

Chapter 12

Watching TV News: Should We Approach It Like Reality TV?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the shortcomings of learning about complex policy issues from television news. The chapter uses the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive website to examine issues raised and not raised by television news, as well as the duration of time spent on issues by news shows. Examining the limitations of television news' ability to present and address complex public policy issues serves as a means to focus on critical thinking in the higher education setting. Two public policy issues are explored in this chapter, Constitutional interpretation and the Affordable Care Act, sometimes referred to as ObamaCare, as the means to show how limited television news is regarding presenting the often frustrating aspects of complex policy issues. Several methods used by the author to help students apply critical thinking skills are discussed. The results of these methods are also addressed.

INTRODUCTION

A legendary Hollywood director, John Ford, thought he was making a movie about the image or the myth of the Old West—but there is another way to see it. Ford's movie was, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, released in 1962, starring, John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, Lee Marvin, and Vera Miles. The movie says a great deal about how certain ways of thinking sometimes set in and become patterns that are difficult to break. Starting with this movie as an insight into how to watch television news, particularly what often passes for news on the 24-hour cable news chan-

nels, provides a means to step back and think about how to approach the watching of television news—particularly cable news.

The movie starts with United States Senator Ransome 'Ranse' Stoddard (played by Jimmy Stewart) and his wife, Hallie (played by Vera Miles) arriving by train in a western town called Shinbone to attend the funeral of Tom Doniphon (played by John Wayne). Reporters interrupt him and want to know why this well-known man is here attending the funeral of Doniphon. Stoddard takes the moment to stop and think that this is time to explain something that involved him and Doniphon, which had occurred many years earlier.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8411-9.ch012

The scene changes to that earlier period many years before, where Stoddard enters Shinbone to start a newspaper. Eventually he comes into conflict with Liberty Valance (played by Lee Marvin), who symbolizes the image of the gunfighter of the Old West. Tensions between the two reach their peak when Valance calls out Stoddard to have a gunfight in the middle of the street. Knowing that Stoddard will be killed, as he is no match for Valance, Hallie races to get Doniphon to help save her true love (previously she had been Doniphon's girlfriend). Doniphon arrives in time to hide next to the building, and as Valance draws on Stoddard, Doniphon shoots, killing Valance.

The movie scene changes back to present where Stoddard is ending his story to the newspaper reporters and watches as a reporter crumples his story and throws it away. The exchange goes:

STODDARD: You're not going to use the story, Mr. Scott?

REPORTER: This is the west, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.

A study that analyzed the press commented in somewhat similar fashion, although not as eloquently as the exchange between Stoddard and a reporter: "Perceptions of media bias may be driven in part by assertions that the creature is real: The more discussion there is of a media bias, the more people believe that such bias exists, regardless of whether the news at a particular moment is more favorable to Democrats or Republicans" (Jamieson & Walden, 2003, p. 169)

Patterns, ways of thinking, establish themselves and we need to question what we have come to accept. The term commonly used to question what we come to accept and then to challenge our reasoning is 'critical thinking.' The term itself is not always easy to clearly define as one writer stated, "The critical thinking literature is quite abstract and fragmented among different scholars who

don't seem to talk to each other" (Nilson, 2014, p. 1). Although at its core there is the desire to instill in people, students in particular, the goal of questioning what they read or, in the case of this chapter, see on television. Another writer referred to the challenge of teaching thinking as "critical consumption and thinking skills" (Jolly, 2014, p. 1). This particular phrasing might more aptly apply to what is addressed by this chapter: Encouraging students to develop different approaches toward how they 'consume' television news.

There are some that raise the issue of a 'dumbing down' of a public in general, maybe students in particular, regarding a decline in critical thinking skills—particularly as related to watching television (Williams, 2014). Newton Minnow as Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, in May 1961, referred to television as a 'vast wasteland' and the phrase is still referred to often as a way to justify the denigration of television. However, I am not sure that pushing this approach toward encouraging critical thinking is always useful. The notion of looking at students and in some way inferring or implying to them that critical thinking can somehow 'save' them from becoming or remaining 'dumb' seems counter-productive. A better approach is to see television news as presenting an opportunity to open up ways of thinking. If, at its most common level, critical thinking is simply an attempt to encourage ways of questioning and thinking, then use television news as the stepping off point. This approach helps to show the limitations of watching television news, and helping by pointing a direction toward critical thinking.

Television news, again particularly what seems to dominate cable news coverage imposes a liberal/conservative perspective, which needs to be challenged. The format of television news often requires the simplicity of a liberal/conservative structure that aids in avoiding nuance, dilemma, conundrum, and those things that create frustration

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