Is television news biased?

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Is television news biased? That anyone alive today should debate this question, or even ask it, is at least paradoxical. The spirit of our age is the spirit of relativism—of the belief in the subjectivity of human consciousness, the parochialism of cultures and values, "doing your own thing," etc. In such an age, the proposition that TV news is biased should be about as controversial as the law of gravity. Yet the situation is otherwise, to put it mildly. The question is not only asked and debated; it has generated an intense controversy that now includes, in addition to the extremes of left and right, a small army of journalists and network executives, politicians across the spectrum, ethnic and interest groups, presidential commissions, and just about everyone else with political interest or ambition.

But in fact there is no contradiction in this. The very scale of the controversy, taken together with the triviality of the question, indicates that the issue has surely been misdefined. The real question is not: Are the media biased? They are, by definition and of necessity. The question is rather: How are the media biased, and what is the consequent effect on our interests and values? Of course, the matter is never put in these terms; the genius of American politics
seems determined that we should frame it the other way, as if a perfectly unbiased or neutral mode of discourse were within the realm of human possibility. The result has been a hopeless muddling of the intellectual issue, and a needless intensification of the authentic political conflict which lies beneath it.

The question of legitimacy

It is not just an American innocence which has transformed a serious debate into the quixotic pursuit of a phantom called "unbiased news." There has been another, more specific cause. For the debate is not only a discussion of whether the media have power and how they use it; it is equally a dispute over the legitimacy of that power. Americans have no trouble believing that an individual may and should do everything within his power (and the law) to affect public discussion and shape public policy; that is his right as a citizen, as a participant in sovereignty, and thus as a source of legitimacy. But the mass media are not citizens or sovereigns. They are corporate entities, creatures of the state; they are elected by no one and are answerable only to themselves. Yet they possess far more power over our public life than does any individual. Then by what right do they exercise this power?

For the media, the question has long been a troubling one; in the context of the current controversy, which they see as a concerted partisan attack, it is downright embarrassing. Their temptation, in the circumstances, is to claim that they exercise no political power and therefore have no need to justify such power. But this line of argument is not very satisfactory, and they rarely use it—at least not for long. For one thing, to deny that they have power over public opinion is to deny that advertisers have any good reason to buy time or space from them. Moreover, as long as American journalists' self-proclaimed mission is to improve public opinion, they cannot very well claim that they have and seek no influence. Besides, any such claim would be met with utter disbelief. Hard as it has been for social science to measure the full range of media effects, the fact remains that the media, at least as selectors of information, possess a subtle but massive power to define the terms, issues, and especially the priorities of public discussion. Indeed, it is their possession and unavoidable use of this power, in the context of our growing national disagreement over the goals and priorities of public policy, which is the underlying reason for the existence of the entire controversy in the first place.
Sensibly enough, most journalists acknowledge the existence of their power and seek instead to defend its legitimacy on the ground of their "professional" and above all "fair" use of it to tell the news. By this they mean that their intention—and, in general, their achievement—is to give equal time, equal space, and equally considerate attention to all popular candidates and all popular views on all popular issues. The media recognize that this strategy will not protect them from the wrath of the political extremes, whose views and candidates they systematically ignore. But they do hope it will prevent them from offending the great majority, who presumably will see in the formula of "fairness" at least a rough approximation to "objectivity."

Yet the fact remains that even if the media were always "fair" by their own definition, they would not necessarily be unbiased in the larger sense. "Fairness" involves adhering to an accepted, professional mode of behavior; bias is a way of describing the effect of any activity ("fair" or not) on some value. The distinction is familiar enough in other connections. Judges and district attorneys may be "fair" in scrupulously following traditional rules; but the cumulative impact of their activities may be biased—against poor people, for instance. The media are capable of making this distinction about other institutions; but they do not acknowledge that this distinction applies to themselves. They defend their legitimacy by using "fairness" as a synonym for lack of bias. In consequence they perpetuate and—let us be candid about this—profit from a serious confusion of the real issue. Meanwhile, wrapped in the mantle of "fairness," the media indignantly rebuke their critics as "biased," "extremist," "self-seeking," "manipulative," or possessed of an irrational desire to punish the innocent messenger who bears a distasteful truth.

For the most part, the critics have been quick to accept this stealthy equation of "fairness" with lack of bias. For without the premise that an unbiased account is both possible and desirable, they have no very persuasive ground for complaint. To object to news coverage by thundering that it is "biased"—that is, clearly and intentionally misleading—is to use a powerful rhetoric; to say that it proceeds in such a way as to produce a misleading impression is rather less compelling. So the critics have been no less delighted than the media to confuse the issue. Neither have they been notably shy about finding dishonorable motives at work in any example of objectionable reportage or making broad charges on the basis of anecdotal or fragmentary evidence. Needless to say, the entire con-
trovery has not been the most enlightening or admirable episode in the history of American public discussion, and the subject by now is long overdue for some serious study.

"TNT"

One could have hoped, therefore, that Edith Efron's The News Twisters (Nash, $7.95), published this fall, would have been recognized for what it is—a serious independent effort to measure what she takes to be the "fairness" of network television news, and thereby to shed the light of quantitative evidence on one important aspect of the debate. Alas, it generally has been recognized as no such thing, and both its supporters and detractors have quickly assimilated it to their own polemical purposes. This is a pity, for the book deserves more thoughtful attention than it has generally received so far—not so much because it is brilliant, or scholarly, or especially penetrating (it is none of these), but rather because it presents for the first time an extensive and tolerably reliable body of evidence on the content of television coverage of the presidential campaign in 1968. Properly interpreted, this evidence reveals a great deal about how television news is biased and thus about the direction of its influence on public opinion. Any book that illumines such matters deserves better than TNT (to use the publisher's provocative acronym) has received.

Miss Efron's procedure was indeed brilliant in its simplicity. She made a transcript of the three national networks' evening news programs during the final seven weeks of the 1968 campaign. She then went through these transcripts identifying and recording every sentence containing positive or negative opinion concerning the three presidential candidates and a list of issues she selected. (Within the news stories on the campaign, most sentences contained no such opinion and therefore were not recorded.) When this procedure was finished—the actual identification and classification of opinion required the formulation and systematic application of specific rules to cover problematic cases—she simply totalled the number of words of positive and negative opinion concerning each candidate and issue and entered these totals on graphs.

Concerning the candidates, the results were as follows: Humphrey received essentially "fair" coverage by all three networks (ABC had 4,200 words for him, 3,600 against; CBS, 2,400 for and 2,100 against; NBC, 1,900 for and 2,700 against). Wallace received tolerably "fair" coverage from two of the networks (CBS, 1,100 words
IS TELEVISION NEWS BIASED?

for and 1,300 against; NBC, 1,000 for and 1,800 against) and pretty clearly "unfair" coverage from one network (ABC: 1,400 words for, 3,400 against). But the coverage of Nixon was something else altogether; on all three networks the pattern was one of extreme "unfairness," so much so that negative opinion on Nixon exceeded positive opinion by a factor of 10. (ABC, 900 words for and 7,500 words against; CBS, 300 words for, 5,300 words against; NBC, 400 words for, 4,200 against.) Miss Efron's study produced other findings—on coverage of the selected issues1 and on the structure and rhetoric of "biased" news stories—but only those on the coverage of candidates merit the reader's close attention.

If it is true that the networks' coverage of Nixon was extraordinarily "unfair," and especially if this "unfairness" was deliberate or politically motivated, then Miss Efron has documented an authentic national scandal. Television, after all, is the primary source of news for a majority of Americans; the three network programs are almost the only source of national and international news on American television; and the networks possess their tight oligopoly over such news as a direct result of federal policy, federal regulation, and federal protection. If the networks are indeed seriously abusing their special powers—and Miss Efron's findings, if true, suggest an abuse of some magnitude—then there would seem to be a strong case for using the same public authority that now sustains the networks' oligopoly either to regulate their news programs more stringently, or else to destroy their oligopoly over national news altogether. One can imagine still other courses of action—but that is beside the point. What is to the point is that, by measuring the extent to which the networks, by their own standards, are performing "unfairly," and therefore illegitimately, Miss Efron's statistics inevitably raise a serious question of public policy, and with it the specter of government intervention.

1 Although Miss Efron holds that her analysis of issue coverage reveals a pattern of leftward "bias," her findings are in fact inconclusive. With only one clear exception, the "issues" she chose to study are not issues in any ordinary sense of the term. Some were not discussed at all during the campaign; others were discussed, but all candidates took essentially the same position on them. In any case, most of her "issues" are not issues but political groups—liberals, conservatives, the white middle class, black militants, the left, demonstrators, and violent radicals. One problem here is that the groups as defined are not mutually exclusive. A more serious problem is that insofar as these groups were topics of discussion, they were not issues but symbols. People either find a symbol persuasive and take it seriously, or else they ignore it out of a preference for some different symbol. To measure the fairness of coverage of symbols, one would have to identify the different symbols of left, center, right, etc., and then measure their relative incidence. Miss Efron's procedure does not do this.
Method and magnitude

So it is hardly a surprise to discover that the book has aroused intense reactions along political lines, with conservatives strongly approving and liberals harshly negative. Aside from the fact that CBS, prior to the official publication date, issued a long memorandum "refuting" Miss Efron's content analysis, using two dozen examples (which are too few to be statistically capable of confirming or falsifying the study), what is interesting about this critical reception is not its direction or intensity but rather its focus. For it is the validity or invalidity of Miss Efron's numbers which has preoccupied the reviewers, both favorable and hostile. Nearly everyone has been prepared to believe that if the numbers are correct, then her conclusion—"that network coverage tends to be strongly biased in favor of the Democratic-liberal-left axis of opinion, and strongly biased against the Republican-conservative-right axis of opinion"—follows automatically. In fact, the only conclusion that follows automatically from her statistics (we are excluding the "non-findings" on issues) is that, whereas the amounts of negative and positive opinion on Humphrey and Wallace were roughly equal, negative opinion on Nixon vastly exceeded positive opinion. Now it is true that one way to describe and explain this pattern is to say that it reveals "bias for" Democrats and liberals and "bias against" Republicans and conservatives. But there are other—and, as we shall see, better—ways to account for the pattern. The point is that what statistics show and mean—even the relatively simple statistics in TNT—is always a complicated and elusive question of interpretation. Miss Efron's hostile reviewers have resolutely ignored this fact. Captivated by the notion that "fairness" is the same thing as lack of bias, and that any bias must automatically flow from "unfairness" on the part of individual journalists, they have busied themselves almost exclusively with her data and methods, as if it were on their validity alone that her conclusions stand or fall.

Of course, her method does deserve careful scrutiny—the data are no more reliable than the way they were gathered. What it has received so far is only inconclusive calumny. Some critics have objected to Miss Efron's decision to exclude from her analysis all pictures, most speeches by candidates, all stories about the results of public opinion polls and the question of whether there would be a Humphrey-Wallace-Nixon debate, and all non-narrative audio material (applause, shouts, random words or phrases from crowds, etc.). Now, although there are good reasons for excluding such material (it is, in various technical ways, especially hard to measure
or categorize as pro or con), it is true that the exclusion may have affected the relative amounts of pro and con opinion on each candidate; but until it is shown that the exclusion did have such effects, there can be no decisive objection to this aspect of Miss Efron's procedure—especially since it seems more reasonable to suppose, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that the excluded content (especially pictures) was pro and con in something like the same proportion as the analyzed content.

A more serious objection has been raised against Miss Efron's notion of what constitutes negative and positive opinion, especially concerning Nixon. (Most examples of questionable categorization adduced by critics concern the "issues"—but again, that part of her study is ill-conceived and should simply be ignored.) And here, it is true, Miss Efron appears to have some farfetched ideas. But there are three points to be made about this problem. First, my own inspection of two different samples of Miss Efron's file of anti-Nixon opinion convinces me that, by any reasonable standard, the large majority of such items are in fact quite clearly anti-Nixon opinion; no more than 20 or 30 per cent of the anti-Nixon items might be questioned. Nobody has shown that the proportion of questionable items is larger; indeed, so far critics have merely adduced a few extreme examples, as if these were enough to invalidate the entire study. And this brings me to the second point. What is significant about Miss Efron's findings is not the absolute numbers of words pro and con; it is the relative size of the two bodies of opinion. In order to invalidate the finding of a huge disparity between pro-Nixon and anti-Nixon opinion, it is not enough to show that some anti-Nixon opinion has been incorrectly classified—one must show that most of it has been incorrectly classified. Even if one were to find that she had overestimated the amount of anti-Nixon opinion by 100 per cent and underestimated the amount of pro-Nixon opinion by 50 per cent, there would still be 2.5 times more anti-Nixon opinion than pro-Nixon opinion, a clearly "unfair" pattern. Needless to say, nobody has yet established errors of this magnitude, and it seems unlikely that anyone will.

And this brings us to a final point. By ignoring the whole question of the magnitude of Miss Efron's errors, the critics seem to be arguing that any method which is in part uncertain is wholly invalid. This objection applies not only to Miss Efron's study but to every similar content analysis. For content analysis of this sort—consisting as it does in identifying opinion and classifying it as positive or negative—is inherently problematic because any definition of opin-
ion is problematic. Such content analysis is not invalidated when one discovers that some material that one personally considers neutral has been classified as pro or con opinion, or vice versa. It is invalidated only when procedures for identifying and classifying opinion are not followed systematically or when the procedures embody a wildly and uniformly unreasonable notion of opinion. Neither appears to be the case with Miss Efron's study. Of course, one is perfectly free to decide that any method that is so inherently arbitrary and uncertain should be abandoned altogether and its findings simply disregarded; some academic content analysts have done as much. But anyone who takes this view is also rejecting the entire notion of "fairness" in journalism. "Fairness" presupposes that opinion can be identified and categorized with reasonable accuracy and consistency; after all, what is a reporter who adheres to the formulae of "fairness" in writing a story doing but making an on-the-spot content analysis? Some critics' arguments have come dangerously close to denying not only the validity of Miss Efron's study but also the possibility of a "fair" (and therefore, by its own standards, legitimate) journalism. This latter, one feels sure, is not exactly what they have in mind.

Ultimately, the validity of the Efron study will not be definitively confirmed or falsified until someone undertakes a complete reanalysis of her transcripts. One can be fairly certain that when that happens, all her specific numbers will be revised, some of them substantially, but that the general pattern—at least concerning Nixon—will be confirmed. For quite apart from Miss Efron's book, there is ample evidence for believing that the networks' coverage of Nixon during the 1968 campaign was indeed substantially "unfair" in the sense that it presented much more negative than positive material about him, and that their coverage of Humphrey (and possibly also Wallace) was significantly less so. The question to be asked, then, is not whether this happened—very probably it did. The really interesting question is how and why it happened, and what it means.

Is a campaign an issue?

The intuitive reaction to Miss Efron's work is to conclude, as Miss Efron herself does, that the networks' coverage was clearly, even overwhelmingly, biased against Nixon. From there it seems but a short and logical step to the further conclusion that the cause of this slanted coverage must have been the personal political opinions of the network newsmen. As a group, after all, they are mostly
lifers, and as liberals they have not only an innate dislike for Republicans and conservatives in general, but also the American liberal’s special historical animus against Nixon in particular. So, on the face of the matter, it seems plausible to conclude that what Miss Efron has found is biased reporting by biased reporters animated solely by their bias—not a pretty picture in a democracy, implying as it does the systematic manipulation of public opinion by a powerful few for their own favored political ends.

But in this case, as in so many others, what seems intuitively obvious turns out, on closer inspection, to rest on assumptions that are not obviously true at all. For in describing the coverage of Nixon as “unfair”—and therefore “biased”—merely on the evidence of the relative amount of pro and con opinion, Miss Efron tacitly assumes that a national election is essentially an “issue” and that each candidate and his campaign represent a “side” of that issue. If this were the case, then “fair” campaign reporting would indeed consist, as Miss Efron supposes, in an equally lengthy and forceful description of each side’s position in a way that advantages no side. But the principle of fairness she uses here is only one of two different “fairness” principles that journalists apply.

When they perceive the subject of one of their stories as an “issue”—something on which one “takes sides”—journalists do indeed apply this “equal treatment” test: They try to guarantee equality of textual results, so that their reportage confers no differential advantage or disadvantage upon any party to the dispute. On the other hand, the subject of a story may not be perceived as an issue or dispute at all. For instance, if a public official is caught with his hand in the till and subsequently is convicted for it, this event is not an “issue,” even though the official may insist on his innocence. The journalistic report will necessarily contain a preponderance of negative opinion concerning the official. In this context, journalistic “fairness” would not demand that a reporter balance his story with some favorable item about the official, so that a reader’s total impression would be of equal amounts of good and bad. The story would be unfair only if disadvantage were conferred through an arbitrary or deliberately inconsistent application of the established rules and routines of news reporting or through some falsification of the facts.

In short, where the story’s subject is perceived not as an issue but as an event or action, the “equal treatment” criterion simply does not apply; under these circumstances, one is not justified in inferring “unfairness” from the presence of a preponderance of disadvantaging
or advantaging content. "Unfairness" in these circumstances exists only where too much or too little disadvantage (or advantage) is conferred as a result of unsystematic or partial use of the conventional concepts and rules of news. Needless to say, it is next to impossible to demonstrate "unfairness" of this kind.

So the critical question for Miss Efron's conclusions is this: Did the television networks perceive the 1968 campaign as an issue? If they did, then both Miss Efron's data and her interpretation are conclusive; the networks stand condemned by their own standard of fairness, and one can only assume that the unfairness of their coverage reflects the newsmen's personal animus against Nixon. But if in fact the networks saw the campaign as something other than an issue, her findings are not so conclusive after all—at least not by the established traditions of American journalism and the FCC's Fairness Doctrine. Of course, one may still conclude from her data that Nixon (or for that matter Humphrey or Wallace) was treated unjustly or inadequately. But in this case the standard of justice or adequacy will be one's own, not the official or traditional journalistic one; the standard will have to be defended; and the explanation of the injustice or inadequacy of coverage will probably be found not in the reporters' personal opinions (which is how any deviation from professional news standards usually is explained), but rather in the established routines and concepts of gathering, selecting, and writing news (since it is almost certain that one's own standards will be different from those of the craft of journalism).

For several reasons, Miss Efron's interpretation—that the campaign was an issue, that the networks saw it as such, and that their actual coverage therefore was deliberately biased—seems unsatisfactory. First, anyone who watched the networks' coverage in 1968 could not help but notice their massive and almost single-minded concentration on those aspects of the campaign with only a most distant relation to the "issue" of who ought to be president—the physical events, human dramas, crowds, happenings, rallies, speeches, motorcades, balloons, etc., etc. Insofar as they saw the campaign in these terms, the "equal treatment" standard did not apply. In the second place, the networks were meticulously fair about giving the two major candidates almost exactly equal amounts of coverage. Thus, insofar as they did perceive the campaign as an issue—as a choice between two men—they did indeed adhere to an "equal treatment" standard of fairness. And this suggests in turn that where the networks' coverage did not meet the equal treatment test, the reason was simply that they saw the campaign not as an
issue but as a series of events, actions, people, etc.; that they reported those events in accordance with the established definitions and formulae of "news"; and that any advantage or disadvantage thereby conferred on the candidates was the direct result of those definitions and formulae themselves. If so, then what Miss Efron's numbers measure is not bias against Nixon himself because of his personality, party, or opinions, but rather bias against someone like Nixon for reasons of his journalistically-defined situation and identity; and the cause of this bias is not the personal political sentiments of reporters—not their will to unfairness—but rather the nature of the television news form itself. In other words, what Nixon encountered in 1968 was not an essentially political bias, it was an essentially journalistic bias.

The television news form

To see how this is so, one must begin by appreciating the television news story as a form, which is most readily grasped by contrasting it to the form of the newspaper news story. In newspapers, the subject and focus of every story is an event, which is described in the headline and lead paragraph. The rest of the story, which elaborates upon the event according to an established routine of description (who, what, where, when, how, and why), is discursive almost to the point of formlessness; it ends simply by trailing off or, more often, by being arbitrarily cut off by an editor. The story is narrated in a highly impersonal manner; the reporter never directly reveals himself; and all statements are presented as impersonal statements of fact.

By contrast, a television news story cannot assume this discursive structure. Its principal need is for a clear, continuous narrative line sustained throughout the story—something with a beginning, a middle, and an end that will create, maintain, and if possible increase the viewer's interest (otherwise, he might switch to another channel). Because of this need, a television story cannot focus simply on an event and go on to describe serially its component parts; it needs instead a theme which can be sustained throughout the story. This focus on theme rather than event is symbolized by the role which the reporter assumes in television—no longer a self-effacing and impersonal figure, as in newspapers, but a highly visible and distinctive one whose personality and sustained presence are an additional device lending unity and intelligibility to the story. The focus on theme also determines the role of facts and
simple events in the story: They no longer constitute the story’s major interest, as in newspapers; they become instead the materials with which the chosen theme is illustrated.

These three elements and needs of the form—a suitable theme, a short and simple but continuous narrative, and the use of events as illustrative materials—powerfully affect the content of television news in various ways. For one thing, they endow television news with a strong preference for personifying and dramatizing, for representing institutions, situations, general developments, and the like, by means of the actions, predicaments, moods, or statements of individual people. And more generally, the form guarantees that the typical television news story will be far more interpretive than a newspaper news story. In a campaign, for example, whereas a newspaper will focus primarily on the events of a campaign—a rally here, a major address there—television coverage focuses not on events but on the general trends, situations, and dynamics of the campaign, which it illustrates with materials gathered at the events. Thus, the tendency of TV campaign reporting is to disregard the surface of events in preference for explaining what’s really going on underneath. And this leads to a further consequence of the form: It tends to make TV campaign reporting much more repetitious and uniform, substantively, than newspaper reporting. For newspapers, a campaign story is different every day because it focuses on a different particular event, but television news stories change only as fast as the underlying campaign situation changes—if it changes at all. In 1968 it changed very little, as a result of which the themes of television news coverage were almost changeless and thus almost timeless. Only the illustrative materials changed, and on any given day not even these could be relied on to be uniformly up-to-the-minute.

So the content, and therefore the bias of television campaign coverage depend crucially on the nature of the recurrent story themes, and these in turn depend on how the network newsmen interpret what’s “really” going on beneath the surface of events. Obviously, a very important factor in the newsmen’s interpretation is the actual situation and dynamics of the campaign itself and the personalities, histories, idiosyncrasies, etc., of the candidates. Yet there is in principle no end to the number of different ways one could define the situation, personalities, and so on, which means that newsmen must have some basis for selecting among the possibilities. They find that basis in the intellectual traditions and operational standards of the craft of journalism; these include as one of their
central elements a narrow and distinctively journalistic model or theory of politics, one which defines not only politics in general but also the spirit and terms in which to describe political situations. This model is the second crucial factor shaping the themes of campaign stories, and its pervasive influence largely accounts for the networks' different treatment of the three candidates in 1968.

According to this model, which has been at the heart of American journalism for something approaching a century and a half, politics is essentially a game played by individual politicians for personal advancement, gain, or power. The game is a competitive one, and the players' principal activities are those of calculating and pursuing strategies designed to defeat competitors and to achieve their goals (usually election to public office). Of course, the game takes place against a backdrop of governmental institutions, public problems, policy debates, and the like, but these are noteworthy only insofar as they affect, or are used by, players in pursuit of the game's rewards. The game is played before an audience—the electorate—which controls most of the prizes, and players therefore constantly attempt to make a favorable impression. In consequence, there is an endemic tendency for players to exaggerate their good qualities and to minimize their bad ones, to be deceitful, to engage in hypocrisies, to manipulate appearances; though inevitable, these tendencies are bad tendencies according to the model and should be exposed. They reduce the electorate's ability to make its own discriminating choices, and they may hide players' infractions of the game's rules, such as those against corruption and lying.

Seen in terms of this model, then, every campaign has two faces. In one sense, it is a lively competition for public favor and office, and to this extent it is an exciting drama of men in pursuit of their goals—a spectacle that engages the empathy and emotions of the onlooker. But in a second sense, a campaign also is a drama of men trying to deceive and manipulate their audience and thus arouses in the onlooker feelings of contempt, indignation, or fear.

This traditional and distinctively journalistic model determined in almost every respect the way newsmen defined the situations and dynamics of the 1968 campaign, the way they defined the few simple recurrent themes which gave structure and focus to most campaign news stories, and therefore also the types and amounts of opinion contained in their reportage.
Themes of campaign coverage

The networks defined Humphrey's situation in the campaign as that of the underdog, and virtually all their news stories about him centered around the theme of “underdog.” On this theme there were a number of variations. Particularly in the early weeks of the campaign, the theme was defined in terms of the sources of his underdog status—the disarray of the party after the Chicago convention, the disorganization and poverty of Humphrey's campaign, the candidate's close association with the person and policies of Lyndon Johnson, the candidate's garrulous and unconvincing effort to appear optimistic in the face of almost certain defeat, and, in general, the confusion and inefficacy of his entire campaign effort. A second variation, which began to develop toward the mid-point of the campaign, was that of the underdog confronting and beginning to overcome the causes of his underdog status. Here the focus was particularly on Humphrey's own efforts and achievements: the apparent break with Johnson symbolized by the Salt Lake City speech, the foray into the South (“Wallace country”), the frontal attack on both Wallace and Nixon (“Richard the Chicken-Hearted”), and the dramatic renewal of the candidate's confidence, enthusiasm, and charm. The third variation was that of the underdog gaining momentum and making dramatic progress toward a possible upset victory, as reflected in the reversal of the Wallace tide, the unification of the Democratic party around its candidate (yielding many endorsements, which of course counted as “pro” opinion in Miss Efron's study), the increase in campaign contributions, the candidate's steady progress in the public opinion polls, and, finally, the candidate's growing conviction that he would win.

This theme in its three variations was the cognitive underpinning of most network news stories on Humphrey and determined the selection and presentation of events, facts, etc. Especially because of the early opposition to Humphrey from the left, campaign reporting contained roughly equal amounts of favorable and unfavorable opinion; but the overall image of the underdog enthusiastically battling to overcome his predicament against great odds and coming within an inch of triumph was the central story—and an immensely appealing personal drama of rags-to-near-riches it was.

The networks defined Nixon's situation as that of the front runner—a big lead in the polls, an experienced campaigner with a well-organized campaign effort, large amounts of money, a unified party, in short, a player who needed only to hold onto his lead in order to win the game. On this theme there were three major variations. One
emphasized the consequences of the candidate's position as front runner—the reasonable and statesmanlike role he could take, his ability to avoid political gut-fighting, his opportunity to make thoughtful speeches on subjects like the American spirit, East-West trade, and other such recondite matters, his reluctance to attack Humphrey and Wallace directly or at length, and the like. But if this variation of the front runner theme often proved favorable to Nixon, the other two variations did not. One of these, which found its way into a great many stories on Nixon, fixed attention on the characteristic problems of the front runner: how to maintain his lead and how to do it most effectively. This variation on the front runner theme, of course, focuses directly on the campaign as an exercise in the calculated, organized, well-funded manipulation of appearances and public opinion; and stories built around this theme emphasized the deliberateness, the lack of spontaneity, and the deceptiveness of all campaign events—the fact that behind every enthusiastic rally there are advance men at work creating and directing an audience; that in every public statement on some issue there lurks a tactical intelligence calculating what position will gain the most votes or lose the fewest, and so on. This theme accounted for much of the negative opinion on Nixon identified by Miss Efron's study.

Nixon was disproportionately the subject of this theme not only because of his front runner status but also because of the personal drama surrounding him in the last several weeks of the campaign. This constituted the third variation on the front runner theme: the psychological drama of the front runner facing the spectacle of his commanding lead dwindling day by day as Humphrey's fortunes rose. The stories built around this variation pictured Nixon, in contrast to the outgoing and enthusiastic "happy warrior" Humphrey, as an introspective man, calculating whether victory was again going to slip through his fingers and trying to avoid doing anything hasty or impetuous to invite that fate. Here, too, the effect was to present an unfavorable image of the candidate.

In sum, while it is true that some of the anti-Nixon opinion in network coverage derived from Humphrey's and other Democrats' at-

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^ABC provided the most extreme example of this kind of story while reporting a Nixon rally in Syracuse, New York. After an introduction, the reporter said: "You can almost feel him struggling with himself. 'Hold on, Richard. You've come so far and you're almost there. Don't blow it now.' . . . Well, that's difficult, especially when his natural instinct is to smash the enemy with a club or go after it with a meat axe. . . . Richard Nixon's most interesting and vital struggle is not with Hubert Humphrey or with George Wallace, but with himself." (ABC, 10/30/68)
tacks on Nixon, a very large amount of it derived from the front runner theme, especially in its second and third variations. At least in the American democracy, to describe a man and his campaign in a way that calls attention to their manipulative intention is not exactly to flatter him.

The theme of most Wallace stories was that he not only reflected but also created division and violence wherever he went. As a result of the emphasis on division and conflict, these stories contained roughly equal amounts of pro-Wallace and anti-Wallace opinion; but the overall theme, it need hardly be pointed out, was scarcely neutral as to the essence of the Wallace phenomenon. Here too the theme was supplied by the journalistic model of politics, which discounts ideology and issues and prefers to focus attention on (among other things) a player's impact on the electorate—especially when that impact leads to incidents (e.g., a riot) that are eminently "televisable."

Humphrey the underdog, Nixon the front runner, and Wallace the sower of discord and violence—these were the central themes which the networks repeated day after day as they looked beneath the surface of events to plumb what really was happening in the campaign. The themes derive directly from an established and distinctively journalistic way of understanding politics, and the extraordinary power they exercised over the content of network coverage was a direct consequence of the peculiarities of the form of the television news story. The resulting pattern of coverage was far from neutral in its depiction of the various candidates; but although the effect of this non-neutrality was, or may have been, political, its cause appears to have been almost completely journalistic in nature. And so, at least in a narrow sense, the networks’ indignant rejection of those who have charged them with "political bias" in reporting the 1968 campaign has some justification. It would appear that they were indeed merely reporting what they saw as the news fairly and impartially, and that if the news conferred advantage or disadvantage on any candidate, it did so primarily because of the inherent biases of television news as a distinctive form of discourse.

On the margins, it is true, the personal political opinions of the newsmen almost certainly influenced the content of television campaign coverage. The extremely favorable reporting on Muskie seems perhaps the clearest example of such influence, and the extraordinary frequency with which the manipulative aspect of the Nixon campaign was mentioned may well be another. Even beyond these examples, it is doubtless true that network newsmen could often
take pleasure in their news stories' depiction of the various candidates, for the effects of these depictions were often in harmony with their liberal political sympathies. But influence on the margins is by no means the same thing as the power to control and shape. Granting this marginal influence to the reporters' sympathies takes nothing away from the overwhelming importance of the news form itself in determining the content—and biases—of the news.

The problem of news itself

To say that in the main the networks were indeed doing a professional and "fair" job of reporting the news of the 1968 campaign may lay to rest the charge of "political bias" as it has generally been formulated, but it does not at all resolve the larger issue of the news media: not whether they are biased, but rather how they are biased. Indeed, it only sharpens that issue. If a professional job of reporting often reinforced the entire thrust of the Humphrey campaign, often presented the Nixon effort in an extremely unflattering light, and saw in the Wallace phenomenon nothing but the seeds of violence, perhaps we should begin to worry about the adequacy of the professionals' notion of news itself. Obviously news itself, as conventionally defined by the journalistic profession, has its own structural biases. This means that insofar as we rely on news in forming our mental picture of what is going on in the world, what we are receiving is not a neutral body of information, but rather information gathered and presented to illustrate certain ways of seeing the world, based on certain values and favorable to certain courses of action. If so, one issue which arises immediately is that of legitimacy: By what right do the news media propagate their own distinctive vision, which is not entirely neutral as between different sorts of candidates, or different sorts of opinions? But that, I fear, is an insoluble question. Any body of knowledge possesses its biases. The only way to insure that every citizen truly is the master of his own opinions is to ban all media (not to speak of other opinion-forming institutions). But such an imposition of ignorance would exercise its own tyranny.

A more useful question to pose is: Which biases are we content to let journalism possess, and which do we insist that it avoid? This is a formulation which gives us some real choice. For it is by no means clear that television news in its current form represents an optimal combination of all the available and feasible biases. As an example, consider the model of politics as a game played for personal advantage, which informs and shapes nearly every story about political
campaigning. To be sure, there is much to be said for reporting this facet of electioneering. It does exist, there is deceit and worse, and people should be aware of its excesses. But it is wildly misleading to look at a campaign and see *nothing but* this. A campaign to some extent always *is* an issue, and candidates usually do present some authentic choices about the style and direction of public policy and national leadership. To ignore or minimize the serious issues implicit (and sometimes explicit) in a campaign is to deny citizens the information and analysis they need in order to make a rational decision about how to exercise their suffrage in the manner most likely to promote their own vision of how our public life should be ordered.

Nor is that the only cost of the news form as it exists today. For in its denial of the “issue” aspect of campaigning and in its cynical preoccupation with the deceptive and manipulative aspects of politics, it subtly but powerfully suggests to citizens a posture of detachment (at best) or cynical rejection (at worst) toward the political institutions of the nation. In the long run this can only weaken their capacity to perform the services which that very detachment or rejection posits as desirable.

However reassuring it may be to know that the biases of television news more often than not have their origin in the news form rather than in reporters’ personal opinions, it is disconcerting in the extreme to discover, when one examines that form, how frivolous, mean-spirited, and intellectually impoverished a form it is. It clearly would be desirable for reporters to see *more* themes, developments, and phenomena in the campaigns and other events they cover. Thus, what is needed is a pluralizing of the themes of “stories,” and an expansion and improvement of the “vocabulary” of the television reporter and editor. Perhaps the current controversy will convince the networks of the utility, and possibly even the merit, of this kind of self-reform. In any case, this is not the sort of reform which Congress or the FCC can undertake, or even stimulate; government intervention would be almost certain to make things worse. For what is required is not some new law; it is instead an enlargement of the journalistic imagination and an expansion of the journalists’ vision. This is not to say that newsmen should try to become social scientists or political theorists—if they tried they would probably fail, and besides, there is much of value to be learned from a uniquely journalistic view of the world. Only journalists can decide what this view is to be; but to do so intelligently they must face up to the fact that no form is without bias, and that the biases of the current news form clearly are less than optimal.