A STUDY OF THE LOCAL DOCUMENTARY PROGRAMMING PRACTICES OF TWENTY-ONE COMMERCIAL TELEVISION STATIONS IN SIX MIDWESTERN STATES

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A world made smaller by speeding airplanes, heard and visible through electronic media, has nurtured a public more desirous of knowing and understanding that world. One of the devices used by broadcasters to encourage understanding is the television documentary.

In their book Filming TV News & Documentaries, Jim Atkins, Jr. and Leo Willette, note that:

> The documentary is television's finest hour. It combines the best of the arts of filming, production, and writing with journalism; and although many stations are not aware of it, the provocative local documentaries capture the audience.[1]

According to a 1965 survey many television stations are aware of the potential appeal of the documentary effort. The survey showed, "...among stations with active news departments, nearly half produced a documentary each month; a tenth produced one more often than that; a tenth produced from six to nine documentaries a year; and the rest produced one occasionally or are just beginning to get into the documentary form."[2]

This is principally a study of television documentary programming on a local level. It seeks to give a view of the

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[1]New York, 1965, p. 119.

[2]William A. Wood, Electronic Journalism (New York, 1967), p. 56.

actualities and possibilities of television documentary programming in six mid-western states.

I. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. The purpose of the study was three-fold: (1) to determine the frequency and length of local documentary programs shown on all commercial television stations in six mid-western states; (2) to study the programs reported as to content and structure and to classify them accordingly; (3) to determine the possibility of usage of each television documentary interchangeably by other stations.

Importance of the study. It was believed that the accumulation of such information would be of value to neophyte broadcasters interested in doing television documentary programming on a local level as well as serving as a prod to more experienced broadcasters who need a stimulus or incentive to create their own ideas. Moreover, for those broadcasters already engaged in such documentary work, the report may serve as a re-enforcing factor.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Scope of the study. In order to achieve the objectives of the study, a questionnaire was designed to be answered by commercial television station managers in the states of Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Colorado, Nebraska and Iowa.

Because of the highly developed and lucrative television operations of both the east and west coasts, it was felt that the midwest states selected would give a more representative view

of what was being done by the majority of commercial broadcasters who are neither so monetarily endowed nor as competitively pressured to create television documentaries as their larger counterparts.

Procedure. Because of the relatively large geographical separation of the stations involved and the expense of transportation, personal interviews were ruled out, and the questionnaire method selected.

Author Pauline Young wrote:

> ...questionnaires...are good because they are as brief as is consistent with complete understanding of the data desired; they are important enough to be sent to important people; they use the language and the definitions of units and terms with which the average person is familiar; the possibilities for multiple interpretations are few; a minimum of time and effort is required for filling out these questionnaires; ...the data are logically grouped.[3]

The 1968 issue of Broadcasting Yearbook was used as a source for commercial television station call letters, managers' names and addresses. Only commercial television stations were used in the compilation of stations queried.

On September 20, 1968, sixty-five questionnaires and cover letters (Appendices A and B) were sent to the managers of the sixty-five station universe (Appendix C). Station managers were selected to receive the form because presumably they should be interested in promoting their station's policy. Return envelopes were provided the prospective participants.

The study was descriptive in that the information was

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[3]Scientific Social Surveys and Research (New York, 1939), p. 160.

reported as represented by the respondents. Interpretation of the possible meanings of tabulated totals was necessary in some cases in order to draw conclusions.

In addition to answering the three questions posed by the study itself, the questionnaires returned also contained information which should lead to a greater understanding of the place of the local television documentary in broadcasting.

Prospective respondents were provided with a definition of documentary programming as an aid in answering the questionnaire.

III. DEFINITION OF TERMS

Documentary. For purposes of this study documentary was defined as a creative treatment of actuality providing socially useful information to the public. Further a documentary was considered to deal with significant historical, social, scientific or economic subjects, with emphasis on factual content rather than entertainment.

Journalistic treatment. Programs which dealt with community affairs, science and technology, government and politics, among others, were considered to be of an objective or journalistic nature. The content of these programs would be presented in an objective manner.

Non-Journalistic treatment. Programs which dealt with literature and the arts, children and religion, among others, were considered to be of a subjective or introspective nature, and non-journalistic. The content of these programs would tend to create

an image in the mind of the audience supplemental to the program itself.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In 1922, when American film director Robert Flaherty traveled into the Hudson Bay Territory to create a film about a walrus hunter, there was undoubtedly no thought in his mind that his film "Nanook of the North," would begin a documentary tradition that is still much alive today.

I. DOCUMENTARY BEGINNINGS

Flaherty made use of the naturalistic approach in filming "Nanook" and later "Moana" (1926) and "Man of Aran" (1934). Utilizing the natural scenery and everyday surroundings as more than purely backdrop to the action of a central character, Flaherty exploited those elements as part of the subject he was treating. In the films mentioned, the settings were as much a part of the story being told as were the people themselves.

It was for Flaherty then a story of man and nature. In his book, Documentary Film, Paul Rotha quoted film critic and director, John Grierson, as saying, "...it became an absolute principle that the story must be taken from the location, and that it should be the essential story of the location. His drama, therefore, is a drama of days and nights, of the round of the year's seasons, of the fundamental fights which give his people sustenance, or build up the dignity of the tribe."[4]

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[4]London, 1952, p. 83.

Because of the character of Flaherty himself, and the affection with which he made his films, he often ran afoul of film magnates of the day such as Paramount (then Famous-Players) and Metro-Goldwyn company. "Nanook" was quite successful and led Famous-Players to offer a contract to Flaherty to furnish a South Seas version. The result, "Moana" was commercialized by selling it to the public as the "love-life of a South Sea syren," when it was in fact the story of a Samoan ritual of manhood. When Metro-Goldwyn offered Flaherty another opportunity to return to the South Seas, he refused on the grounds that he could not work with studio supplied stars and story.[5]

Thus, almost fifty years ago Robert Flaherty began what documentary film makers today would probably label _cinema verite_, or what some might describe as "telling it like it is." But Flaherty's works were not the only ones in evidence in the twenties.

While Flaherty's documentaries depicted the relationship between man and nature and in fact presented pictures of worlds little known to the average American, the documentary films of British critic and creator John Grierson, "...characterized man's relation to his institutional life, whether industrial, social or political; and in technique a subordination of form to content."[6]

Of Grierson, William Bluem remarked, "He sensed the need for

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[5]Rotha, pp. 82-83.

[6]Raymond Spottiswoode, _A Grammar of the Film_ (Los Angeles, 1959), p. 75.

the poetic quality in reality films...but insisted that poetics be used only to supplement and enhance a descriptive, socially significant film content. Persuasion was his purpose, and he set himself the task of waking both the heart and will of the British Public."[7]

As an agent of the Empire Marketing Board, an organization charged with promoting the sale of British products, Grierson made the film "Drifters" in 1929 telling the story of herring fishermen and hoping to show the British people how one part of the economy depended on the other for a smoothly running system. In this film, and particularly in "Industrial Britain," (1933) co-produced with Robert Flaherty, was perhaps the first hint of conflict between a film maker concerned with artistry and with reporting specifics at the same time.[8]

Though Flaherty was an American engaged in film-making and Grierson was apparently the first to use the term documentary in reviewing "Moana," Rotha stated in Documentary Film, that "It has become convenient to say that the American film of fact began with "The Plow that Broke the Plains," a film by Pare Lorentz. Filmed for the Resettlement Administration in 1936, this film endeavored to give the American farmer an understanding of the government's soil conservation and resettlement programs. Rotha had the following comments to make about "Plow." "As a first film it had many of the faults which we can now see were

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[7] Documentary In American Television (New York, 1965), p. 46

[8] Ibid., p. 48.

characteristic of the early British documentaries; over-complex editing, no human contact, a mannered commentary and, most guilty from a propagandist viewpoint, a tacked-on ending explaining why the film had been made." While these technical difficulties would seem to make the film seem less than distinguished, it should be remembered that it also showed that the documentary effort was no longer a European commodity.[9]

If "Plow" tried to be both art and social comment and failed, it may be said of "The River," that "...the great narrative power of film was employed to record natural phenomena in such a way that a vital social statement was advanced."[10] So stated Bluem in discussing the film which studied the erosion of the Mississippi River basin.

It was in the middle thirties too that American audiences became aware of a new face on the theatre screen, that of the "March of Time." Born of Time, Inc. on February 1, 1935, "March of Time" was to live for sixteen years influencing vast audiences, particularly between 1936 and 1942 when an estimated 20 million people viewed the series in more than nine thousand motion picture houses.[11]

Though bound in the beginning to the straight newsreel tradition of reporting the news, "March of Time" soon took lessons from its radio predecessor (of the same name) and as Rotha

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[9] Documentary Film, p. 199.

[10] Bluem, p. 51.

[11] Ibid., pp. 35, 36.

noted, "It borrows from the fiction film a dramatic method of presentation. Using partly the same naturally-shot material which is the stuff of the news-reel, and partly staged scenes with both real people and actors, it tries to present an event in relation to its background, an approach that calls for a considered restatement of facts."[12]

In his study of "March of Time," William Bluem recognized several points of development that made the program more than a news-reel. Bluem pointed out that in the beginning the program treated as many as six stories in the eighteen to twenty-two minutes of its duration. The number was gradually weeded down to two to four stories and in 1938 the first one-feature story, "Inside Nazi-Germany, 1938," was seen. This limiting of subject matter Bluem contended was indicative of the emphasis, the story-telling quality of the series. In his words, "This expansion of time in the reporting process was important chiefly because it permitted a journalistic style in which emphasis was divided between the inherent drama of an event and a dramatic technique of presentation."

A second feature of the film series "March of Time," revolved around its actual need to re-enact elements of history which had slipped by unrecorded by either microphone or camera. Supply of missing elements had been used to good effect in the radio version of "March" and was only appropriate on the silver screen. "March of Time," according to Bluem, "simply avowed that the news story

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[12]Rotha, p. 191.

was valid reportage even if certain voices and actions were staged." Assuming the "doctored" reportage was based on fact, the validity of the presentation could only by acceptable since it was a sincere attempt to present the information in a striking manner. In this regard, "March of Time" may be likened to the demised "Armstrong Circle Theatre" which made extended use of re-enactment.

The third development added by "March of Time" to the newsreel plus tradition, was the element of controversy. By its unique juxtaposition of film clips of Huey Long, "March of Time" affected a view of this man as no newsreel ever could, provoking a continual battle with censor boards from shore to shore and border to border.[13]

Though "March of Time" was a success, there was one factor the series couldn't fight and that was the actual march of Father Time and the events attendant to his passage. World War II arrived.

With the war came an increased interest, not unexpected, in the use of the documentary film as a propaganda tool for expressing the viewpoint of a political power. After the blitzes on London it became quite evident that the public's morale needed boosting. The GPO (Government Post Office) film unit was renamed the Crown Film Unit and began producing films that would have a wide appeal to the British people.

Apparently one of the most effective productions of this period was a film called "True Glory." It was a product of

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[13]Bluem, pp. 36-39.

cooperation between the British organization named above and the United States Office of War Information. "True Glory" consisted of a variety of material shot at different times and places, complicated by the task of blending natural sound with narration. In structure, "True Glory" was in effect the first "compilation" documentary which will be discussed later in part III of this chapter.[14]

As important as the films themselves was the distribution to the public. Concerning this, Paul Rotha remarked in Documentary Films that:

> The use of the film in Britain was integrated to an extent not achieved elsewhere. In America, the volume was large enough, but there was no way--with Hollywood so firmly entrenched--of conducting official film-making as a single, unified operation. American achievement, and it was considerable, was much more an *ad hoc* affair. In Britain, by contrast, production was closely geared to the distribution available in the cinemas, in the Armed Forces, in the factories and through all the other non-theatrical channels.[15]

In speaking of the most widely publicized series, Richard Griffith commented of "Why We Fight," "They were specifically intended to give the fighting man an account of world history from the Treaty of Versailles to America's entry into World War II, since it was found that the general knowledge of the average draftee on any such subject was poor indeed." Some of the films of this series were shown to civilian audiences at home and abroad. Like "True Glory," the films of "Why We Fight" were in the compilation tradition drawing even on captured enemy film for their

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[14] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

[15] Rotha, p. 247.

source material. The first three films covered the time between 1918 and 1941 and were entitled "Prelude To War," "The Nazis Strike," and "Divide and Conquer." Again, the films were put together after considerable study and were furnished with a narrative commentary.[16]

After the war ended documentary film productions by the Office of War Information in the United States sought to show other countries how Americans lived and worked. Subjects for these films ranged from the TVA to the public school system. They also gave glimpses of both rural and city life in the United States. But these films were an end of an era in documentary works. Up to 1953 there were no great documentary films made from the standpoint of affecting a large audience as had done the war films. This is not to say no films were made, but rather to point out that those that were, were more experimental in nature rather than documentary. William Bluem best described the films of that period.

> All of these films represent genuine dedication and the highest standards of creativity in film-making. Yet all of them, in one important sense, miss the mark of documentary. For despite this great activity...the social documentary, the purposive film which strives to do more than merely describe processes and functions, and seeks to reach beyond the specific needs of sponsoring or the intensely subjective aim of "experimental" film-makers--is missing.[17]

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[16]Griffith, in Rotha's Documentary Film, p. 310.

[17]op. cit., p. 59.

II. RADIO DOCUMENTARY

Almost a quarter of a century ago before television documentary began, audiences were becoming familiar with public affairs broadcasting on radio. The first radio program that really could be considered of a documentary nature was "March of Time." This series sponsored by Time, Inc. began in 1932. William Bluem wrote, "Setting a general style and approach for the later film version--and perhaps for the bulk of all subsequent journalistic documentaries--the series also sought to dramatize news events, and from the outset it used actors, rather than people actually involved in the described event,..."[18]

The main reason for reenacting events stemmed from the lack of technical innovations in the early years of broadcasting. In 1932 the use of audio tape and portable recorders was still roughly fifteen years away. Another reason the reenactment of events was possible was the acceptability by the audience since radio was a one-dimensional media; since no visual image was incorporated a program could still be believable when utilizing actors. Though non-documentary the radio series "Amos 'n' Andy" was a good example of the use of less than real participants; the Negro voices of the main characters were done by white actors.

"March of Time" made several kinds of impact upon both audience and broadcaster. In years that followed producers would often say, "Let's not have a 'March of Time' voice-of-doom

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[18]Bluem, p. 61.

narrator." They referred to the program's third announcer Westbrook Van Voorhis who was known for his resounding voice.

"The impact of the 'March of Time'--and the vistas it opened--may have been among the factors that, in the closing months of 1932, sharpened the split between the newspaper world and the broadcasting world."[19]

In 1939 CBS broadcast a series produced by the United States Office of Education. "Democracy in Action," described governmental processes. From 1936 to 1940 the National Broadcasting Corporation carried "The World Is Yours" a series based on the Smithsonian Institution.

Bluem felt that all such programs could legitimately be called documentaries despite the fact that most of them relied heavily on reenactment. "Like the film documentaries of that period, they attempted to present to men some idea of the world about them. They sought to change attitudes, broaden philosophies and outlooks; and, for the time being, technique remained a secondary consideration so long as a documentary intent and purpose were in evidence."[20]

Other interesting observations on pre-war radio documentary came from authors Sam Slate and Joe Cook. In speaking of the series "Defense for America," which began in 1941, they noted that not all documentaries were reenacted. "There were no

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[19]Eric Barnouw, A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Volume I; A Tower In Babel, (New York, 1966) p. 278.

[20]Bluem, p. 63.

prerecordings, no such things as tape, and naturally no prior editing. If you were broadcasting from a diving submarine, a moving tank, or a falling parachute...the pickup had to be instantaneous." Such originations when possible were a bonanza to the telephone company who strung miles and miles of wire for remote broadcasts.

"It was this kind of experimentation," noted Slate and Cook, "that helped make possible such shows as..."The 20th Century," "David Brinkley's Journal," and the slick documentaries we enjoy now."[21]

During the war, more so perhaps than at any other time, radio documentary served as a communications tool. The Office of Emergency Management produced 275 programs in the first six months of the war and informed the people of the civilian's role in wartime. By the middle of 1942 the Office of War Information had produced the series "This Is War!" which brought to a state of perfection the second-person narrative style ("you're in the cockpit--you hear the motors begin to warm up") combined with sound effects.[22]

By the end of the war radio had mastered the dramatic documentary approach. But the advancement of technology in tape recording and other broadcast mechanics made the use of reenactment and other semi-dramatic techniques largely a device for general information programs. With more reality in news

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[21]It Sounds Impossible, (New York, 1963), pp. 45, 48.

[22]Bluem, p. 65.

reporting being heard everyday, it became passe to listen to a staged reenactment.

In 1947 the Columbia Broadcasting System started a Documentary Unit designed to produce radio documentaries dealing with a post-war world. One of the first efforts, "The Eagle's Brood," dealt with juvenile delinquency and in addition to examining the problem, offered solutions. Bluem noted that although this documentary and others produced by the unit "represented a final departure from the heavy 'stagey' drama of an earlier time," they also supported the belief that "a dramatic plot line is a valid documentary tool..."

Post war documentary was distinguished by its lack of uniformity. Various techniques and approaches were used and were even combined as in Norman Corwin's "One World Flight," in which a combination of actuality recordings of a world cruise, were combined with Corwin's narrative style reminiscent of the "This Is War!" series.[23]

A series of events noted by Bluem concerning Fred Friendly was interesting in that they occured very close to the demise of radio documentary. While with NBC in 1950 Friendly produced a show featuring Bob Hope entitled "The Quick and the Dead," a four part production on atomic energy. The program was most important because it called attention to Friendly who a year later went to CBS where, with Edward R. Murrow he conceived another radio documentary; "Hear It Now" was short lived and moved into

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[23]Bluem, p. 70.

television with only a title change after less than a year.

William Bluem best summarized radio documentary's rise and fall:

> From experience gained in earlier experiments it had evolved an authentic and dramatic form of journalistic documentary, dealing with the crises of the world as they continued to arise. It had worked forward from dramatic restatement of fact to drama made with fact. It had presented information in a compelling form on numberless major and minor issues and problems confronting the American people. It had evolved a special combination of drama, journalism, and education in a successful presentation of history. And as it did all these things, it gave a legacy to television which had begun, by the early 1950's to assume radio's role as the dominant mass medium of this nation.[24]

So, radio, like film, had loaned its mistakes and successes to television to do with them what it could.

III. TELEVISION DOCUMENTARY STYLES

With World War II over, the world changing because of the war, and with the birth of television, came the golden opportunity for the development of meaningful documentary in the American home.

The very nature of the documentary, that of revealing events in a special light, makes it a useful news tool, and for this reason the news documentary was among the first to develop to any large extent. Wilbur Schramm said of news that it was "an attempt to reconstruct the essential framework of the event...a frame of reference which is calculated to make the event meaningful to the reader."[25] A program narrated by Edward R. Murrow was the first

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[24]Bluem, p. 71.

[25]"The Nature of News," Journalism Quarterly, Sept., 1949,

to practice this preachment.

When CBS television fans tuned in November 18, 1951, they saw what was the first of many programs with the series title "See It Now." The weekly program from the beginning was sponsored by the Aluminum Company of America.

Fred Friendly, former CBS executive, and co-producer with Murrow, of the "See It Now" series, recalled the first broadcast in this way. "In the course of his introduction, Ed said to the television audience: 'This is an old team trying to learn a new trade.' It took us two years to learn that job." Friendly felt that the show lacked conviction, controversy and a point of view. He believed this was really supplied two years later when "See It Now" told the story of Milo Radulovich, an Air Force Officer who was asked to resign because of alleged connection with communist sympathizers.

Bluem believed the program should be given its due as the prototype of the factual, timely in-depth report on both national and international issues. According to Bluem, "See It Now" often combined what, in print, was the feature and the background story, but added the terse, spare narration of the radio style, a visual faithfulness to reality in the best tradition of film documentary, and--at the heart of their success--a probing, existence which, indeed, became news because Murrow and Friendly said it was."[26]

Following closely on the heels of the Milo Radulovich story was "Christmas In Korea." This program, a simple chronicle of a

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[26]Bluem, pp. 99,100.