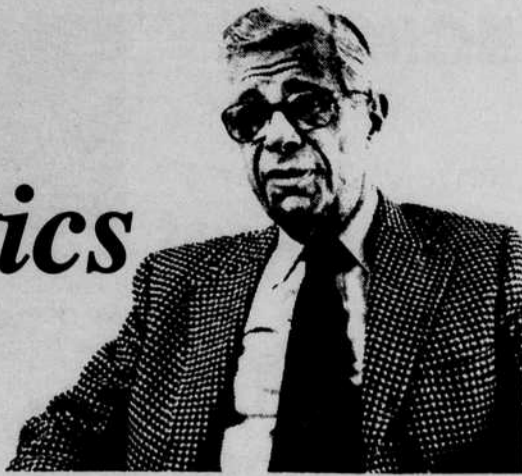


Daniel Schorr Media Politics

by George Beres



In 1977, veteran TV newsman Daniel Schorr was forced to resign from CBS News and threatened with imprisonment by the U.S. Government. His "crime"—releasing a classified report on CIA corruption to the American people—has renewed relevance today because of Congressional Contragate hearings alleging CIA involvement in unlawful activity. This article, the first of two based on Schorr's speech in Portland, September 30, deals with the dominant role television has come to play in the shaping of viewer attitudes in the United States. A second article next week will tell Schorr's view on how TV has become the arbiter of the legislative process at the highest levels, with President Reagan as standard bearer for what has become "media politics."

THE DOUBLE-TALK OF TELEVISION was just one of the areas of the news business to come under the crusading scrutiny of veteran newsman Daniel Schorr in his September 30 public talk at Portland's First Congregational Church.

Terms such as "live on tape" and "guest-host" were among the contradictory elements of TV culture that received the barbed sarcasm of Schorr during one of his speaking stops on a national tour.

The cumulative total of all who will hear Schorr during his tour won't approximate the number he used to reach in just a single appearance on the nightly national CBS newscast. But the impact may be far greater, if one were to judge by the standing ovation an audience of some 250 gave him at the close of his talk in the rotunda-like main hall of the church.

"TV is like a big kid, unaware of the power it has," he said. "The competitive drives force TV to do things it knows are not good. It should report acts of terrorism. But it should not exploit terrorism, which it does in the race for ratings."

"When I came back from the foreign service as an overseas correspondent in 1956, I noticed some interesting things about TV news. As it sought the emotion of confrontation, legislators learned they had to raise their voices to get the attention that would earn them a spot on the 10 o'clock news that night."

Schorr recalled coming out of a Watergate hearing and running into Senator Hubert Humphrey, who asked if he had an extra camera crew he could assign to a room where an important hearing on economic issues had begun. "If cameras are there, senators will attend," pleaded the Minnesota senator.

"We newsmen would get such requests not because senators are vain, but because they know you can't make progress in this country any more unless you get the attention of the media," said Schorr. "So TV has become the arbiter of the legislative process."

He believes TV newsmen have been forced into becoming performers: "We have to share a stage with the great entertainers of the age. So we wind up presenting news in a way that meets the entertainment values of the rest of the medium. TV news gives one a hyped-up version of reality. People today are playing the TV 'game.' They are cowed by this great medium. This has blurred the lines between what is real and what is not real."

"Through such programming as docudramas—fiction made to look like fact by the techniques used—the medium erodes the distinction between what is real and what is unreal."

SCHORR'S FAVORITE EXAMPLE of TV unreality is President Ronald Reagan:

"On TV, you are as large as the person you would like to be. And why not? Hasn't President Reagan made a career of it? He is the first totally media president we have had. He is surpassingly good at being before the camera. He never is physically awkward before the camera. He puts people at ease, because he always appears to be at ease with himself."

"As Reagan accelerates the trend toward 'media politics,' our national town meeting has become more like a national seance, with TV screening out real character and originality."

"When he recalls his broadcasting days in Des Moines, Iowa, he tells how he would describe games he couldn't see. These were Western Union ticker tape accounts of away games in an age when few stations used to send broadcasters to out-of-town games. He learned to embroider the ticker tape report. He told of one away game when the ticker tape suddenly stopped. So he described 18 consecutive foul balls until the wire report resumed six minutes later."

"If that's the way he did baseball, how are we to think he does arms control?"

"He and others regularly before the media have learned the secret of success is sincerity. If you can fake that, you've got it made. Reagan routinely says things that are incorrect—and he routinely will repeat them. He makes up statistics as he goes along. They stick in his mind, and he repeats them."

Schorr recalled 1968, when, he admitted, he shared with other newsmen the desire to put something on the air that sounded menacing to attract audiences. Personal regret at this failing came across as he described the media's misrepresentation of the March of the Poor on Washington, D.C., planned just before the death of Martin Luther King. "After one King appearance before the media, I told him he looked depressed," said Schorr. "He answered: 'You people in the media are driving the civil rights movement to more militancy and violence.'"

At that point, Schorr started to understand how a diet of violence on TV would cause violence to be imitated.

Schorr said that despite their flaws, journalists still function well as watchdogs, when they remain concerned about protecting the consumer. He also believes media people are not the manipulators, but that they are manipulated by promotion-minded people who "create photo opportunities to attract the viewer."

The most important role of journalists, he feels, is to guard against government efforts to keep secrets that would corrupt the constitutional process.

"With some effort, and a bit of luck, journalists can reveal what really is happening."

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