

Dec-1998

Editor's Notebook: Making Sense of the News

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Recommended Citation

Kryzanek, Michael (1998). Editor's Notebook: Making Sense of the News. *Bridgewater Review*, 17(2), 2.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol17/iss2/4

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EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

MAKING SENSE OF THE NEWS

• *News is about the four C's – controversy, conflict, criticism and confrontation. Stories about the world at peace or people solving problems usually have a hard time making it on screen. It is important to keep in mind that the news need not be an accurate picture of America. On too many occasions, it is not.*

I am often reminded when I watch the evening news or a program with political content of the actor Peter Finch in the movie *Network*. Finch played a television news anchor who was slipping into madness. In one of those memorable moments from the movies, Finch goes on the air looking disheveled in a ratty raincoat and speaks to the millions of viewers who had gathered around the television for the nightly news. As Finch raves on about the declining state of the country and the world, he utters the now famous line, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore." Finch's outburst has become the tag line for all those Americans who are angry with their government. But *Network* was not really a movie about angry Americans; rather it was a well-crafted message about how television has the power to shape our minds and our hearts and make politicians into statesmen or fools. Finch's message therefore was a call to arms for television viewers that they would be wise to "tame" the monster before it "tames" them. As citizens of this great democracy we owe it to ourselves to use television as a means of improving politics and national affairs, and not become zombies entranced by the mediocrity and slickness of the tube.

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A recent study of the knowledge that Americans have about their government and national affairs documented what most of us already know – 69% of Americans rely on television for political information. Over the last twenty years, television has replaced newspapers and magazines as the tool of sharpening our minds about the world of politics. The only real surprise in the study is that the Internet now provides 10% of the political information that we seek. With the explosion of Internet use, it is likely that newspapers and magazines will slip further when this study is replicated in the future.

The power of television in describing and shaping national politics may be a given, but what is often not addressed is that sitting in front of the tube watching the nightly news or those vapid political commercials need not be a passive experience. Television is without question a powerful medium, but that does not mean all of us who rely on television automatically become bleary-eyed zombies under the spell of NBC, CBS, ABC and CNN. We can control the wave of political information coming across that 27 inch Sony in the family room. There are ways to tame the television "monster" and use the networks for improving political understanding. Here are some helpful hints that may lead to improving the quality of television news watching and information gathering.

• *If possible watch more than one news program; they're not alike and the definition of what is news on any given day can be vastly different.*

- *Beware of reporters who use terms like "I think" or "an unnamed source said." Remember, the news is about presenting facts and should not be a speculative exercise.*
- *Politicians and government officials are now masters of image-making. Watch out for those news segments that are clearly puff pieces designed to make someone look good, rather than provide news.*
- *Politics is about give and take, two sides to a story. Be conscious of balance in news reporting and watch out for slanted news stories.*
- *After all those commercials, the nightly news is only about 26 minutes. Ask yourself, what are the news items that never made it to the screen, and why did the editor choose these stories?*
- *As a corollary to the above, remember also that the choice of what goes on the air each night is not a terribly democratic process, but is usually the decision of Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings and Dan Rather. They may be wonderful journalists, but what's news is still their decision.*
- *Be ever mindful that news shows have ratings and sponsors just like all the other television programs. News programming is not "pure" journalism, it but is a money-making venture. Viewers are consumers first and interested citizens second. The result is that the "boring" stuff of public policy has too often been replaced by the "exciting" stuff of disaster, crime and sex.*

