant enquired of his senior people in the news team whether they knew that 'there has been an NBC News company-wide decision embargoing any Carmichael-Brown actuality.'[543] After some investigation, the CBS News president confirmed the rival network's company-wide moratorium to executive producer of the Evening News, Les Midgely.[544] The CBS network executives left no written record of their opinions towards NBC's policy, nor how this information affected their own approach to covering Black Power leaders.[545] That the question of preventing Black militants from accessing the airwaves animated the memoranda traffic between CBS executive desks, however, suggested the news department was still concerned with how to report responsibly on spokesmen so unpalatable to its mainstream white audience.

Publicly, Salant continued to commit to covering in context any figure that proved newsworthy - including Stokely Carmichael.[546] Yet comments he made at an International Radio & Television society college conference in April 1968 revealed that the Black Power proponent tested this guarantee. According to *Broadcasting* magazine, Salant 'explained his reticence to broadcast…[a] news conference of former SNCC leader Stokely Camrichael in terms of 'not shouting 'fire!' in a crowded theatre.'[547] At CBS News Carmichael tested the limits of the free

[543] CBS Memorandum from Richard Salant to Gordon Manning cc Paskman, Stone, Midgely, Lewis, 16 April 1968, b.2.325/F31, F. CMMCLS Cronkite News, LM.
[544] Hand-written note on CBS Memorandum from Salant to Manning.
[545] Letter from Walter Cronkite to Bill Donnella, News Director WIFE Radio, 29 April 1968, b.2K71, CBSENA.
[546] 'HHH sounds off on riot news', *Broadcasting* 1 July 1968, p.45.
[547] 'Negroes' Problems Set for Heavy Coverage', *Broadcasting*, 22 April 1968, p.10.

marketplace of ideas, but at NBC News it was clear, the airwaves were no longer open to vocal proponents of Black Power.

The Question of Riots and Demonstrations

After discussing the CBS News position on covering Black militants, in his 1967 speech to the Conference of CBS Affiliates, Richard Salant turned to another aspect of reportorial responsibility. 'There is a somewhat different facet involved on the question of riots and demonstrations,' the CBS News president opined. Continuing, he highlighted: 'There is no question that there are times when demonstrators put on a performance for the television cameras, and, although it is certainly not our intention we may inadvertently influence the event.'[548] Salant diagnosed a problem in the potential that protestors might adjust their behaviour if news teams made them aware of the possibility of reaching a wider audience. Such a response to the presence of cameras, he counselled the newsmen gathered in front of him, meant that television news reporters were transgressing the journalistic line between documenting and influencing an event. 'Our job is to report the news, not to shape it,' Salant declared, affirming his position that facilitating or participating in a performance was a dereliction of reportorial responsibility. Although there was no straightforward solution to this dilemma – as television news crews could not transcend their physical reality – Salant determined that the best course of action was to err on the side of caution. 'We have come to the conclusion that the wise policy is a policy of restraint,' he told the conference.

Over the course of the decade, covering racial protest had forced television news departments to contend with the disconnect between the journalistic ideal to function as unseen observers

[548] Salant, Conference of CBS Affiliates 6 June 1967.

and the practical reality that activists and citizens were aware of their existence. The professional imperative to document organically occurring events without disturbing them was impossible in a society where people responded to the presence of news teams and acted in anticipation of their coverage. The wave of civil rights protest which crashed across America in 1963 had first prompted Salant to address this dilemma to his news department. 'With the likelihood of a continuing series of racial crises and other confrontations throughout the country, I am sure that all CBS News personnel covering these stories will bear in mind the great importance of conducting themselves with restraint and care,' he instructed in a memorandum circulated to the entire organisation that summer. 'One of the most difficult issues we face in situations such as these is the dilemma created on the one hand by the perfectly legitimate desire to report fully by pictures, and on the other hand, the unsettling effect on a stimulated crowd which the presence of cameras and heavy equipment may have.'[549] Reporting on the volatile race story had prompted the news department president to advise CBS news teams to exercise caution to avoid influencing events.

Television newsmen's proclivity to, in Salant's words, report 'fully by pictures' was not just a 'legitimate desire', it was the lifeblood of the medium and a competitive necessity that had been baked into the evolution of the television news industry to differentiate itself from print and radio. The lure of television for people at home, according to NBC's News director in the 1950s, Reuven Frank, was the potential to see the news happen.[550] As the industry continued to develop, an emphasis on dramatic pictures – buoyed by viewer preference – became a convention of television news production.[551] The lasting legacy of the industry's emphasis on 'visualisation' as the core of television news and a means to differentiate the news medium from

[549] Quoted in CBS Memorandum from Richard Salant to CND Correspondents, reporters, bureau chiefs, news broadcast producers, 10 May 1966, b.2K132, f. Richard Salant, 1965-1971, CBSENA
[550] Frank, *Out of Thin Air*, p.95., Conway, *Contested Ground*, p.98.
[551] Ponce De Leon, *That's the Way It Is*, p.69.

its competitors was reflected in the direction of television news executives. 'We seem to be falling into a habit which is common to every television news department: forgetting that we're in television; not radio, not newspaper, but television,' head of CBS's New York Station Joe Loughlin chided his employees in a letter sent to WCBS-TV reporters and camera crews in late 1963. 'As far as I'm concerned the essence of television news is graphic, well-edited newsfilm.' According to Loughlin there were 'only three legitimate reasons' that his news department should not have filmed footage of a news event: 'deadline pressure, equipment failure and a total eclipse of the sun.' 'Visual impact made television news,' the WCBS-TV director told his staff, 'let's see more of it.'[552] Loughlin's injunction to his news staff revealed the extent to which the need to capture graphic visual imagery informed news judgements.

African American demonstrations against inequality however, prompted CBS News president Salant to highlight in his 1963 memorandum a circumstance short of solar blackout under which failing to capture filmed footage of a news story would be excused. 'We know that it is unfortunately true that there is a tendency on certain occasions for crowds to 'put on a performance' for the benefit of cameras' the CBS News head informed his news division. He continued:

> I would rather lose a picture story than feel that our desire for a story has contributed to violence or riot. We should be as unobtrusive as possible, and on-the-spot judgements by correspondents and cameramen that a situation may be eased by our turning away the cameras will be fully respected by all of us at CBS News.[553]

Reporting on civil rights confrontations had caused television news departments to question the effect their news teams' presence could have on a crowd. Salant decreed that if news teams on the ground determined their filming of a situation contributed to an event escalating, they

[552] Letter from Joe Laughlin to Reporters and Camera Crews WCBS-TV, 17 December 1963, b.4Ze298, RT.
[553] Cited in CBS Memorandum from Richard Salant to CND Correspondents, reporters, bureau chiefs, news broadcast producers, 10 May 1966, b.2K132, f. Richard Salant, 1965-1971, CBSENA

were to shut the operation down. The CBS News president's instructions emphasised his desire to avoid CBS News bearing responsibility for inciting civil disorder. Losing a story, Salant had determined, was a lesser sin than the presence of news teams exacerbating a situation.

The news department head had also made clear his belief that there was a distinct if intangible difference between authentic behaviour and contrived performance. Responsible reporting, he believed, meant determining where the boundary between the two lay. 'I only want to make sure that there is great care and discretion where there is a feeling that the presence of our cameras results not in mirroring events but in causing people to create events for our benefit,' Salant told his news department. The delicate balance between the conflicting professional imperatives to report the news and to avoid influencing the outcome of events, was present in every situation where news teams reported on subjects who were aware of their existence. Since the late 1950s, television news publicity had become central to achieving and exercising political power – a phenomenon which politicians, civil rights activists, and people on American streets understood. Yet it was his news teams' reporting on racial unrest in 1963 which led the network executive to determine that CBS News teams should implement a policy of restraint to avoid facilitating certain performances enacted for news cameras. News departments drew the line separating legitimate and illegitimate performance to privilege those in positions of power and disfavour civil rights demonstrators.

The African American uprisings in America's cities which continued in the summers of the second half of the decade prompted Richard Salant to reinscribe the boundaries of acceptable performance. In the late spring of 1966, as America seemed on the verge of another long hot summer of civil unrest, Salant penned a memo to his organisation, in which he highlighted the bind that the symbiotic relationship between news and publicity created for the journalistic profession. The news department head recognised that 'many 'happenings' – from press

conferences through demonstrations to publicity stunts – would not occur if the press including television, ignored them.'[554] He understood that given the inextricable intertwining of the news media with the functioning of public life, it was impossible to report only events where the actors were uncontaminated by a desire for media attention. 'We cannot turn our back on all such 'happenings' or else we would be largely remitted to covering wars and natural disasters,' Salant declared.[555] Yet the CBS News President argued, 'there are special circumstances where it may be wise and desirable for us to turn our cameras away.'[556] Salant made clear by restating the content of his 1963 directive, that his news teams should cease to collaborate in publicity when it seemed people were creating events for the benefit of news teams in the context of racial crises, confrontations, and riots. In his effort to distinguish between contrived actions for attention and the authentic behaviour of protest, Salant in effect determined that publicity was a political tool that could only be used by some and not by others. African American demonstrators and protestors, his memo made clear, were likely to fall in the category of illegitimate performance.

Responsible reporting, Salant highlighted to his news departments as Black rebellions continued, extended beyond the effect that cameras had on the ground to what effect news broadcasts had in both the present and the future. During the nationwide turmoil in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in April of 1968, the CBS executive was disturbed by footage the evening news had included on a story about unrest in Baltimore. In the memo he wrote to Gordon Manning, Ralph Paskman, and Les Midgely, the men in charge of the evening news, Salant pointed out that the Cronkite show had brought to television screens a 'self-styled spokesman' who told American audiences, 'gonna burn it down…this is just the beginning, this

[554] CBS Memorandum from Richard Salant to CND Correspondents, reporters, bureau chiefs, news broadcast producers, 10 May 1966, b.2K132, f. Richard Salant, 1965-1971, CBSENA
[555] Ibid. See also, 'Demonstrations, Riots and Other Civil Disturbances', *CBS News Standards,* p.6.
[556] CBS Memorandum from Richard Salant to CND Correspondents, reporters, bureau chiefs, news broadcast producers, 10 May 1966, b.2K132, f. Richard Salant, 1965-1971, CBSENA

is going to go on all summer.' The CBS News president warned that including this unknown person's incendiary announcement had been imprudent:

> In the present sensitive and explosive situation, I think that it is not a derogation of news judgement, but on the contrary a is a responsible exercise of news judgement, to avoid an inflammatory statement like this in the midst of a riot, from some anonymous man in the street whose credentials we do not know.[557]

Aside from the potential to exacerbate an already volatile situation, such injudicious editorial decisions could inspire future attempts at showmanship. 'Putting this guy on television, it seems to me, just encourages people to stick their faces in the camera to make sensational statements for their own sake,' he argued. 'Please let's avoid this.'[558] Salant understood that a feedback loop existed where filming, transmission, and reception informed how subjects in the future might respond to the presence of news cameras. Present broadcasts could inspire future performances. In the context of African American protest, the CBS News president had determined that newsroom editors needed to ensure they exercised caution.

Salant's prescriptions of responsible coverage were not limited to his instructions to refrain from inspiring protestors to perform for the cameras. Covering African American uprisings had prompted the CBS News department to consider how television's approach of seeking dramatic imagery could serve to misrepresent an event. In 1962, when white crowds had rioted in response to the admission of James Meredith at the University of Mississippi, it had been standard practice for reporters like Dan Rather at CBS 'to shoot bloody.'[559] In Rather's words this meant looking 'for where the heads were being knocked or the shots fired because doing so would produce the most memorable film.'[560] Yet five years later, reporting Black urban

[557] CBS Memorandum from Richard Salant to Manning cc Paskman and Midgely, 9 April 1968, b.2.325/F32, LM.
[558] Ibid., 'Negroes' problems set for heavy coverage', *Broadcasting*, 22 April 1968, p.10.
[559] Rather with Herskowitz, *Camera Never Blinks*, p.77.
[560] Ibid.

rebellions had caused CBS News to revise this approach. 'There is in this competitive electronic journalism a great temptation to shoot bloody as the phrase goes,' Salant declared in his 1967 speech to the CBS affiliates, 'but this may actually be no more than isolated, meaningless events which distort the overall picture.'[561] Reviewing this issue with his field producers and correspondents in the previous weeks as they predicted another summer of civil unrest, he had reminded them that his organisation privileged journalism over sensationalism. In a memorandum circulated to the company, Salant told his audience, he had emphasised that the CBS News department would not press its news teams on the ground 'to come up with the most vivid and dramatic pictures of violence.' 'We and our producers in New York must bear a heavy burden of making sure that our reporting is responsible, penetrating and not controlled by a desire for the most vivid pictures – when those pictures may not represent the true situation,' Salant told his team. Instead, the news department's policy encouraged news teams to privilege meaningful context and accurate reporting.[562]

The latitude that existed in how to determine accurate reporting was evidenced by the different policies that CBS and NBC developed to determine how to name the unrest they were covering. CBS News warned its personnel to 'not characterise a disturbance as a "riot" unless that term is clearly justified by the size and intensity of the disturbance.'[563] The specific guidelines for the handling of civil disturbances which NBC News had developed by 1967 enjoined its reporters to 'never call a disturbance a 'riot' unless the police or another responsible agency or official has done so.'[564] Where CBS management relied on their

[561] Salant, Conference of CBS Affiliates 6 June 1967
[562] Ibid.
[563] 'Demonstrations, Riots and Other Civil Disturbances', *CBS News Standards,* p.6.
[564] Quoted in Lem Tucker, 'Report It. Don't Promote It', Bill Matney, 'We Found Ourselves the Targets', *Reporters on Reporting* NBC News Pamphlet, b.220, f.19 'News c1968-1972', NBCOF

newsmen's judgements of events, NBC preferred to defer to the interpretation of those in authority positions.[565]

Both networks, in their consideration of the importance of terminology, interpreted responsible reporting from the perspective of the white establishment. They cautioned against careless use of the word 'riot' because it was an inflammatory term which might exacerbate tensions. 'Our job is to report the story, not promote it,' the NBC guidelines argued. White-run network television news departments who knew little about the lives of the Black American population of the nation's inner cities used a term to describe the violence which many African Americans disagreed with.[566] As Hinton has argued, the term 'riot' was a misnomer which framed the mass violence of Black American city residents as devoid of political content; spontaneous uncontrollable outpourings of emotion at best or unjustifiable instances of mass criminality at worst.[567] Governmental post-mortem investigations into the African American uprisings in the mid-1960s which determined they were essentially meaningless underpinned this perception. An FBI investigation into the urban violence of 1964 concluded that 'a common characteristic of the riots was a senseless attack on all constituted authority without purpose or object.'[568] The McCone Commission in its examination of the Watts uprising in 1965 similarly concluded that the rioters were marginal people and the riots meaningless outbursts,' resulting from 'irresponsible agitation by negro leaders,' according to urban historian Robert Fogelson.[569] Yet as historians like Hinton have shown, the mass violence of the 1960s represented rebellion against a system

[565] See also Martindale, *The White Press and Black America*, pp.40-43.
[566] *CBS Reports: Watts, Riot or Revolt?* [television programme] CBS, 7 December 1965.
[567] Hinton, *America on Fire*, pp.3-4
[568] Federal Bureau of Investigation, 'REPORT', 18 September 1964, b.26, NdeBK, 'Text of FBI Report to President on Summer Riots in 9 Cities Over Country', *NYT*, 27 September 1964, p.82.
[569] Perlman, *Public Interests*, p.52.

that had entrenched unequal conditions and anti-Black violence.[570] In the mid-1960s networks privileged official sources over the viewpoint of Black inner city communities.[571]

At CBS News, Salant had enjoined his department to provide meaningful context to avoid misrepresenting events, yet his organisation's reporting rarely offered insights into the causes of urban violence. Instead, CBS News reports regularly underpinned the governmental perspective that the disorders were nothing more than episodes of wanton destruction and opportunistic looting. In a televised address to the nation during the mass uprising which erupted in Detroit in 1967, President Lyndon Johnson outlined his stance on the subject: 'There is no American right to loot stores, or to burn buildings, or to fire rifles from the rooftops. That is crime.'[572] The CBS evening news segment reporting the disorder in Washington D.C. in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968 typified news coverage which frequently took a similar line. Correspondent Steve Rowan over footage of shop fronts in flames in Washington D.C. described how looters roamed through the streets 'cheering as another plate glass window caved in laughing at each other as they emerged with armfuls of loot.' Later he noted drily, 'there was little talk of Martin Luther King.' Rowan highlighted how the African American looters were 'taking more than they could ever use themselves discarding what didn't fit or wasn't the right colour.'[573] Such commentary in news reports undermined any argument that the unrest was rooted in the conditions of poverty experienced by inner city residents or an expression of frustration and anger at American racial inequality. Instead, television news

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[570] Hinton, *America on Fire*, p.7.

[571] CBS documentary *Watts: Riot or Revolt?* recognised that an alternative interpretation existed and acknowledged the economic, educational, and social inequality faced by the Los Angeles Black community. Yet ultimately the documentary privileged official white sources over the testimony of Watts residents and denounced the riots as criminal attacks perpetuated by violent thugs devoid of any political cause. *CBS Reports: Watts – Riot or Revolt?* [television programme] CBS, 7 December 1965. For more on *Watts – Riot or Revolt?* see, Acham, *Revolution Televised*, pp.32-41.

[572] Quoted in Hinton, America on Fire, p.4.

[573] *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite* [television programme] CBS, 5 April 1968. A copy of this recording became available on a youtube account hosted by 'Hezakaya Newz' in 2018 which the author downloaded and has in personal possession. The Hezakaya Newz online copy has since been removed.

reporters regularly positioned Black people involved in urban rebellions as troublemakers taking advantage of a breakdown of law and order to wreak mindless havoc.

It was the experience of covering the racial crisis over the course of the 1960s that had prompted television news departments to interrogate the ethical and practical quandary of how to report the news without shaping it. Network news executives like Richard Salant shifted their guidance on which impulses should guide news judgements, determining that rather than seeking dramatic imagery, responsible reporting in the context of African American protests necessitated caution. The networks enjoined their teams to cap their cameras rather than risk finding themselves transgressing the line they believed existed between documenting and influencing the news. Yet in their determinations of where to draw this line the operational guidelines they developed made a decision about whose performances for the camera were legitimate political theatre and whose attempts at engaging in the politics of being seen were illegitimate publicity-seeking. White news reporters who understood little about the experiences of Black America and privileged the viewpoints of the white establishment had a tendency to view African American people – whether involved in demonstrations or civil disorders – as troublemakers. These were the type of people whose performances in front of the camera therefore they were likely to deem unacceptable.

News departments had devised their guidelines on responsible reporting in the context of public criticism of the television news industry's lack of responsibility. As the next section will explore there were some critiques that had more resonance than others.

Section Two

Criticism of the News

In July of 1968 Richard Salant sent copies of a *US News & World Report* clipping to the top men in his news division with the comment: 'Read the attached only if your digestion is good and your stomach strong. Wow!'[574] Under the heading 'Television Comes Under Fire,' the article stated:

> Growing concern is being expressed about the world that TV portrays. Is this the real world? Television has had a terrific impact on everything from politics to war. Now it is being criticised for the quality of its news coverage. At the heart of the issue: Does the TV camera objectively report events, or does it help shape them?[575]

The article highlighted that amongst the wider anxieties which had begun to animate public discourse about how television was redefining the 'real' in the 1960s, criticism had emerged in America's public conversation that television news rather than covering 'riots' and civil rights demonstrations had helped to create them.[576]

This critique of television news irresponsibility in its reporting on race had its roots in segregationist arguments that television news teams provided undue attention to publicity-seeking civil rights demonstrators. Broader concerns about television's impact helped these arguments gain traction. Yet Black communities and those engaged in the Black freedom struggle had a conflicting perspective on how the news media determined the politics of being seen. They argued that television news ignored and misrepresented Black America. As this section will show, television news departments developed their operational guidelines on reporting on racial unrest in the context of conflicting critiques from those outside of the industry. Exploring these arguments reveals that news departments responded to criticisms

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574 CBS Memorandum from Richard Salant to Messrs. Leonard, Manning, Cronkite, Midgely, Silver, 11 July 1968, b.2K132, f. Richard Salant, 1965-1971, CBSENA

575 'Television Comes Under Fire,' *US News & World Report*, 15 July attachment to CBS Memorandum Salant to Messrs. Leonard et al. 11 July 1968.

576 An early proponent of this critique, historian Daniel J. Boorstin, had coined the term 'pseudo-event' in 1962 as an excoriation of events which blurred the line between reality and publicity stunt. For more on Boorstin's concept, see Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: Or, What Happened to the American Dream* (New York, 1962)

from figures in the white establishment that their coverage propelled protests against racism. They paid less attention to the charges made by anti-racism protestors and ordinary African American citizens that their coverage operated as an instrument of white supremacy.

Television as an Instrument of the White Establishment

In the mid-1960s, SNCC organisers argued that network reporting which relied on elected officials as sources of fact produced coverage that perpetuated the racism of the Southern white establishment. Encapsulating this position, SNCC fieldworker Mendy Samstein in September of 1964, described his frustrations with a CBS News report that provided a distorted narrative about the aftermath of two bombings in McComb Mississippi:

> The Negroes crowd in the street, brooding anguishing. To the police this is a mob. So they tell the press: 3,000 Negroes gather in the streets. Yet the entire Negro population of McComb is just over 3,000. This doesn't matter. Cover up the real story. Paint a picture of rioting Negroes. Play on Northern fears. This is what the press will pick up. And so Mike Wallace calmly and objectively explains to morning national T.V. viewers that last night the Negroes of McComb reacted with violence.[577]

According to Samstein, a narrow definition of objectivity which privileged official sources had allowed reporters to overlook the truth of what had occurred, instead propagating the interpretation of racist white Southerners. Over the course of the 1960s, this reporting had caused members of SNCC, including the organisation's chairman Stokely Carmichael, increasingly to lose faith in television news as a neutral institution. Black Power activists decried the news media as a white institution which replicated rather than reported on the racism entrenched in American society.

[577] 'Bombings 13th and 14th in McComb, Mississippi', p.3. Mendy Samstein Papers, 1963-1966, (Archives Main Stacks, SC3093; WIHVS260-A), Freedom Summer Digital Collection, WSHS, https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/17659/rec/1

Many African American residents of the nation's inner cities held similar beliefs about the idea that television news operated as an unbiased observer was a fiction. One of the most potent ingredients in the cocktail of injustice that Los Angeles' Black community resented was a news media that had for years either ignored or misrepresented their viewpoint.[578] In their experience, the national news media, through its blind spots and distortions, participated in and perpetuated unfair treatment of Black America. In the words of chronicler of the 1965 Watts rebellion, Robert Conot, 'the newsman thought he was a hero. The black man thought he was a villain.'[579] Residents of this district of south-central Los Angeles therefore saw in the television news cameras that entered their neighbourhoods to document the unrest, symbols of a white society responsible for their oppression upon which they could focus their rage. When some Black Angelinos attacked newsmen and their equipment, therefore, the assaults were not random acts of violence.[580]

Conot's searing account of the rebellion detailed how coverage of events lived up to Black Los Angeles residents' low opinions of television news – providing an example of exactly the treatment Watts residents resented. After the first day of violence, in the hopes of quelling any further unrest the LA County Human Relations Commission called a meeting with community organisations and representatives of the police department and other agencies. Television cameras were there to capture this meeting which soon morphed into a public forum as community members aired their complaints about police brutality and the lack of jobs; lamented authorities that never listened to them; and called for peace rather than continued violence. Rena Frye – whom police had arrested alongside her son Marquette in the altercation that had sparked the disturbances of the previous day – announced to vocal cries of support: 'I'm here

[578] Robert Conot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness*, (New York, 1967), p.155.
[579] Conot, *Rivers of Blood*, p.75.
[580] Gerald Horne, *Fire this Time: the Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (New York, 1997), p.323. Donovan and Scherer, *Unsilent Revolution*:, p.72.

to ask you, please, to help me and to help others in this community to calm the situation down so that we will not have a riot tonight!'[581] Yet in the coverage aired to Los Angeles by CBS affiliate KNXT (and the nation when the network carried the broadcast on national news) the complete report of the meeting showed only a clip of one African American boy who yelled out that African Americans were 'after the Whiteys!' and were going to riot in white neighbourhoods that evening.[582] It did not however show that jeers from the crowd had silenced the boy or the community leader who dragged him from the microphone before announcing that he did not represent the consensus of the community, which only wanted a fair hearing.[583] The report, by leaving footage of the community's grievances on the cutting room floor and by making the boy's viewpoint appear illustrative rather than at odds with the dominant tone of the meeting, provided a false representation.[584] Black citizens of Los Angeles who watched the evening news, according to Conot, were 'dismayed, and simultaneously fulfilled in their expectations' of a news media which to their minds had never covered their community fairly.[585]

This was not, however, a grievance confined to the residents of Watts, nor did it change after 1965. African American citizens in cities throughout the nation continued to resent a white news media which they had found ignored Black America, failed to report its grievances, and slanted against them what little coverage it did provide of the nation's Black communities. As had been the case in Watts, as unrest erupted across the nation's cities in the summers of the later 1960s, television news teams tried to report on the violence. But African Americans participating in rebellions against a society which oppressed them viewed these TV news crews

[581] Conot, *Rivers of Blood*, p.151.
[582] Ibid., p.155
[583] Conot also describes how once away from the microphone a group of youths attacked this boy and he was only saved from a severe beating by the intervention of several adults. The boy's exhortations to riot it therefore appears were not sentiments shared by his contemporaries at the meeting. Ibid.
[584] According to Conot's account, at the end of the meeting a group led by African American police sergeant Vivian Strange approached the television cameramen who were packing up their equipment and pleaded with them not to include. Ibid.
[585] Ibid.

not as impartial observers but organs of the white power structure complicit in the subjugation of Black America. As a result, African American inner-city residents continued to provide a hostile reception to news crews. 'The civil uprisings of 1967 posed massive problems not only for law enforcement agencies but for news media as well – particularly television,' Bill Matney of NBC News Chicago recalled in a pamphlet his network put out about reporting on the unrest later in the decade. [586] 'For this past Summer, more often than not, we found ourselves targets of abuse… In Newark and Detroit, I witnessed the destruction and damage of NBC television equipment.' Those teams reporting on rebellions in the nation's cities found that television news equipment attracted a violent response from subjects who resented how the news media had treated them. That Matney himself was Black revealed that angry residents of Newark and Detroit were not targeting television news organisations due to a misplaced sense of reverse racism. To them the networks represented a history of ill-treatment of their communities and a tool of white supremacy.

In part because television news so frequently overlooked Black communities, ordinary African American citizens had few opportunities to make their criticisms of television news coverage heard. Some Black members of the public, however, put pen to paper to register their complaints with comments white newscasters made about the rebellions. A number of such letters of complaint from Black viewers reached Walter Cronkite following a comment he made on his evening news programme in the wake of the Detroit rebellion in 1967. The anchorman had asserted that with the passage of civil rights legislation and the creation of Great Society programmes in recent years it was difficult to explain why the recent rash of riots had occurred. 'Bless your heart!' Mary Louise Hinton, an African American housewife from Kansas City wrote acidly to Cronkite as a result of 'that incredibly stupid question.' 'The reasons for the riots lie in

[586] Bill Matney, 'We Found Ourselves the Targets', *Reporters on Reporting* NBC News Pamphlet, b.220, f.19 'News c1968-1972', NBCOF.

conditions which no smug, complacent white person, absolutely secure in his omnipotent whiteness, is capable of understanding.' The anger which burned through America's cities was a response to the 'utter frustration, deep humiliation, paralyzing hurt and devastating degradation that is the Negroes' lot every day of his life,' she argued.[587] Continuing Mrs Hinton attempted to enlighten Cronkite: 'Representative John Conyers of Michigan personally interpreted the reasons for the riots most succinctly when he stated on the "Today" program "250 years of slavery followed by 102 years of 2nd to 10th class citizenship could only have climaxed in some kind of explosion."'[588] This African American viewer's letter explained that the racism rooted deep in the fabric and structure of American society had not and could not be eradicated with the passage of a few laws. Yet she highlighted that her words would likely have little effect. 'Nothing I have written will change your mind or attitude one iota, because you, too, are conditioned by the fact you are the product of a segregated society,' she informed the white newsman.[589] To Mrs Hinton, Walter Cronkite represented not a neutral perspective, but a white point of view.

In response to the same broadcast, another Black viewer, Albert Dean Jefferson, pointed out to Cronkite that television news in condemning the Black residents who committed the violence was not helping to solve the issue. 'To say the people are lawless, irresponsible, violent etc. does not deal with the problem and you well know it,' he told the newscaster. 'So you could do a great service to all those concerned and spell out the problems in the ghetto and encourage and [sic] all out honest effort to eradicate them.'[590] Television news coverage, Jefferson argued, could fulfil its public service responsibilities by enlightening the nation about the entrenched inequality in America's inner cities.

[587] Letter from Mary Louise Hinton to Walter Cronkite, 31 July 1967, b.2K65, CBSENA.
[588] Ibid.
[589] Ibid.
[590] Letter from Albert Dean Jefferson to Walter Cronkite, 31 July 1967, b.2K65, CBSENA.

Activists like Stokely Carmichael had a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between news media coverage and political power, but ordinary African American citizens across the nation also understood this connection more broadly. They therefore viewed network news which misrepresented their communities and ignored their problems as complicit in their continued oppression and as a result partially if indirectly to blame for the uprisings which erupted in American cities. Although some African American viewers did succeed in making their views known to the networks, in wider public discourse a conflicting complaint about television news' culpability in the unrest made by people in more powerful positions in American society gained far more traction.

Irresponsible Reporting

Segregationists in the late 1950s and early 1960s resented a national news media they believed slanted news coverage in favour of African Americans and presented white Southerners in a negative light.[591] A central strand of this criticism held that biased Northern reporters were stirring up trouble by providing an audience for self-serving attention-seeking Black civil rights leaders.[592] Ever the quintessential racist Southern official, Bull Connor typified this view when he confronted CBS reporter Dan Rather in Birmingham in 1963. 'What the hell you ovah here for, wantin' to give these niggers mo' publicity?' the segregationist official had demanded of the CBS newsman.[593] According to Rather, Connor – himself 'in his glory' on television every night

[591] Greenberg, 'The Idea of 'the Liberal Media"
[592] Watson, *Expanding Vista*, p.93., The antipathy towards Northern reporters often manifested in violence. Because of their highly visible equipment television news teams were particularly vulnerable to such attacks. For more on segregationist attacks on newsmen see David R. Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* (Columbia University Press, 1985), p.10, David J. Wallace, *Massive Resistance and Media Suppression: The Segregationist Response to Dissent during the Civil Rights Movement* (El Paso, 2013), pp.157-188, Bliss, Jr., *Now the News*, p.322, Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, p.384.
[593] Rather with Herskowitz, *Camera Never Blinks*, p.93.

during the Birmingham campaign – felt the news media 'was either being used, or playing King's game.'[594]

The segregationist critique that television news reporters were engaged in an irresponsible compact with civil rights activists who aggressively sought the limelight tapped into wider concerns that emerged over the 1950s and 1960s that television was blurring the boundaries between style and substance in the nation's politics. Americans across the political spectrum in this period began to adjust, uneasily, to a new type of media-driven political sphere, intensified by television, where presentation and celebrity had become fundamental to establishing political authority and legitimacy. According to media historian Kathryn Cramer Brownell, as political culture increasingly valued media attention, 'star quality' became an essential component of gaining political credibility.[595] The tactic of transforming politicians into public personalities via television, however, generated controversy. In 1956, John Schneider's satirical novel *The Golden Kazoo* played on anxieties that political candidates had become products that advertising agencies marketed to TV audiences.[596] Politicians from both parties decried what Kennedy's opposition Richard Nixon derided as his attempts to pander for 'cheap publicity' in the 1960 presidential election. By 1968 Nixon himself was the subject of scorn in reporter Joe McGinniss's bestselling expose *The Selling of the President.*[597] Despite his public condemnation of the celebrity style of Kennedy and claims that he was a politician 'not a showman,' Nixon had worked carefully with a coterie of advertising and television consultants to control his image in the mass media and construct the presidential candidate as a celebrity.[598] In American popular

[594] Ibid., p.92.
[595] Kathryn Cramer Brownell, 'The Making of the Celebrity Presidency' in Brian Balogh and Bruce J. Schulman (eds) *Recapturing the Oval Office: New Historical Approaches to the American Presidency* (Ithaca, 2015), p.168.
[596] Brownell, 'The Making of the Celebrity Presidency', p.167.
[597] Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President, 1968* (New York, 1969).
[598] Quoted in Kathryn Cramer Brownell, 'The Entertainment Estate: Hollywood in American Politics, 1932-1972' (PhD thesis, Boston University, 2011), p.302., Brownell, 'The Making of the Celebrity Presidency', p.174.

political discourse, the relationship between politics, celebrity, and television was met with a note of cynicism.

Fears about the intertwining of celebrity and political relevance provided reinforcement for those who wished to denounce both militant activists and irresponsible reporters. Where segregationists in the early 1960s had argued that the news media gave Martin Luther King Jr. undue attention, by the close of the decade white conservatives and moderate civil rights leaders alike argued that the media had created Stokely Carmichael. One of the loudest proponents of this perspective, Whitney Young Jr., the Executive Director of the National Urban League encapsulated this viewpoint in a widely circulated 1968 interview in the *U.S. News & World Report* which argued that Carmichael's following consisted of 'about 5000 white reporters.'[599] Through their unjustified fixation with the telegenic young activist, Young argued, the news media motivated by sensation-seeking, had elevated Carmichael to a level of importance far beyond his actual influence in the African American community.

Criticisms of how television was shaping American society during the 1960s also extended into anxiety that the news media was contributing to an elimination of the distinction between authentic reality and contrived unreality. Leading the way with this criticism, conservative historian Daniel J. Boorstin in his 1961 book *The Image: or What Happened to the American Dream* coined the term 'pseudo-event' to describe artificial occurrences designed to be reported or reproduced by the media.[600] Demonstrating how civil rights protest coverage became a poster issue for this critique, Boorstin pointed to the topic as an example of how television reporters were creating content rather than covering authentic spontaneous events as they occurred in the world. During school integration disorders in New Orleans in 1960, Boorstin highlighted

[599] Quoted in 'Carmichael No Leader, Whitney Young Claims', WP, 15 April 1968, p.A4.
[600] Cited in Winberg, 'Archie Bunker for President', p.15.

in *The Image*, Mayor de Lesseps S. Morrison had written a letter to television newsmen arguing that, 'the mere presence of telecasting facilities was breeding disorder.'[601] Amongst the mayor's complaints was the charge that newsmen had staged events for their cameras: 'Mayor Morrison said he himself had witnessed a television cameraman 'setting up a scene', and then, having persuaded a group of students to respond like a 'cheering section', he had them yell and demonstrate on cue.'[602] Morrison had proposed a three-day suspension on television coverage of the controversy. The newsmen's rejection of this suggested news blackout as censorship, Boorstin argued to his readers, was a charade in which the reporters' performance of journalistic integrity masqueraded their true irresponsible intentions to contrive a story.

> The conscientious reporters indignantly rejected the Mayor's proposed moratorium on news: they said that 'Freedom of the Press' was at stake. What was once an institution preserved in the interest of the community; now it is often a euphemism for the prerogative of reporters to produce their synthetic commodity.'[603]

Such arguments in the nation's intellectual circles which framed television as an integrity-free promoter of artificial spectacle helped provide reinforcement to white Southern claims that irresponsible Northern television news reporters were helping self-serving civil rights activists put on a show.

In the mid-1960s, as African American residents of inner cities began to rebel with mass violence, white Southerners continued to make the case that Black Americans were hungry for unjustified attention rather than legitimate justice. Inherent in these arguments was the belief that television, by providing these troublemakers with an audience, was partly responsible for the disorders. Writing to presidential press secretary Bill Moyers during the Watts rebellion in

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601 Boorstin did not specify but it is likely that production of the episode of ABC's *Bell & Howell Close-Up!* Documentary series 'The Children Were Watching' about the desegregation of a New Orleans elementary school contributed to Mayor Morrison's irritation. Watson, *Expanding Vista*, p.92.
602 Tennessee Governor Buford Ellington made a similar charge that year that sit-ins in downtown Nashville had been staged for a CBS crew in town filming a documentary. Watson, *The Expanding Vista*, p.99.
603 Boorstin, *The Image*, pp.39-40.

1965, Democratic Georgia congressional candidate Max Lockwood called for the major network presidents to initiate a voluntary news blackout of the south-central area of Los Angeles. Lockwood litigated this case for television to cease its journalistic duty to report significant events by arguing that 'many of the misguided hoodlums are having a field day as they see their images on television screens, knowing that they have the attention of a world-wide audience.'[604] An extension of white Southern criticisms of the relationship between Northern reporters and publicity-seeking civil rights activists, such charges reiterated the belief that television cameras were to blame for causing trouble and that protesting Black Americans had no real grievances.

Lockwood's criticism was shared beyond the circles of Southern conservatives. By the mid 1960s, white Americans on both sides of the political spectrum had joined white segregationists in believing that American society was just. Many of those who had decried the racism of Jim Crow believed that the passage of civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965 had eradicated the problem of racial inequality. This belief combined with a climate of anxiety around television's influence on society helped fuel arguments that TV news bore some responsibility for the rebellions. Mid-century government investigations into the causes of the rebellions which rendered the majority of those involved in the uprisings as troublemakers with no real grievance also placed partial blame on the incendiary impact of television's sensationalist breaking coverage. According to an FBI report on the 'the riot situations' which had occurred in nine cities in the summer of 1964, 'the arrival of a large number of reporters and television cameras at the riots provided an opportunity for self-seeking individuals to publicise wild charges on television and radio and in the press.' The report also condemned the news media for carrying 'lurid accounts' of rioting nationwide which had escalated the disorders by attracting others

[604] Joseph Latin to Max Lockwood (w/attached telegram, Lockwood to Bill Moyers, 8/20/65), Gen HU 2/ST5, WHCF, LBJL.

'interested primarily in looting' to the scene and inspiring 'riots' to start in other cities.[605] The FBI report painted reporters as having irresponsibly fanned burning embers of meaningless anarchy into the flames that engulfed American urban centres.

The McCone Commission in its examination of the Watts uprising a year later similarly blended incredulity that the uprisings represented a communal protest with condemnation of the incendiary impact of the news media. As media historian Allison Perlman has highlighted, in its accounting of the uprising, the report levelled criticism at the news media and especially television for intensifying the unrest with dramatic and sensationalist coverage that inflamed passions on all sides. Critical of television for broadcasting 'inflammatory incidents,' the McCone Commission recommended that the press refrained from disseminating coverage of incendiary events until the volatile situation came under control.[606]

As the decade progressed, unrest continued to light up American cities, and fears around the role of media in American society persisted, irresponsible television coverage became a favoured explanation for government officials looking to assign blame. In 1967, trade magazine *Broadcasting* reported that 'criticism of broadcasting exposure given to those who would incite civil disorder' verged on the edge of 'blossoming into a full-fledged congressional issue'. Following civil disturbances in the July of 1967, Republican Missouri congressman Durward G. Hall in remarks prepared for the congressional record accused broadcasters of lending their facilities 'to be used as incitement to riot' by covering the unfolding of events leading up to incidents 'in a fashion no less detestable than the worst days of 'yellow journalism." He urged those in charge of 'instant' media to exercise responsible restraint.[607] Republican Senator Hugh Scott, a member of the Communications Subcommittee, sent letters to CBS, NBC, and ABC

[605] FBI REPORT, 18 September 1964, 'Text of FBI Report to President on Summer Riots'
[606] Perlman, *Public Interests,* p.52.
[607] Quoted in 'Congressman charges broadcasters aid riots', *Broadcasting,* 31 July 1967, p.44.

claiming that 'concentration on the sensational aspects of the situation…raises a serious question as to the editorial responsibility and the discretion of the media.'[608] In perhaps the most widely reported condemnation of television, vice president Hubert Humphrey in an interview published in the 9 July issue of *Look* magazine argued that 'TV in particular has spread the message of rioting and looting…and has literally served as a catalyst to promote even more trouble.' Arguing that the media needed to reflect on its obligations he claimed it was 'absolutely essential that TV in particular, and radio and press secondarily, accept their responsibility in these riot situations.'[609] As Black reporter R. O. Donaldson argued in the *Chicago Defender*, the urban violence that summer had occasioned 'a corresponding outbreak of buckpassing and finger-pointing,' as 'leader after leader…sought to fix the 'blame' for the riots. Invariably, the blame was found to rest with someone else.'[610] Where Southern segregationists had tried to shift attention from racial injustice onto the role of the news media in covering protests, by the late 1960s, American politicians across the political spectrum had adopted this strategy to blame television newsmen for causing the unrest rather than persisting inequality.

Mixed into Humphrey's accusations that television had fomented riots through the immediate broadcasting of inflammatory incidents was his contention that ordinary African American individuals on the streets sought the attention of television cameras for reasons of personal vanity:

> If the media are going to broadcast the emotional appeals of the Stokely Carmichaels and the other agitators, it is like throwing gasoline on the flames. I have discovered even in my campaign that Negro youth particularly likes to get on television. Half of the jumping, pushing and shoving that goes on in a campaign is a desire on the part of the youngster in the ghetto to have some publicity, to see his picture on television.[611]

608 Quoted in 'Riot Coverage Stirs Congress', *Broadcasting*, 7 August 1967, p.60.
609 Quoted in 'HHH sounds off on riot news'
610 R. O. Donaldson, 'Blame For Cities' Riots Becomes Rampant', *CD*, 12 August 1967, p.12.
611 Cited in Val Adams, 'Humphrey Charges Television is a 'Catalyst' Spurring Riots', *NYT*, 25 June 1968, p.83.

Alongside his denigration of recognised leaders like Stokely Carmichael, in language reminiscent of Georgia congressional candidate Max Lockwood's complaint, Humphrey pathologised young African Americans as being uniquely intoxicated by the prospect of appearing on TV screens. The Vice President implied that the presence of television cameras was a particularly strong stimulant for this demographic and by extension made the claim that a desire to appear on screen had influenced unrest on American city streets. Such arguments invalidated the anger of young Black ghetto-residents facing persistent exploitation, police violence, and political exclusion. As Perlman has highlighted, politicians argued that broadcasts which showed trenchant criticism of racism in America, had provoked the unrest which burned through the country's cities rather than the racism itself.[612] At the same time, viewing the African Americans that resorted to violence on city streets as publicity-seekers rather than protestors allowed those in positions of power to absolve themselves of any responsibility for the unrest.

Journalists in the print press similarly promoted the argument that television news reporting on civil unrest merged a dereliction of journalistic duty on the behalf of television news and rampant attention-seeking on the part of African Americans in city streets. Borrowing the concept of 'boundary work' from the field of sociology, former television news journalist and historian, Mike Conway, has argued that the print journalism community in the 1960s sought to protect their professional territory from the growing power of their new competitor.[613] By demonising others who encroach on their expertise, those who engage in boundary work tactics both burnish their own reputations and protect their niche. As media scholar Jane Singer has shown print journalists in the twentieth century invoked the ethics of traditional journalism to marginalise the 'poseurs' in television by damaging their reputations as professional journalists.[614] Television news reportage on racial unrest provided an unmissable opportunity

[612] Perlman, *Public Interests*, p.52.
[613] Conway, *Contested Ground*, p.2., Schudson, 'The Objectivity Norm in Journalism', p.152
[614] Cited in Conway, *Contested Ground*, p.7.

for print reporters to cast aspersions on television news by calling the professional integrity of its journalists into question. From the pages of *Horizon* magazine in 1967, journalist Henry Fairlie made an argument typical of this tactic, claiming in an article entitled 'Can You Believe Your Eyes?' that television unlike its print cousin had a 'tendency to produce self-generating news.' Fairlie informed *Horizon* readers that 'television cameramen and reporters move into the streets looking – literally looking – for trouble and the crowds play up to them…Television, merely by its presence, helps to create incidents and then itself remains part of the happening.' The journalist continued with the declaration that both at the Watts rebellion and the disorder the previous Summer in Chicago such dynamics had been in play.

A year later *Washington Post* staff writer Philip Geyelin demonstrated that such indictments of television's irresponsible reporting on racial unrest had not lost their appeal to white newspaper editors. In an article entitled 'Telling It Like It Wasn't,' Geyelin, recounted in detail a situation where reckless television newsmen had collaborated with Black bystander-turned-actors to stage a story of urban rioting in the context of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.[615] The print journalist described how from a collection of men, women, and children who had been calmly watching a building on fire, a group aware of the presence of television cameras created a ruckus yelling racial epithets and invoking the murder of King until the police arrived to disperse them. 'And every bit of it was aimed at the funnel-shaped snout of a television camera;' Geyelin argued, 'the medium had moved in. As the cameraman panned across the crowd, it was [as] if some unseen director was calling out cues. It was instant Showbiz.' The confrontation, he argued, was 'a piece of theatre, inspired, produced and directed by the Almighty Eye."[616] Geyelin contended that what had transpired was pure performance; from his perspective the

[615] Geyelin's condemnation of the effect of 'The Almighty Eye' reached an even bigger audience when it was then picked up and the bulk of his article reiterated in Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson's syndicated column the next week. Philip Geyelin, 'Telling It Like It Wasn't', *WP*, 11 April 1968, p.A20, Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson, 'The Washington Merry-Go-Round: Riot Spread Laid to 'Almighty Eye", *WP*, 17 April 1968, p.B11.
[616] Geyelin, 'Telling It Like It Wasn't'

behaviour of the African American spectators of the fire was inauthentic and therefore invalid. At the same time, he excoriated television for creating rather than covering the news. By using the language of the entertainment industry, the other side of television's janus-face, Geyelin invoked the medium's proximity to commercialism to highlight its failure to uphold the principles of responsible journalism.

Over the course of the 1960s television networks were subject to criticism from multiple different directions for their reporting on African American resistance to racism. Anxieties about how the media was shaping society's relationship to reality helped buoy segregationist accusations in the 1950s and early 1960s that television news reporters were stirring up trouble by covering civil rights. By the end of the decade when urban disorders erupted in the nation's cities, politicians on both the left and the right adopted the segregationist tactic of shifting attention from racial injustice to the role of those who reported it. At the same time, newspaper reporters saw in the critique of television's irresponsibility a means by which to demonise the competitor medium which had usurped their dominance of the news industry. Central to all of these accusations was an indictment of the African American subjects of television's irresponsible reporting as self-serving co-conspirators who sought nothing more than the shallow publicity TV news cameras promised. Black Americans – whether savvy activists or regular citizens living in America's inner cities – recognised the power of news media images, but they did not view television news reporters as willing purveyors of attention to their communities. Instead, they resented a white institution complicit in reinforcing white supremacy in coverage which continued to ignore and distort Black America.

Conclusion

In 1967, Richard Salant circulated to his news department Henry Fairlie's article which accused television newsmen of looking for trouble during the urban disorders in Watts and Chicago during the preceding years. Attached to the xeroxed copies of Fairlie's words was a memo from Salant in which the CBS News president stated he found the charges 'most provocative but only partially valid.'[617] The following year, director of NBC News Washington William Monroe hit back at Philip Geyelin's accusation that television news crews had staged a broadcast of civil disorder at an academic discussion on the mass media and urban disorders at the University of Chicago. Arguing that the real people guilty of sensationalist misrepresentation were the print reporters criticising television, in comments relayed to the industry by *Broadcasting* magazine, Monroe stated: 'Here we have a case of consistent journalistic responsibility turned into an anti-television atrocity story by newspapermen visibly enjoying the seduction of a half-truth.'[618]

Those in the television news industry were cognisant of the criticism eddying through public discourse. In response to politicians' and print journalists' attacks on the integrity of television news reporting on the urban disorders television news executives doubled down on their claims of commitment to responsible reporting. William Monroe argued to his Chicago audience – and the industry by way of *Broadcasting*'s reporting – that the electronic media had learned to cover rioting 'with discipline and responsibility.'[619] Both ABC News and NBC News issued formal statements in response to Hubert Humphrey's public criticism that television needed to examine its obligations during riot situations while CBS News pointed to its policy on the topic which the American Society of Newspaper Editors' *Bulletin* had published the previous year.[620] Each of these statements highlighted how the organisation upheld its journalistic ethics in reporting on racial unrest, as ABC News president Elmer W. Lower argued: 'We cover the

[617] CBS Memorandum from Richard Salant to Distribution List, 9 March 1967, b.2K132, f.'Richard Salant, 1965-1971', CBSENA.
[618] The name of the game: Make TV the riot scapegoat', *Broadcasting*, 13 May 1968, p.62.
[619] Ibid.
[620] Adams, 'Humphrey Charges Television is a 'Catalyst' Spurring Riots'

story…[but] do not become part of the story…We have a responsibility to cover the news, and to cover it fairly, and in the case of an explosive story, we assume the responsibility with caution.'[621] In seeking to counter the criticism being levelled at them, TV news executives emphasised their responsible reporting.

The definition of responsibility that television news executives evinced both in their public statements and in the policies on reporting on civil disturbances they developed over the course of the 1960s reveals an understanding of the concept shaped by the white establishment. Where Black communities demanded more and fairer coverage, first white segregationists and then politicians and newspaper journalists on both sides of the political spectrum argued that attention-seeking Black troublemakers should be given less. It was the criticisms by those in power to which television news executives responded.[622] The policies of restraint newsrooms developed in response to covering racial unrest encouraged news teams to cap their cameras rather than contribute to the creation of an inauthentic story. These policies of restraint ostensibly fulfilled the networks' proclaimed journalistic obligations to cover and not create the news, but they did so in a way that favoured those in power. By drawing a line between the publicity-seeking of those in official and 'responsible' positions they deemed acceptable and the performance of protest by Black anti-racist resistors they deemed illegitimate, television news pulled back from providing airtime to African American proponents of change.

[621] 'HHH Sounds Off on Riot News', 'Sheehan Says TV Did All It Could to Avoid Riots', *Broadcasting*, 29 April 1968, p.48., 'Riot News 'Responsible,' Says ABC News' Lower'
[622] Demonstrations, Riots and Other Civil Disturbances', *CBS News Standards,* p.6.

CONCLUSION

As the streets of Detroit lay smouldering in 1967, President Lyndon Johnson's Executive Order 11365 created the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to determine the nature, causes of, and solutions to the 'civil disorders' which had continued to erupt in American cities in the summers since 1964.[623] The final report of what became commonly known as the Kerner commission charged famously that the nation was 'moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.'[624] With an entire chapter devoted to 'The News Media and the Disorders' the report laid a large portion of the blame for the country's divisions at the feet of the fourth estate.[625] The institution responsible for informing and educating the whole of American society, the report argued, had fallen significantly and catastrophically short of the mark by failing 'to analyse and report adequately on racial problems in the United States and, as a related matter, to meet the Negro's legitimate expectations in journalism.' An overwhelmingly white national news media, the commission found, which had been 'shockingly backward in seeking out, hiring, training, and promoting Negroes,' had 'repeatedly, if unconsciously, reflect[ed] the biases, the paternalism, the indifference of white America.'[626] By failing to represent Black America within the newsroom, the nation's news departments had failed in their responsibility to report a truthful and accurate picture of the nation and its problems.

Upon the report's publication, CBS News president Richard Salant circulated the Kerner Commission's findings to the correspondents, reporters, producers, editors, writers, and

[623] Jelani Cobb, 'Introduction,' in Jelani Cobb with Matthew Guariglia, (eds) *The Essential Kerner Commission Report* (New York, 2021).
[624] Otto Kerner et al. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, (Washington D.C., 1968), p.1.
[625] National Advisory Commission, p.1.
[626] Ibid., p.221.

directors of his news department. 'I urge each of you to read and ponder it,' he instructed in a memorandum affixed to copies of Chapter Fifteen: 'The News Media and the Disorders':

> Not all of its words are wise; some of them may appear to be quite foolish. But the chapter should serve to stimulate dialogue among us at CND and to examine as non-defensively and conscientiously as is humanly possible what we ought to be doing better in these areas, and what we are not doing that we should be doing.[627]

This thesis seeks to understand the history of the nexus between race and the news media by tracing the relationship between America's network television news and the struggle for Black freedom. It finds that the struggle for racial equality played a fundamental role in the formation of modern network television. Covering the explosive topic of race relations and receiving the criticism their operations engendered revealed the gaps which existed between television newsmen's professional principles and the practical reality of producing national news for a divided America. The race issue challenged television news departments to critically examine how they fulfilled their obligations to American society. At times reporters and executives differed in their beliefs over how to address the ethical dilemmas of responsible news gathering and dissemination. Yet in their public pronouncements, the networks used coverage of the nation's racial strife as proof of their professionalism, the prestige of their operation, and the value of their public service to America.

At the same time this thesis helps to show that a central component of the battle between those invested in white supremacy and those attempting to dismantle it for American hearts and minds was the fight to shape television news. The criticism of the Kerner commission was only the latest contributions to a two decade-long struggle. From the instant that television news departments first began to bring the news to American homes, viewers both Black and white,

[627] CBS Memorandum from Richard Salant to CND Distribution List, 7 March 1968, b.2K132, f.'Salant, Richard, 1965-1967', CBSENA.

activists fighting for racial equality, segregationists invested in maintaining the status quo, print journalists and politicians on both sides of the political spectrum put pressure on the developing industry to adjust how they reported on race in America. These various stakeholders understood that the broadcasts which defined America's race relations to the nation were a manmade product created by a set of people whose beliefs determined how they viewed the world. Wrapped up in their struggle to influence what the networks reported on screen, therefore, were battles to determine who produced the news and how they defined and upheld journalistic ideals of responsibility and neutrality.

There remain several areas to be explored in uncovering more fully the role that the relationship between the evolutions of the struggle for Back freedom and the development of the television news industry played in shaping modern America. While this thesis focused on national network news, how local news departments interacted with the struggle for Black freedom, and the role that the networks' relationships with their affiliates played in this story deserves more attention. A crucial facet of this history which remains understudied is the part that local affiliate news departments played in desegregating television news. Furthermore, while this thesis made a point of focusing on the relationship between the struggle for Black freedom and the development of television news, African American people were not the only oppressed groups whose fight for full citizenship interacted with the developing media landscape. It would be worth looking beyond Black America to consider how the rights struggles of other minorities factored into and complicated the arguments this thesis has laid out. A more concentrated focus on how gender operated within the newsroom, the Black freedom struggle, and white resistance organisations, would help to uncover more clearly the role that ideas around Cold War masculinity played into shaping this story. Additionally, future research into the historical nexus between television news and race would benefit from employing a transnational lens to consider

how this relationship was shaped by Cold war considerations, global political ideologies and movements, and increasingly international media markets.

Nevertheless, this thesis suggests a number of important interventions and contributions to several areas of scholarship. It contributes to literature on the history of American politics and the media by tracing how resistance to Black empowerment shaped political discourse surrounding network television. For the field of civil rights, it demonstrates the centrality of television news in the battle to determine how America understood the meaning of racism and the causes and effects of racial inequality. For historians of broadcasting, it helps to show that race relations were not just another 'issue of public importance' but a fundamental factor in shaping how news organisations operated. Lastly, for the emerging field of scholarship devoted to television news and the freedom struggle this thesis helps to further the project of tempering celebratory narratives of television's role in the fight for Black liberation. By taking a more expansive view of the relationship between the politics of television and race, this thesis illuminates that struggles over fair employment were an inextricable element of this story. *Making the News* also complicates our understanding of the complex matrix of motivating factors influencing television news. It reveals that journalistic ideals were not always in tension with commercial interests, but at times professing practice of the highest standard of journalism was itself a corporate strategy. Finally, it shows how the relationship between Black activists and television news reporters changed over time, rooting the disillusionment of Black Power proponents in their earlier experiences with television. In turn newsmen's inability to understand an ideology which did not centre whiteness and their disdain for its supporters sprung from their approach to covering civil rights.

By examining the interconnections between the evolving struggle for Black equality and the developing industry of television news over two decades this thesis finds that executives clung

on to a belief that their news departments could and should function as a free marketplace of ideas. In a society structured by racial oppression, however, this ideology proved fundamentally flawed. It failed to consider how the television news industry's white perspectives played into how they defined the contours of acceptable debate and how a white American public's investment in whiteness shaped how it understood news of the Black freedom struggle. News executives argued that their news departments should guide their decisions based on 'news value' alone. Yet they did not appreciate that their positions as white men in an unequal America influenced what they judged to be 'newsworthy.'

Because the television news industry was an institution which replicated the inequalities of American society, ultimately segregationists and white conservatives, with their disproportionately powerful positions in American society, were more successful than African American activists in shaping how television news defined responsible coverage. For decades before the Kerner commission published its report, Black Americans had castigated networks which failed to hire Black reporters and therefore defined the story of race relations, from a white perspective. Disillusioned by the continuing distortions of this white institution, by the time the Kerner report was released, much of Black America had long viewed television news as an enemy. White segregationists on the other hand, proved able to gain far more traction with their strategy of shifting public focus from racial injustices to those who reported them. Using the television industry's own professed ideals as a weapon against them, white Southerners accused television news reporters of bias, arguing that they intentionally colluded with self-serving civil rights activists at the expense of Southern white communities. Wider anxieties about how television was reshaping America's relationship to reality helped nurture the doubt segregationists cast on the professional ethics of television news and the authenticity of Black grievances. By the end of the decade, even democratic politicians and elite newspapermen had adopted this framework to shift blame for the Black protest erupting in

America's cities on irresponsible television coverage rather than enduring conditions of oppression.

Public condemnation of the network's sensation-seeking irresponsible coverage which rendered television news rather than American racism as the problem drowned out the Kerner report's criticisms that the television industry, by itself reflecting society's inequality, helped to perpetuate American racism. By the end of the decade, Richard Nixon's administration made accusations of the media's liberal bias a central component of its appeals to the 'Silent Majority' of Middle America. In the years which followed, right-wing media activists like Pat Buchanan and Roger Ailes would help to reinforce a belief in liberal media bias as a constitutive part of modern conservatism.[628] This thesis has helped to show how segregationist strategies for condemning civil rights reporting provided one point of origin for this liberal media bias framework.[629] The seeds of suspicion racist white Southerners helped to plant about the irresponsibility of television news reporters in particular helped to foster a climate of mistrust in network television news.

Although the dominance of network television news would wane, and the structures of broadcast news media would change, the struggles and debates which characterised this era echoed into the future. The questions over newsroom diversity, reportorial objectivity, and the boundaries between publicity and reality which characterise today's conversations about race and the news media in America have their roots in the mid-century relationship between television news and the struggle for Black freedom.

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[628] Hemmer, 'From "Faith in Facts" p.128.
[629] Greenberg, 'The Idea of "The Liberal Media"'

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Tarrytown New York Daily News
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