

makes as little sense as Barraclough's view of prewar society. World War I began between the eastern- and central-European empires over a crisis in the Balkans that affected the European power balance; the Moroccan problem, like every other colonial issue between the Great Powers from 1815 to 1914, was resolved by compromise. Had colonies and the underdeveloped world been the decisive issue before World War I, the Triple Entente could never have come into existence. Conflicts over colonial issues were more numerous and more serious between Britain and Russia, as well as Britain and France, than between any of the future allies and the Central Powers. Even Barraclough admits that by 1914 colonial issues had become merely a diversion, but this recognition of the obvious has no influence on his basic thesis.

The climax of the book is Barraclough's discovery that the underlying pattern of today's international politics is "striking-

ly similar" to his version of the past. The United States and the Soviet Union are in the same position as Britain and Imperial Germany in 1911. The United States is just "defending an empire" in the Middle East. Any assertion to the contrary just shows the extent to which we are dominated by "imperialist" thinking. In Barraclough's phantasmagoric world, the Soviets are not exactly good guys, but they are playing by the traditional imperialist rules; maybe they are just playing a defensive game. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, after all, was provoked by the Americans, it is claimed; the Soviets are only defending their sphere of influence. As did the British Foreign Office in 1911, Barraclough insists, the American leaders are erroneously basing their policy on "mutual suspicion," and this is "bound to lead to an explosion." The rather tiresome question of whether their suspicions might be justified is one that Barraclough, like the Ground Zero crew, would prefer to avoid. □

television story is invariably headlines and subheadlines; the text is merely background accompaniment for a visual depiction. The average story is two minutes in length. "Pictures tell the story, not a talking head" is a well-established cliché in the industry. Those who prefer a bright talking head who tells a story well are informed by the cognoscenti: "That may be journalism, but it isn't television journalism."

Another condition of television news to which Leshar alludes but doesn't explore is "news provincialism." This is the phenomenon of "What happens to Americans is what's happening." Rare is the student who when asked the question, "What is the bloodiest war in the last three decades?" responds with any answer other than "Vietnam." The correct response is the war in the Sudan—an event that American television cameras did not cover and which, as a consequence, remains an event about which Americans are completely ignorant. Related to this matter is the way in which television cameras make the news. Posturing is a natural response to the camera. When the news crew arrives the target audience is "on stage," as was the case with Iranians holding American diplomats hostage or students holding a dean captive at the University of California. The news is often manufactured, an inauthentic event staged by authentic actors. Dan Rather is quoted by Leshar as suggesting television news is a "crude art." Yet Rather—like other reporters and anchors—projects an image of assuredness. He and his confreres couch their news items in sincere, straightforward reporting. But all too often what is seen can't be believed and what is said with assurance should be said with qualification. This is particularly evident in the case of *60 Minutes*, which Leshar details.

An examination of the contentious questioning style of Mike Wallace makes it quite obvious that queries made by "reporters" are structured to support a preconceived point of view. Although this is described as "advocacy journalism"

TV News & Other Fixed Games of Chance

Stephan Leshar: *Media Unbound: The Impact of Television Journalism on the Public*; Houghton Mifflin; Boston.

by Herbert I. London

It is apparent from Stephan Leshar's *Media Unbound* that television journalism is to journalism what plastic decorations are to flora. In the television era, it seems, whatever is presented is thus newsworthy—a tautology that can have meaning only for the progeny of McLuhan. Essentially, this book is a television book: headlines and occasionally riveting stories are presented, but one hopes in vain for explanations and ratiocination. For ex-

ample, the following critical and poignant questions are mentioned in the book, yet they are treated superficially, obliquely, or not at all. Does television news make journalism's weaknesses manifest, as Mr. Leshar asserts, or does it create a unique set of journalistic problems all its own? Do distortions result from the nature of journalism—again as Leshar indicates—or from the intrinsic prejudice of journalists trained in an ambience that confuses liberal judgment with truth? Is there any meaning to the journalist's code of truth, honesty, and integrity when he is in search of "the big story"? Are journalists a menace to the very social order that provides them with protection and sanctuary?

Certainly the time constraints on television news broadcasts set this form of reporting apart from print journalism. A

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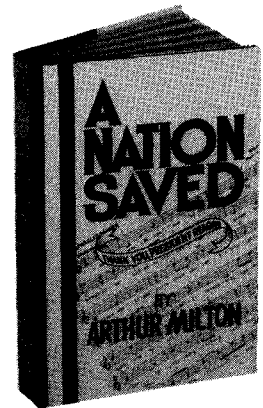
(a contradiction in terms), it is another example of the search for truth through inauthentic means. Complexity is reduced to the editor's and producer's predilections. And to make matters worse, *60 Minutes'* producer Don Hewitt adopts the self-righteous stance that his is the "only" position. When confronted with several examples of omission and commission on his programs, Mr. Hewitt refused to apologize, maintaining that these were programs worth doing despite their flaws. In the egocentric world of Mr. Hewitt, the media interest is inextricably united with the national interest. Ultimately *he* decides what is good for the nation and nestles the entire process under the protective umbrella of the First Amendment. Libel and slander have become anachronisms in a television age that eagerly promotes the sensational and a philosophy of caveat emptor. Those who are hurt in the process are treated with as much concern as the videotape left on the cutting-room floor. Here are the new gods: lacking humility, searching for new muck to rake, posturing for audience approval, and administering extraordinary power without responsibility.

Admittedly, the public has "a right to know"—to employ another media cliché—but so too does the public have a right to expect tastefulness, good judgment, and fairness in those it has anointed as journalistic gods. If Walter Cronkite, to cite one of those who sat on the Olympus of Black Rock, can say after the 1968 Tet offensive "this government is losing the center over Vietnam" despite the now well-documented American victory at that time, hubris has replaced fairness as a godly attribute. Time and again Mr. Leshner, to his credit, identifies reporters who confuse their mission to present the news fairly with a deeply ingrained ideology that includes suspicion of government, dislike for business, and the usual panoply of liberal "virtues."

This brings back a point raised earlier: do distortions result from the nature of journalism or the nature of journalists? As I've suggested, there are intrinsic

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problems in television news that are directly related to the medium. But there are also distortions that result from the training and background of television journalists. Their training at many universities and as apprentices at newspapers and television stations is an exercise in mimicking media heroes. If Mike Wallace is contentious, young journalists believe that is the appropriate style for an interviewer. How else can one explain the perverse distemper of Geraldo Rivera? His level of despair for social injury shows little distinction between an assassination attempt on the Pope and the decline of his favorite rock star's career. Almost every journalism student thinks of himself as a budding Woodward or Bernstein searching for his Deep Throat. Media stardom is what he aspires to, not the thankless and plodding job of unearthing the difficult facts that give a story its texture. Television news is in a constellation of shooting stars—as soon as you see it, the star is gone, a fleeting memory that neither lingers nor provides illumination.

In the United Kingdom the BBC has introduced the sensible policy of calling anchormen “readers.” Why should American broadcast readers of the Associated Press printout be called anything else? By attributing undeserved status to the “news” people, deplorable distortions are promoted. Perhaps this explains why many viewers have lost perspective on contemporary events and why relatively trivial matters can be exaggerated into earth-shattering calamities. For instance, television newscasters sometimes equate Joseph McCarthy with Hitler. That an overzealous politician who employed questionable tactics can be compared to Hitler is not simply a distortion; it is a lie of such magnitude as to rewrite history. Similar exaggerations abounded with regard to Watergate. That debacle is no longer considered a stupid violation of political fair play or Presidential tampering with the political process; it is now seen as the Soviet Purge or Cromwell's Rump Parliament. If the populace were sophisticated about history, the absurdity of these claims would immediately be

apparent. But that isn't the case. As a result, history is homogenized so that one evil is like another, distinctions lose focus, and even those things one should wish to preserve and defend lose meaning. Television news doesn't simply corrupt, it debases.

But exaggerating events is only one part of the television news calculus. Another significant dimension is its contamination of news. Last month's events are a vague memory; what happened last year is forgotten. A visual montage of blood and gore desensitizes us, leaving in its wake the erasure of history. If history courses were once criticized for their emphasis on names, dates, and places, they can now be criticized for leaving us with little but “feelings”: students now “know” that Kennedy cared and Nixon didn't. It may not be the intent of news programming, but it has promoted historical amnesia. “Docudramas”—the halfway houses between the news and theater—admittedly take liberties with the facts. Such manipulation of the news itself is no longer considered the violation of a sacred trust, even when it is recognized. It simply appears as another kind of docudrama. In

the final analysis—notwithstanding all the pompous claims—television news is more often than not an extension of entertainment programming. It is there for ratings; it titillates and excites. The weatherman is not a reporter; he entertains. The anchor isn't an interpreter or reader; he's a dreamboat. The interview isn't for gathering information; it is designed to intimidate a foe. Even the sports reporter doesn't simply give us scores; he is expected to be a comedian and clown.

Mr. Leshner has performed a valuable service in demonstrating where television news has gone wrong. But he is too charitable. Ultimately he contends that journalistic presentations aren't slanted because of ideology. They are based, he maintains, on misinformation. He is unconvincing. The impact of the Don Hewitts cannot be so lightly cast aside. Misinformation exists some of the time, but not all, or even nearly all, of the time. Producers like Hewitt aren't simply careless—they have an ax to grind. It is knowing what that ax is and how to combat it that might be useful to newsviewers. But since most viewers aren't aware of the producer's intent, news programs can be watched only with a sense of risk. □

Effects of a Limited Imagination

Jean Lacouture: *Léon Blum*; Holmes & Meier; New York.

by Richard A. Cooper

Before every human being lies the burden and opportunity of choice. We must make choices and bear their consequences. Society is a vast web of interpersonal relations wherein individuals are affected by the choices of others and vice versa. The choices certain individuals make, the ideas which enter into those choices, and their results consti-

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tute the subject matter of history. Léon Blum, French premier in the late 1930's, wielded power that affected the lives of millions of people in the tumultuous first half of the 20th century. From Jean Lacouture's account, Blum emerges as a man whose critical choice was to champion what he construed as justice and the republican ideal. The means to his end: socialism.

Originally a man of letters, Blum faced the necessity of making a steady living. His choice is revealing. The young socialist, of impeccably bourgeois origins, made an impeccably bourgeois choice. “In January 1896, he thus became *auditeur* second class in the *Conseil d'Etat*, a