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How to Watch TV NEWS — An Exercise

by Sidney Wise, Franklin & Marshall College

This brief essay deals with an attempt to teach students how to watch a network news show. It is a somewhat painstaking but entertaining experiment which allows the teacher to demonstrate that televised news has unique properties that can be distinguished from those of the print media. It avoids the ideological debate that televised news is biased—left or right—and focuses attention on the adversarial and dramatic properties that inhere in the visual media as practices by networks that are competing for ratings. And it has a modest goal, minimizing such important but ultimately judgmental inquiries as to whether the networks should have allowed live interviews with American hostages who were menaced by off-camera terrorists, or whether their coverage of Hanoi's celebration of the 10th anniversary of the fall of Saigon took sufficient note of the boat people.

First, the problem. Many analysts of TV have noted that a news item on the screen is presented as a mini-drama. As in most drama, the emphasis is on conflict between powerful forces. Whether the struggle is between good and evil, David and Goliath, or the House versus the President, it must be confrontational. Failing that, it must be a story that relies very heavily on pictures and minimizes verbal intrusions or recitations of facts. Additionally, the anchorperson—reminiscent of the onstage narrator of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town"—offers the appropriate mix of detachment, omniscience and trust. As each major news item ends, either the anchor or the on-site reporter tells us not only what we have seen but gives us the insight of the true insider as to its "real" meaning.

If this is the sophisticated view of TV news, how then can the classroom political scientist instruct undergraduates to be aware of the unique qualities of network newscasts and the extent to which those

mini-dramas may be altering their perception of reality? It is not easy. Even though the political scientist-politics-television junkie can watch an evening newscast and recognize the techniques that are *sui generis*, it is a much more difficult task for the typical undergraduate, for two major reasons. In the first place, any single news item is reported in a perfectly credible manner. Taken by itself, the approximately 90 seconds devoted to virtually any happening is complete, as well as compelling. Secondly—and this is a point that troubles even the junkie—there is unlikely to be a full appreciation of the item as reported unless the viewer is aware of much more than what is reported. In other words, the extent of the newscaster's tilt is virtually impossible to assess unless the viewer has a great deal of background or is privy to the actual event as well as the TV rendering of the event.

The conventional pedagogic strategy is for the teacher to lecture on the topic and to assign reading. Certainly every introductory textbook in American Government nowadays is very mindful of the role of television in politics. For the instructor and for students in upper-level courses, an excellent starting point is Austin Ranney's superb *Channels of Power* (Basic Books, 1983) which not only underscores the nuances of television newscasts that should be of particular concern to political scientists but also, through his extensive footnotes, leads the reader to the rich and growing research in this area.

But every classroom teacher who has attempted to lecture about television's role in politics is invariably frustrated by the difficulties. Discussions of "equal time," "the fairness doctrine," televised debates, political commercials or the "images" of Presidents Kennedy and Reagan certainly engage the students. Yet the subtleties of the day-to-day coverage of the news, so

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Expanding the Beltway: Developing a Washington Resource Center

by Eugene J. Alpert
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"Inside the Beltway" is the phrase most often used by observers of national politics to note the distinctiveness of the people, places and things that exist within the confines of the interlocking highway system that surrounds the national capital area. Apparently, according to critics, the only people who really follow or care about the "inside baseball" of Washington intrigue are the people who live within the 257 sq. miles of roadway.¹ The rest of the country is either unconcerned or unaware, since a) the *Washington Post* is not available for home delivery in their area, b) they are not invited to Georgetown cocktail parties or intimate Chevy Chase dinners, c) they aren't in contact with the 40,000 plus lawyers in D.C. or d) all of the above.

Despite the difficulty of following Washington politics on a daily basis, it is something that cannot be totally avoided. Information of course does reach beyond the Beltway through the media, but, with some rare exceptions, such as the C-SPAN cable system and some public broadcasting programming², the news is selectively filtered and diluted, making it less reliable for citizens to make valid political judgments. Consequently, the perspectives of those outside the Beltway often differ from those inside.

Teachers of political science are especially sensitive to the perceptions that incoming students have about political machinations in Washington. Perhaps we spend considerable class time destroying (or confirming) some of the popular myths about politics only to be contradicted by some political event whose interpretation is distorted by well orchestrated public relations campaigns. As political groups become more adept at influencing pub-

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