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CONFERENCE

" Television News Then and Now"\*

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Jimmie Reeves: What I have to say today might be unpalatable to professional journalists. I want to present the central findings of my book, Cracked Coverage, as a way of demonstrating a critical view of journalistic surveillance. In the book, my co-author, Richard Campbell, and I treat the routine newscast as a surveillance mechanism that is constantly involved in the production, reproduction, maintenance and repair of contemporary systems of power and knowledge. This view runs counter to commonly-held notions of the news as a mirror on reality. Rather than study the news in terms of objectivity, balance, fairness, propaganda or even entertainment, my angle on journalistic surveillance explores how the routine newscast operates as an agent of top-down social control. This view also contrasts with the perspective on journalistic surveillance held by quantitative communications researchers. Many of these scholars celebrate surveillance as an admirable aspect of the news. Vincent Price, following Harold Laswell, argues that the surveillance or "lookout" function is perhaps the most prominent public service attributed to, and claimed by, the news media. Price suggests that this role is reflected in the names of newspapers such as "The Sentinel" or "Monitor". In his view, journalists, as surveillance agents, try to alert publics to problems. They bring news about the behavior and intentions of political elites to their audience's attention, allowing attentive publics to monitor the political environment. This vision of surveillance as a public service is shared by many journalists. For example the metaphor of journalist as "watchdog" romanticizes this surveillance role.

My view of journalistic surveillance is not as flattering. Cracked Coverage documents a recent struggle over the meaning of cocaine, based on a study of 270 reports which appeared on the newscasts of the three major networks between 1981 and 1988. Overall, the number of stories on cocaine increased gradually from 1981-1985, then jumped dramatically during 1986 during a powerful inter-media convergence around what was presented as a sinister new threat to the American way: crack cocaine. The crack crisis of 1986 stands as one of the great moral panics of the post-war era. Our analysis found that mainstream journalists worked together with enterprising experts of the drug control establishment to prime, hype, sensationalize, commodify and cash in on the abundant drug hysteria. Perhaps the chief finding of the book was the racial disparity in news surveillance of the so-called cocaine epidemic. Between 1981-1985 the news coverage of cocaine worked within a trickle-down paradigm. Cocaine was treated as a pollutant trickling down from decadent elements of privileged classes and contaminating vulnerable segments of the middle class. It was often called a recreational or

\* This is an edited summary, not a complete transcript of the remarks made by the speakers.

glamour drug for America's elite. News surveillance associated cocaine primarily with white, mostly suburban offenders. Within this context, the approved journalistic solution to the drug problem was therapeutic treatment. The main experts whom the networks turned to in the early were psychologists and counselors associated with the drug treatment industry. Not surprisingly, given this view of the drug problem, addiction treatment was one of the most expansive growth industries in the U.S. service economy during this period.

However, in 1986, after the journalistic discovery of crack, the established meanings associated with cocaine abuse were almost completely inverted. The news treatment of cocaine as a social problem was transformed from a trickle-down formulation to a siege paradigm. Cocaine was no longer associated with white offenders amenable to rehabilitation. Instead, crack cocaine was primarily associated with black delinquents who were members of the so-called underclass. They were condemned as "enemies within" who threatened the American way of life. As the news surveillance shifted from white to black, from middle-class to poor, and from the suburbs to the inner cities, the approved journalistic solution to the cocaine problem also shifted, from rehabilitation to incarceration. The new experts turned to by the networks were associated with law enforcement agencies. The signature image of the new siege framework was of police invading a crack house, accompanied by a hand-held camera. The journalistic point of view converged to a policing outlook on people of color caught up in the economic devastation of de-industrialization. Some cocaine transgressors were defined as "like us" and thus amenable to treatment and recovery, while others were stigmatized as "them", i.e. as delinquents beyond rehabilitation. The racial disparity of the news coverage was codified in laws which treated crack possession more severely than possession of white powder cocaine. This resulted in the longer imprisonment of African Americans compared to their white counterparts. Due in part to mainstream journalism's recruitment in the Reagan era War on Drugs, the incarceration industry expanded, like the drug treatment industry earlier. Between 1980-1989 the U.S. prison population nearly doubled because of the increase in drug arrests. Pushing the War on Drugs did not only generate federal funds for the drug control establishment. It also generated high ratings for the networks. The crack crisis initiated a host of quasi-news shows such as Cops and American Detective which blurred the distinction between reality and entertainment. These and other shows were spinoffs of the 1980's drug news.

In advocating anti-drug activism, television journalists joined drug experts and law enforcement agents as moral entrepreneurs in the political economy of Reagan's America. They benefited both personally and professionally from co-producing a series of moral panics that centered on controlling cocaine and disciplining its users. Even more disturbing, by adopting a support-the-troops mentality regarding the War on Drugs, network news surveillance helped polarize the electorate along color lines and helped justify the continuing shift in public policy from a commitment to social welfare to a social-control orientation. To conclude, my findings suggest that it is more accurate to characterize mainstream journalists as "police dogs" rather than as watchdogs. The surveillance I documented was not primarily concerned with alerting the public to problems, but was geared toward maintaining the inequities of existing racial, sexual and class relations.

Reuven Frank: I welcome this evening's subject, "Television News Then and Now", because I get to represent "then." I get to be the one who says everything has gone to hell. You may add my voice to those who deplore the descent of TV news from Edward R. Murrow to Inside Edition, from Huntley to Geraldo, and from Eric Sevareid to Jenny Jones. This decline did not happen suddenly. Nor did it occur solely because the medium was wrested from those we now pretend were pioneering idealists by mere managers to whom broadcasting was just another business. This was part of it, but not all. The road from then to now was long, with sharp turns and identifiable days when everything was transformed. The first such day was more than 30 years ago, when the Roper polls told us that more Americans got their news from television than from radio or newspapers. This changed the television news business. We became traditional. We began giving all the news and giving it the time it deserved. Words took

precedence. Words no longer described pictures; pictures illustrated words. Roper thus transformed television news from seeing to hearing, and from showing to telling.

When I arrived at NBC in 1950, American's TV networks were two years old. There were four of them and two had news programs: fifteen minutes, once a day, weekdays only. All other TV news, including local news, was primarily faces reading radio scripts, taken mostly from the wire services or cribbed from newspapers, with blurry still pictures because nobody had yet invented the technology for turning still photos into clear television signals. The networks with news programs had national and worldwide organizations of film cameramen, who tried to move from the languid regimen of the newsreels where most of them had been trained, to the speed of daily journalism. Film is physical and bulky. It must be shipped, processed, cut apart and pasted together before it can be shown. So from anywhere abroad and nearly everywhere in the United States, it could not arrive as fast as a radio voice or a wire service teletype. In those days, we inside TV news assumed that anyone watching TV news already knew the news, from newspapers or the car radio. In our minds, film was the difference we had to offer. Seeing news happen gave it a different dimension and added enough to justify showing it a day or many days after it happened. Perhaps pictures address a different part of the brain and we thought we were finding this part and educating it. When we became important, we had to think differently, but I still think we were onto something. For example, when most people remember Vietnam, they remember images such as a naked girl, her back aflame with Napalm, running screaming down a country road, or the last Americans leaving Saigon by helicopter as Vietnamese embassy officials clung to the runners. We learned to tell such stories, the cameramen filmed them, the film editors put them together, and the newswriters described them and put them in context. We told each other that ours was a high calling and we had a wonderful time.

Then TV news became the American public's principal information source, and our mandate changed. Significant events that we used to slight with scant mention were dealt with at fuller length, pictures or no pictures. Reporters became stars and film cameramen became technicians. Torrents of words smothered the visual images. Today most pictures on TV news, other than those of someone talking, were not made that day to record that event. Newswriters often call the network's picture archives to get file pictures to accompany their stories rather than using pictures taken that day. This happens because words now matter more than pictures in television news. It is the new technology that made it possible. Videotape today is instantly and infinitely reproducible. So to recap, the first big change for TV news was its new importance. The second was technology — videotapes, satellites, miniaturization, etc. Better cameras are now used to record family gatherings than we had for the 1968 political conventions. Technological advance promises an even more wonderful future: more avenues of transmission, more speed, and news a la carte. Soon we will choose our own news and read, see and hear only what interests us.

Technology will continue to influence many aspects of the news, but it will provide no answer to the problems of news. Technology will keep making enormous contributions to how, and how well, news is distributed. But the problems of news — what it is, who gets to report it and how — find no answers in technology.

TV news has been changed not only by technology, but also by the collapse of the American public school curriculum. News is meaningless to anyone ignorant of history and geography, as we are told today's high school's graduates are. News coincidentally began when the country's interest in news — especially international news — was very high due to our soldiers' involvement abroad. The "we-they" world of the Cold War further fueled the interest in world news. But things are different today. Major international stories, such as the breakup of Yugoslavia, miss the press altogether. After Somalia, America decided Africa was too hard to follow. Our troops were in Haiti six months but our reporters weren't. Today's news used to be tomorrow's history, but news today is tomorrow's footnotes. News today is Anita Hill, Nancy Kerrigan, and William Kennedy Smith, all good, valid news stories. But what happened to the other kind of news story? The only long-running news story since the fall of the Berlin Wall is O.J. Simpson. News today is like the news of the 1920's — when tabloid newspaper journalism was born — in its focus on big trials, scandals, and sex. History repeats itself.

Although there is every reason to bemoan what television news — indeed all news — has become, it is good to know that it has been like that before. Perhaps that means it will go away.

Christopher Lydon: In the context of today's discussion, I want to say that some things do get better. Radio is a fantastic medium. I believe that talk radio is full of tremendous promise. But getting to today's topic, what is the problem with today's network news? Why don't I watch it anymore and when did I lose faith in it? When I was young, my whole family loved the old Huntley-Brinkley show. The theme music from the show was taken from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which says something about where we were and what we have fallen to. But at the same time, I am not a back-to-the-good-old-days person. The old days had their faults too.

We are all reflecting today on what happened to network news. For me, the critical moment was sometime in the early 1980's. One of the big New York TV stations, owned and operated by one of the networks, discovered that they could beat the competition for the news audience at 6:30 p.m. by counter-programming with Wheel of Fortune, and they did it. Even at the time, I thought that this was one of those defining moments when the network news business was just going for the absurdly cheap shot. They sacrificed what was their great claim, which was a certain kind of dignity. And they did have dignity. John Cameron Swayzey in his day had fabulous dignity. Another example of what was good about network news in the older days was that the CBS Morning News, which had distinctive video and classy writing. This was because the CBS reporters knew that William Paley got up in the morning to watch his own news show. There was something sort of royal about it; it was for one constituent. CBS Morning News in those days, particularly in the early 1970's when John Hart did it, was a spectacular program. It would open with a Vivaldi piece over sunrise somewhere in America. It was a great visual opening and sometimes I would get up just to hear it. John Hart wrote like a dream, and so did many other writers for the program.

In those days, I was a New York Times reporter. When I covered the 1972 and 1976 presidential campaigns, I thought that the network reporters we worked against seemed very much like us in the print media. For example, just like the newspaper reporters, network reporters like Sam Donaldson would get very serious about the characters of the people we were covering. I felt that the network reporters were just like me, a newspaper reporter, except that they were better-looking, made more money, or were better known. We were interested in the same questions. We seemed to be in the same business. But that changed in a big way.

I agree with Mr. Frank's point that television news was done in as soon as it became the primary information source, because it was not built to carry a verbal message. I also think that TV, in a certain sense, was not meant to make money. When somebody learned from the local affiliates that it was possible to make a lot of money from shows like Huntley-Brinkley, it really did go to hell in a handbasket very fast. But I don't want to sound simply "gloom and doom." I don't think American culture, life, and democracy can be so easily destroyed. I'm not worried about the end of American culture. But I think we do have to say that the glory of network news — like the Italian Renaissance or the Elizabethan poets — was just one of those things that happened, that had an extraordinary moment. It was a combination of technology, culture, and wonderful people such as Revuen Frank, Edward Murrow, and Fred Friendly, who challenged each other to do good things. But it is important to realize that that era is over, and it will pop up some day in some completely new form.

Beth Rosenson, Rapporteur

**TELEVISION NEWS THEN AND NOW  
MIT COMMUNICATIONS FORUM  
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Jimmie L. Reeves  
Research Presentation

I. Introduction.

- A. Generational Membership.
- B. Regional Background.
- C. Class Allegiances.
- D. Interdisciplinary Orientation.

II. Past Research.

A. Entertainment Programming.

- 1. Dissertation--Stardom.
- 2. The Rewriting Metaphor for Television Creativity.
- 3. Issues of Popularity.
- 4. Postmodernism.

B. News Programming (with Richard Campbell)

- 1. "Covering Homelessness: The Joyce Brown Story."
- 2. Cracked Coverage: Television News, the Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy.
  - a. The Trickle Down Paradigm (1981-1985).
  - b. The Siege Paradigm (1986).

III. Current Work: Jimmie's Eyes (with Bettina Fabos and Terri Sarris)--a 90 minute video documentary.

IV. Future Work: Rewriting Popularity: Transformations in the American Television Experience from 1950 to 2000--a single-authored, book-length project.

A. TV I.

- 1. A broadcast system dominated by a three network oligopoly.
- 2. Linked to the Cold World Order and Fordism (the "rigid" economic order named for Henry Ford that drove the general prosperity of the postwar boom through an expansive manufacturing economy of assembly-line production and mass consumption).
- 3. Mass Culture--programming meant to attract the largest possible undifferentiated audience.

B. TV II

- 1. A combination broadcast/cable/satellite/VCR/PC system involving a much larger number of corporate interests.
- 2. Linked to the New World Order and Post-Fordism (a more "flexible" economic order that is associated with the transformation from a manufacturing economy to a service economy including deindustrialization, globalization, and hyper-consumerism).
- 3. Cult Culture--programming meant to attract narrowly-defined, demographically correct audiences.

# Network Coverage of Cocaine

