Television Coverage of Presidential Conventions: Now You See It, Now You Don't

DAVID L. PALETZ
MARTHA ELSON

Just prior to the opening of the 1972 Democratic convention in Miami Beach, NBC anchorman John Chancellor declared: "Convention coverage is the most important thing we do. The conventions are not just political theater, but really serious stuff, and that's why all the networks have an obligation to give gavel-to-gavel coverage. It's a time when we all ought to be doing our duty."[1] This same "duty-conscious" anchorman, giving a nod toward the podium reluctantly suggested at 1:34 A.M. during the first session of the convention, while the speeches on the Illinois challenge were being delivered: "Maybe we should go listen. Frankly, it's not the most interesting stuff in the world."[2] Later, perhaps in an effort to inject a bit of seasoning into the convention "stuff," Chancellor brought NBC coverage of the third session

[1] *The New York Times*, July 6, 1972, p. 75.

[2] All quotations from NBC's coverage of the 1972 Democratic National Convention are taken from the Vanderbilt Television Archive videotapes of the convention. We are deeply indebted to this organization and especially to Mr. James Pilkington for providing the facilities and tapes which enabled us to watch the networks' coverage. By videotaping and preserving the three networks' evening news shows and other politically relevant programs, and by making them available for analysis, the Archive provides a valuable service which scholars should cherish and protect.

DAVID L. PALTEZ is an associate professor of political science at Duke University. The author of numerous articles, he is presently at work on a book advocating press irresponsibility. MARTHA ELSON is a newspaper and magazine writer. She was an undergraduate at Duke when this was written.

to a jarring conclusion with the remark that the Democrats had just nominated "George McGovern, a man who was called by one of his associates earlier this year, a humble, self-effacing, ego maniac" (12 midnight, July 12).

These three comments by Chancellor suggest why television coverage of the Democratic and Republican National Presidential Nominating Conventions has been subject to sometime vigorous, albeit not always intelligent or disinterested criticism. Yet scholarly analyses of the coverage are sparse.[3] We shall therefore begin by considering the criticisms of television convention coverage. Then we will very briefly compare the experiences of North Carolina delegates who participated in the 1972 Democratic gathering with the reactions of their friends and acquaintances who watched events on television back home. We next quantitatively content analyze NBC's coverage of the convention in terms of the critics' comments and delegates' experiences. A theoretical, qualitative analysis follows in which we suggest (among other things) that coverage is a sort of shell game because of the television production processes, techniques followed by television newspersons, inattention and intermittent viewing by the audience, and the protean quality of the convention itself. We shall conclude by developing the political implications of our data and analysis.

Criticisms of Television Coverage of Conventions

A prominent issue is whether the networks should provide gavel-to-gavel coverage or resort to selective airing of the most significant portions of the conventions mainly during prime time. ABC has offered such abbreviated coverage during recent conventions. Those who endorse limited coverage contend that much of what happens at conventions is boring and unimportant to viewers and should therefore be skipped.

More important than this issue is the question of the content television should offer in its coverage, irrespective of how long that coverage lasts. A primary point of contention is whether networks should keep their television cameras trained almost exclusively on the podium throughout the convention (as PBS did at the 1972 Democratic convention) or mix podium coverage with coverage of outside events, delegates on the floor, interviews, and analysis and commentary. Critics of the latter type of coverage insist that it is irritating, extraneous, and unfair to those

[3] Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang pioneered convention research with their study of events in 1952; see their *Politics and Television* (Chicago, 1968), pp. 78–211. Less sophisticated is Herbert Waltzer, "In the Magic Lantern: Television Coverage of the 1964 National Conventions," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 30 (Spring 1966), 35–53. Also see David L. Paletz, "Delegates' Views of TV Coverage of the 1968 Democratic Convention," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 16 (Fall 1972), 441–451.

who want to watch all the "convention proper." They contend that podium events are the most important aspect of the convention and should therefore receive comprehensive coverage.[4] Comparing the convention to a football game, Edwin L. Dale writes: "Strangely, the football fan wants to watch even the dull moments like penalties, just to be sure what happened." And he complains: "If we wanted to know how New Mexico voted at 5 A.M. on abortion, we heard useless gabble by Cronkite, Chancellor or Brinkley. If we wanted to hear at least a snatch of the debate on the proposed Wallace amendments to the platform, we could not. Instead, we heard endless interviews with Gary Hart, or Dolph Briscoe or I. W. Abel or God knows who else." In short, he claims, "We were not allowed to watch and listen to the *convention*."[5]

In defense of their policy, the networks counter that there is more to the convention than just podium events. As NBC president Reuven Frank said before the Democratic convention: "We will cut away from the podium as we see fit. We are there not to *carry* the convention. We are there to *report* the convention."[6] NBC anchorman David Brinkley also argued that: "The convention essentially is not on the rostrum. The delegates on the floor *are* the convention, and it is impossible to report a convention without reporting on them. It may well be that some of us talk too much, but it is also true that at a convention, there are long periods—a half hour, or longer—when absolutely no business is being done and when, in fact, the rostrum is empty and quiet. And we do have to put something on the air. And so we do the only thing we can do—we interview delegates and others."[7] And: "If we kept the cameras on the rostrum continuously, never looking elsewhere for news, insights, sidebars, explanations and background, the television audience would hear a vast Niagara of speeches and partisan rhetoric. It would know who was nominated but not much else."[8]

Although some of the criticism of network strategy is directed strictly at the policy of covering extra-podium events, much more seems to be aimed at the value of this coverage. Thus, the implication of Dale's use of such phrases as "useless gabble" from commentators and "endless interviews" is that if commentary were "useful" and interviews short and enlightening, the extra-podium coverage would be at least more acceptable to its critics. Marvin Barrett accuses the networks of ignoring

[4] William Shannon, *The New York Times*, August 15, 1972, p. 35.

[5] Edwin L. Dale, "But We Wanted to See the Convention," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 11 (September–October 1972), 49–50.

[6] Quoted in Marvin Barrett (ed.), *The Politics of Broadcasting* (New York, 1973), p. 120. We assume the emphases are Frank's not Barrett's.

[7] *The New York Times*, August 23, 1972, p. 41.

[8] Ibid.

the significant "in favor of the inconsequential or inscrutable."[9] And Judith Parris, in a book published before the 1972 conventions, comments on the undesirable repercussions of this allegedly "hit or miss" strategy in interviewing and covering speeches: "Not only may the frivolous or irrelevant get as much time as the significant; they may be made thereby to appear equally important."[10]

Other criticisms of the manner in which coverage is conducted are that it emphasizes the sensational, the controversial, and the unusual. Parris writes that one way television shapes or distorts a convention is "that reporters try to make the conventions and other political events more dramatic than they actually are."[11] All this leads to the general criticism made primarily by politicians, more often privately than publicly, that television convention coverage is sometimes biased in favor of or against particular candidates, issues, or groups.

We have adumbrated the main criticisms directed at television coverage of national conventions in general and the 1972 Democratic affair in particular. Most emanated from journalists, political scientists, and other professional observers. The criticisms acquire additional weight if corroborated or lose some of their cogency if denied by the delegates. Accordingly, before analyzing the actual television content, we will very briefly discuss the impressions and reactions to the convention of a sample of delegates and their nondelegate friends.

The Delegates' Views

Fifty-seven of the sixty-four North Carolina delegates were asked a series of questions concerning their experiences at the 1972 Democratic convention, television coverage, and the relationship of the two.[12] The main objectives of the questions were to ascertain in what ways, if any, television's portrayal of the convention was different from the actual convention as the delegates observed and experienced it.

Two different approaches were used to ascertain how the live convention differed from the image presented on television. The first was to ask the delegates, "How was the reality of the 1972 convention different from what you've seen on television in the past?" Over 83 percent indicated that there were differences, the most pronounced of which were order-

[9] Barrett, *Politics of Broadcasting*, p. 123.

[10] Judith H. Parris, *The Convention Problem* (Washington, D.C., 1972), p. 169.

[11] Ibid., p. 146.

[12] We are deeply indebted to the North Carolina delegates to the 1972 Democratic National Convention who submitted to lengthy personal interviews on a variety of convention-related subjects. Without their generous cooperation this portion of the study would have been impossible. Figures given in the text refer to the percentage of delegates responding.

liness of proceedings (47.2 percent) and behavior of delegates (31.4 percent). The convention had been more orderly than they had expected. For example, one said that on television the convention "seemed more chaotic" (43) than it was in reality.[13] Another observed: "There was a vast difference between viewing it and being there" (8). A third pointed out that television had not shown campaigning strategies by the rank-and-file delegates and that there was less "back room" (more "open") campaigning than she had expected (62).

It is possible that delegates at the 1972 Democratic affair simply were more orderly, diligent, serious, and conscientious than their Democratic and Republican predecessors. To test such a possibility the delegates' perceptions of the 1972 convention were compared with the impressions of their friends who had viewed the convention on television and subsequently discussed it with the delegates.[14] When asked "Did friends at home who watched the 1972 Democratic convention on television have different impressions of the convention from your own?" over 63 percent answered "yes." The responses to the question, "How were they different?" consistently revealed that friends thought the convention was more conflictual and disorderly, excessively populated by "kooks." Some typical responses on "orderliness" were that friends:

> "thought it [the convention] was mass confusion when it wasn't." (24)
>
> "thought there were many riots and demonstrations." (27)
>
> "thought the convention was a circus." (39)
>
> "didn't think anything was accomplished or that anybody knew what they were doing." (23)

Regarding the type of delegates at the convention, delegates said friends:

> "told me it looked like it was a conglomeration of hippies, yippies, social rejects, reprobates, misfits, criminals." (35)
>
> "they thought it was dominated by gay liberation and other such factions, while I thought everybody had a say." (18)
>
> "thought it was a disorderly mass of liberals." (58)

Other comments were that television coverage specifically emphasized McGovern, did not devote sufficient attention to the activities of the delegates, and failed to keep viewers informed about the issues being debated at the convention. On party divisiveness, one said friends "thought the left took over more than it did and perceived a greater

[13] The number in parentheses is the delegate's confidential identification. A promise of anonymity was one way cooperation and candor from the delegates were facilitated.

[14] Given the natural proclivity of friends to avoid antagonizing each other, the most likely tendency of the data is to understate the differences between the delegates' experiences and their friends' television-derived images.

division in the Party than really existed. The media's emphasis on party division was a prime cause of the division by the time of the election" (5). Another delegate said that for his friends, dissatisfaction with McGovern and disunity were emphasized rather than McGovern's widespread support among the delegates (7).

Obviously the data from this small sample of delegates do not constitute definitive evidence of the nature of television depiction of the convention. They do, however, corroborate the critics' accusations. Accordingly, trying to operationalize these charges, we started simply by attempting to analyze NBC television coverage of the 1972 Democratic convention quantitatively for (1) length of time devoted to podium events, analysis and commentary, interviews, and events outside the hall; (2) emphasis upon the "odd" or "important" elements among convention participants; (3) bias for or against McGovern; (4) emphasis upon disorder.[15]

Quantitative Analysis of NBC Television Coverage

Content was classified as "Interviews," "Analysis," "Outside," "Podium," and "Advertisements." "Interviews" consisted of question and answer segments conducted between network correspondents and convention participants inside the hall. "Analysis" included all commentary from the booth while the camera was focused on the booth, and any explanations or views expressed by reporters or Edwin Newman (located in his own booth) that were not part of an interview. "Outside" comprised segments shot anywhere outside the hall—reports from correspondents at campaign headquarters, shots of candidates leaving and arriving, etc. "Podium" included all segments of coverage in which the camera was directed at the podium or the hall (for instance, to show the parades), including those in which there was commentary in the background. The party films which were shown on television fell into this category. "Advertisements" consisted of the commercals. The amount of time devoted to each different segment of the coverage was noted. The names of those interviewed, the content of the questions from interviewers, and the remarks of anchormen and analysts also were written down, frequently as reasonably accurate quotations. Because of the difficulty of keeping track of the precise length of time devoted to each segment of the coverage, the times were noted in whole minutes.

[15] We must confess that the content analysis presented us with some difficult problems which, for lack of space, we omit here. We are certainly willing, however, to share our problems, procedures, and bibliographic survey with any interested readers who care to contact us.

Length of Time Devoted to Coverage Categories

If the roughly two hours of preconvention coverage is subtracted from the total non-podium time, the data show that NBC devoted approximately the same amount of time to non-podium coverage (analysis, interviews, outside events) as to formal podium events (see Table 1). In its podium coverage, NBC tried to show the "major" speeches, while eliminating some seconding speeches, credentials' challenges speeches, and routine announcements. The objective seemed to be to try to give examples of podium activity in connection with each major issue considered. At each session, the largest portion of the non-podium coverage time was devoted to interviews, with analysis next, and outside coverage taking up the least time. That NBC did not devote even a *majority* of its time to podium events is fuel for critics who claim that television networks devote too much time to non-podium coverage. The results would clearly refute, nonetheless, any charges that in 1972, NBC emphasized events outside the hall. Certainly one reason for this is that there were very few to cover.

Emphasis upon "Odd" or "Important" Convention Participants

Reflecting on his defeat, Senator George McGovern observed: "I thought the convention was great, but what came across on television, apparently, to many of these guys was they saw a lot of aggressive women, they saw a lot of militant blacks, they saw long-haired kids, and I think that combination, which helped win the nomination for me, I think it offended a lot of them."[16] NBC coverage did frequently focus, in scanning shots, on blacks, "hippies," and young people, but just as often it showed middle-aged white delegates. The most common shot was that of different types seated in a group together. NBC's aim seemed merely to show the interesting mix of delegates. Of course the contrast of the variety of Democratic delegates with previous conventions and with delegates at the Republican affair might have been sufficient to give viewers the impression that the 1972 Democratic event was excessively peopled by unconventional types.

A less impressionistic test is to look at those interviewed. Approximately fifty-three individuals were interviewed twice or more by NBC, with McGovern campaign directors Gary Hart, nine times, and Frank Mankiewicz, six times, in the lead. More important, the general distinguishing characteristic of those interviewed more than once was a leadership role—all but eight were officeholders in either national, state,

[16] Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* (San Francisco, 1973), pp. 470–471.

TABLE 1

Length of Time Devoted to Coverage Categories

Session	*Ads*	*Interviews*	*Analysis*	*Outside*	*Total Non-Podium (excluding ads)*	*Podium*	*Total Coverage (excluding ads)*
First session 7/10–7/11	19 m.	2 hr. 17 m.	1 hr. 57 m.	10 m.	4 hr. 24 m.	4 hr. 44 m.	9 hr. 08 m.
Second session 7/11–7/12	37 m.	3 hr. 18 m.	2 hr. 06 m.	12 m.	5 hr. 36 m.	4 hr. 11 m.	9 hr. 47 m.
Third session 7/12–7/13	19 m.	1 hr. 19 m.	35 m.	35 m.	2 hr. 29 m.	2 hr. 39 m.	5 hr. 08 m.
Fourth session 7/13–7/14	39 m.	2 hr. 38 m.	1 hr. 24 m.	21 m.	4 hr. 23 m.	3 hr. 03 m.	7 hr. 26 m.
Total	1 hr. 54 m.	9 hr. 32 m.	6 hr. 02 m.	1 hr. 18 m.	16 hr. 52 m.	14 hr. 37 m.	31 hr. 29 m.

TABLE 2

"Important" and "Rank-and-File" Participants Interviewed

Session	*Important*	*Rank-and-File*	*Total*
First session	58	3	61
Second session	69	18	87
Third session	39	5	44
Fourth session	69	6	75
Total	235	32	267

or local governing bodies, national organizations, or national presidential campaign organizations. And nearly all represented organizations or interest groups at odds at the convention. The only possible "kook" of the group was Chicago black "militant" Jesse Jackson. Only five were women, only one was under thirty, and only five were blacks.

A list of all the people interviewed each day was analyzed to determine the number of "rank and file" versus the number of "important" participants interviewed, and the number of "odd" participants versus the number of "normal" participants. For the first tally, those classed as "important" were: delegation chairmen, vice-chairmen, candidate campaign staff members or floor managers, governors, congressmen, candidates for governor, state legislators, national committeemen and women, leaders of credentials' challenges, and plank sponsors. All others were classed as "rank and file." The results are shown in Table 2.

The data show that, at least in interviewing, NBC did concentrate on the important participants. An individual who was not notable in some respect rarely was asked for his views on a convention issue. Only during the second session were more than a very few rank-and-file participants interviewed: Governor Wallace spoke that evening and members of his family and some of his supporters swell the rank-and-file.

For the next tally, those counted as "odd" convention participants were women, blacks, those under thirty, and "obvious kooks" (e.g., Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman). The results are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3

"Odd" and "Normal" Participants Interviewed

Session	*Odd*	*Normal*	*Total*
First session	11	50	61
Second session	35	52	87
Third session	8	36	44
Fourth session	16	53	69
Total	70	191	261

Even including women in the "odd" category, the number of interviews with such participants is far less than with the so-called normal type. Incidence, however, may have been as important as prevalence. Periodically showing the unusual delegates (unusual in terms of traditional convention norms) on the floor, interviewing some of them intermittently but regularly during the entire convention, commenting occasionally about their presence; all these actions on the part of NBC, journalistically valid as they may have been, provided a critical mass of information which disturbed some of the North Carolina delegates and their television-watching friends. Like some Americans, it made them look askance both at a convention peopled by such types and at the convention's nominees. Viewers may remember the "odd" types more often; nonetheless, the charge that NBC emphasized the unusual elements at the convention does not seem to be justified.

Bias For or Against McGovern

To test for bias for or against McGovern, interviewees were categorized according to their allegiance to candidates at the convention. The assumptions behind the allegiance method were, first, that in selecting the supporter of a certain candidate, the reporter is opening up the possibility that the interviewee will manage to work in some flattering remarks about the candidate or defense of him, no matter how derogatory the phrasing of the question; and second, that every time a supporter of a candidate is designated as such and then interviewed, the general support for the candidate is thereby emphasized. A "neutral" was a respondent who was not *clearly identified* in the interview as a supporter of a certain candidate and was not given the opportunity to express support or preference for a candidate. A special category dubbed "hostile" was established for those who were designated as opponents of McGovern.[17] The results appear in Table 4.

In general, the number of interviews with clearly identified candidate supporters decreased as McGovern's nomination became increasingly more assured. Also, the number of times the other candidates' supporters were interviewed seemed to be determined by the importance of the candidate on each particular day.

This pattern of interviewing is of the type that is generally considered "fair" and "objective"—that is, covering the events and people that have naturally emerged as the most important because of the course run by the convention, rather than covering "network favorites" who may not play an important role in the convention. Thus, as far as we could determine,

[17] Many labor leaders were aligned with Senator Jackson and identified, through their own comments or the introductory remarks of interviewers, as anti-McGovern.

TABLE 4

Supporters of Candidates Interviewed during the Convention

Candidates	*First Session*	*Second Session*	*Third Session*	*Fourth Session*	*Total*
McGovern	19	21	11	12	63
Anti-Daley	3	1	2	none	6
Humphrey	10	1	2	1	14
Wallace	4	14	3	4	25
Muskie	4	2	none	3	9
Jackson (or Labor)	1	4	9	2	16
Daley	5	none	2	none	7
Chisolm	none	1	none	1	2
Hostile	3	none	none	1	4
Total Pro-McGovern (McGovern + Anti-Daley)	22	22	13	12	69
Anti-McGovern	27	22	16	12	77
Neutrals	12	43	10	45	110
Total Interviews	61	87	39	69	256

choices of whom to interview, for how long, what to ask them, and so on, did *not* appear to be made on the basis of the personal and political predispositions of anchormen and reporters.

Finally, if there were actual scenes of conflict and controversy at the convention NBC did not emphasize them. Only once or twice were interviews broadcast from sites where there was more than the usual commotion. David Brinkley even commented at one point, "A delegate notified us he would lead a group out when Wallace spoke. We did not put him on, and he did not walk out" (July 11, 10:22 P.M.).

Qualitative Analysis of NBC Television Coverage

Television personnel from all the networks strove at considerable expense and with extraordinary effort to capture the protean nature of the 1972 Democratic National Convention. Certainly NBC's coverage was *not deliberately* biased or distorted. The correspondents and anchormen appeared to do their best to be honest but fair in their descriptions and appraisals of events. Our data convince us, at least, that NBC's coverage of the convention did not ignore significant events in favor of the inconsequential, did not give the frivolous equal time with the important, did not feature "kooks" at the expense of important convention participants, and was not *deliberately* slanted either in favor of or against Senator George McGovern. Network executives and personnel can well contend that, given the sometime obduracy of convention organizers; the occasional deviousness and evasions of the candidates, their staffs,

and many of their supporters; the exigencies of time; and the other obstacles to adequate coverage too numerous to mention; they did a reasonable job informing viewers of what was going on at the convention as it transpired.[18]

And yet, we are convinced of the authenticity, justifiability, and accuracy of the delegates' and critics' reactions to the television coverage. Their critique may have been faulty and misdirected, but their intuition seems correct. We too received the overwhelming impression that conflict, division, confusion, and disorder were rampant at the 1972 Democratic convention. The impression resulted from several factors, most of which could not be adequately captured and conveyed by a quantitative analysis. These factors are primarily a function of the journalistic and production norms and techniques which television news departments use to depict a national presidential convention.[19] They include the thematic approach inherent in the statements of anchormen and imperative in the questions posed by floor reporters; the tendency of those responsible for the coverage to juxtapose opposing views on the themes and issues with which the convention was concerned; reporters' interviewing techniques; access (what television can and cannot, or does not, show); visual techniques (including image switching, camera angles, brevity of scenes); and the activities, attitudes, and location of anchormen. Our examples and analysis follow.

Network news personnel no doubt approached the convention, as did most newsmen, with some ideas in mind of the important stories. These themes were raised and pursued through correspondents' questions and the summaries and analysis of anchormen. But such thematic emphases have effects; as Alfred North Whitehead observed: "Each mode of consideration is a sort of searchlight elucidating some of the facts and retreating the remainder into an omitted background."[20]

[18] With the conspicuous exception of the strategy and tactics involved in the defeat of the challenge to the credentials of the South Carolina delegation. NBC got the story earlier and more accurately than its rivals. Television coverage may also have created the impression that the platform was more extreme than it actually was. In our view, the platform was well within the tradition of its Democratic predecessor.

[19] On the general nature and organization of television news departments see especially Edward J. Epstein, *News from Nowhere* (New York, 1974).

[20] Alfred N. Whitehead, *Adventures in Ideas* (New York, 1933), p. 54. Paul T. Weaver applies the theme approach to television news coverage of the 1968 presidential election campaign between Humphrey and Nixon. See his "Is Television News Biased?" *The Public Interest*, 26 (Winter 1972), 57–74. The "theme" explanation appears susceptible to the criticism that the themes selected to organize and structure the events occurring were indeed the most appropriate and did convey the reality of the convention. In response we would argue that, no matter how appropriate, a theme inherently exaggerates and distorts the nature of an event. This is especially prevalent on the television small screen and in coverage of such a protean, complex phenomenon as a national convention.

The initial major question was "Will McGovern win the nomination?" Subsidiary stories such as challenges to the credentials of the California and Illinois delegations, and the activities of other candidates were all related to the overarching theme of the prospects for a McGovern victory. Consequently, until the nomination was decided, many interviewees were supporters of particular candidates. In most cases, the topics of the interview were McGovern's chances (for his supporters) or the possibility of stopping him (for McGovern's opponents).

Although McGovern supporters were interviewed more than twice as many times as those of any other single candidate, the combined total for "anti-McGovern" interviewees exceeded the total for "pro-McGovern" forces. But the continued attention to "anti-McGovern" forces (who were interviewed as many times or more than McGovern supporters on each day) suggests that after McGovern had secured the nomination, the major theme-question concerned his efforts and ability to unify the party and their relationship to his chances of victory against President Nixon. Other stories, such as the selection of a vice-presidential nominee, new rules, and future activities of Governor Wallace, tended to be related to the main theme. Many of these interviews were neither pro- nor anti-McGovern per se, but their effect may have been to emphasize the opposition to McGovern and perpetuate the acrimony and disunity in the party —portraying the convention as divided into irreconcilable camps.

In contrast, there is a compensating theme which, we suspect, was less in evidence at the 1972 Democratic convention than in most of its predecessors. The theme is unity around an inspirational candidate. The nominee's family, friends, managers, supporters, and running mate are all interviewed and permitted, even encouraged, to extol the brilliance with which his campaign for the nomination was pursued, his political virtues, and his statesmanship. No wonder a candidate's support in the polls normally rises significantly after he has been nominated.

In one of its infrequent slips, NBC failed to cut out from Tom Pettit's interview with Wallace supporter Hall Timanus in time to miss Timanus' remark, "You've been reading up on me, ain't you?" (July 12, 12:27 A.M.). This is the point exactly—the reporters know whom they are interviewing and what their views are before they interview most of the time. The interview statistics clearly demonstrate that reporters did not seek out "kooks" to interview. Rather their aim seemed to be to find people who would present opposing views on the major themes with which the coverage was concerned. This process, however, tended to emphasize divisiveness in the Democratic party. It was most apparent in the way NBC interviewed people who opposed McGovern, alternating them with McGovern supporters. The juxtaposition of their comments and classifications (i.e., as McGovern supporters, Humphrey supporters, members of the "Stop McGovern Movement," etc.) created the impres-

sion of hostility and disunity among the participants. One example occurred during the first session when NBC carried an interview with Governor Jimmy Carter of Georgia (identified as a leader of the "Stop McGovern Movement") followed consecutively by ones with Senator Harold Hugues (Iowa) a Muskie floor leader, Humphrey's California campaign leader, and Gary Hart (McGovern's national campaign director). In one sense, this traditional getting all sides method seems to be the fairest format for interviewing. But it can make the "Stop McGovern Movement," seem as strong as the "Elect McGovern Movement" whether it is or not. Moreover the technique may actually create the impression of sides that do not really exist to a substantial degree among the delegates as a whole. It certainly increases the elements of conflict and drama.

The questions reporters asked the people they interviewed, and many of the remarks of anchormen and analysts, emphasized divisiveness, disunity, and general trouble (present and future) for McGovern and the Democratic party. The following quotes provide the flavor of this coverage; then we will try to explain its occurrence.[21]

On July 10, 1972—

Catherine Mackin to Governor Reubin Askew (Fla.): "Why do you think the Democrats are so divided?" (6:50 P.M.).

Mackin to Congressman Walter Fauntroy (D.C.): "Some say black support for McGovern is eroding" (8:12 P.M.).

On July 11—

Tom Pettit to Governor Marvin Mandel (Md.): "Don't you feel McGovern delegates would like to get even with Mayor Daley for '68?" (1:15 A.M.).

John Chancellor: "The platform has divisive, contentious, abrasive sections in it that affect the lives of all the people here tonight" (6:59 P.M.).

Garrick Utley to House of Representatives Speaker Carl Albert (Okla.): "It's been said McGovern's nomination will be a disaster for the party . . ." (7:21 P.M.).

Chancellor: "a platform which will cause a great deal of argument" (8:51 P.M.).

On July 12—

Douglas Kiker to McGovern aide Frank Mankiewicz: "Some say Daley will not have any part of you" (3:47 A.M.).

Floyd Kalber to Democratic Party Counsel Joseph Califano: "Young people want it [the new charter] and old people don't, isn't that what it really is?" (6:50 P.M.).

[21] The NBC newsfolk are listed first.

Chancellor: "The chances are now stronger he [Wallace] will bolt the party" (7:13 P.M.).

Mackin to McGovern aide Gary Hart: "Rumors are that you have defectors on the Left, and trouble on the Right . . . " (7:56 P.M.).

Utley to Senator Jackson aide Ben Wattenberg: "Some say McGovern's nomination would be very bad for the party" (11:21 P.M.).

Mackin to Governor Warren Hearnes (Mo.): "You haven't thought much of McGovern in the past—what do you think now?" (11:31 P.M.).

On July 13—

Chancellor: "Democrats will fight about things even when there aren't things to fight about. . . . It's characteristic of the party" (6:57 P.M.).

Kiker to Humphrey campaign adviser Lloyd Hand: "Some are saying that rather than a united party, the Democratic party is a confused party" (8:42 P.M.).

Newman to Edmund Muskie: "How divided is the Democratic party?" (8:44 P.M.).

Pettit to McGovern strategist Eli Segal: "You've spent a lot of time putting out fires. Someone said there were so many arms bent out of shape they couldn't measure it" (9:03 P.M.).

Kiker to gubernatorial candidate (W. Va.) John D. Rockefeller, IV: "Do you think McGovern's policies are too radical for West Virginia?" (9:09 P.M.).

Newman to Senator Stuart Symington (Mo.): "How divided is the party?" (9:35 P.M.).

Utley to Senator Adlai Stevenson, Jr. (Ill.): "I've heard Eagleton may not get it on the first ballot" (10:31 P.M.).

As the quotations show, a popular interviewing technique employed by the reporters was to lead off with: "Some say . . . ," "I've heard that . . . ," etc., followed by a statement that remained unattributed and unsubstantiated. This approach enabled the reporter to suggest in some manner that the party was divided and McGovern was in trouble, regardless of whether such was the case.

A focus upon conflict and divisiveness may be appropriate if a convention is in fact rife with conflict and the party divided. In this instance, however, the questions and comments also reflected a view of these things as unfortunate and even irreparable. Some campaign managers and delegates might see divisiveness as natural and the sign of "democracy at work," competition showing the Democratic party as active and vital. But the commentators tended to portray divisiveness in terms of bitterness, hard feelings, bickering, arguing for the sake of arguing, and a severe impediment to victory after the convention. It cannot be

denied that there was conflict at the convention; but it was given greater emphasis and viewed as unalloyedly negative by the commentators and reporters.

One reason this occurred, we suggest, has to do with the imperatives of television convention reporting. Reporters are competing with each other and with anchormen for scarce and valuable air time. Their network is competing with other networks for the audience. To get on the air, a reporter cannot be boring. He needs to have something newsworthy if not provocative to say, or at least someone to say it. And it has to be said succinctly and with dispatch. Reporters know, moreover, that many interviewees are likely to be evasive, especially on such subjects as divisiveness and disunity which may be perceived as potentially inimical to their party's, their candidate's and their own fortunes. Consequently, the inducement is for reporters to focus upon conflict, to pose leading questions, and to resist, in a way that oscillates from comical to merciless, attempts by respondents to avoid or evade questions. This need to get immediately at what is perceived as the nitty-gritty imbues most interviews with a sense of tension, if not drama, and, combined with the techniques of juxtaposing interviews with people holding opposing views, heightens the impression for television viewers of divisiveness and conflict.[22]

The convention appeared disorderly and confused on television. And the delegates appeared more disorderly, confused, and ineffectual than they thought they were. One obvious reason is that NBC newsmen, especially the anchormen, frequently referred to these characteristics. A few examples follow:

On July 10—

David Brinkley: "The floor is almost the worst place on earth to keep track of what's going on. You can't see very well and you can't hear very well" (10:39 P.M.).

On July 11—

Brinkley: "The people on the podium can't hear who's voting. They all shout. You can't tell who's voting and who isn't" (12:33 A.M.).

Chancellor after Chairman O'Brien asked delegates to clear the aisles: "Now it's, 'Come on, will you, gang?' In about another hour it'll be, 'Sit down you bums' " (1:00 A.M.).

Chancellor: "Many of the delegates have gone home" (2:38 A.M.).

[22] For obvious reasons, courtesy is not abundant and chitchat infrequent in the television interviews. Were a more casual interaction possible, however, we suspect it would considerably reduce the pervasive feeling of drama and conflict we received in watching the television coverage.

Chancellor: "with a lot of delegates falling asleep on the floor . . ." (3:15 A.M.).

Brinkley, after the announcement that the rest of the challenges had been withdrawn: "They're too tired to fight" (3:47 A.M.).

Kalber: "We'll possibly have as much confusion and debate as last night" (6:34 P.M.).

Chancellor: "The platform speeches are not reaching the delegates. There's an awful lot of milling around. Everyone is waiting for his own particular enterprise to come up. In the meantime, they don't listen to the speeches" (11:50 P.M.).

On July 12—

Chancellor: "the turtlelike pace of events" (12:02 P.M.).

Chancellor: "Many of the delegates have gone home" (2:31 A.M.).

Pettit to O'Brien: "are you asleep?" (3:24 A.M.).

Brinkley, after passage of the Indian lands plank: "No one knew what it meant, but the emotional sentimental mood was such that it passed anyway, overwhelmingly" (4:14 A.M.).

Brinkley: "The delegates usually don't pay any attention to requests to clear the aisles. . . . The Ohio delegates are late for everything. Frank King said, 'None of these people have been to a convention before—it takes them longer to count' " (7:00 P.M.).

Edwin Newman: "We know far more about what's going on than they do. Numberless delegates tell us the only way they can find out what's going on is to watch television or listen to the radio" (11:13 P.M.).

These comments may all have been accurate perceptions of the convention as the newsmen experienced it. And no doubt some of the delegates might have argued that there was disorder on the floor, although they might also have taken it in stride as an exciting, stimulating part of the convention process. For many delegates, however, including the overwhelming majority of our North Carolina sample, the convention was characterized by a lack of confusion. Our delegates felt that they had worked diligently to master the credentials, platform, rules, and nomination issues with which they were confronted. Many felt pleased with their efficacy at the convention. Yet television rarely conveyed this impression. Rather, the NBC anchormen and correspondents tended to give the impression that confusion was rampant and that it resulted from poor management and lack of cooperation among the delegates.

One reason for this difference between delegates' experiences and television content is that the television newsmen depicted the convention as they perceived it on the floor, in their encounters with delegates, and from their booths above the hall. Each network was limited in 1972 to

four floor reporters and one floor cameraman who was there to film interviews. They were "supplemented by cameras in baskets hung around the wall."[23] The shots from cameras stationed above the floor were usually roving ones of large areas of the floor from a long distance away, or close-ups of individual delegates or groups of delegates. In nearly all cases the delegates were shown seated. The primary purpose of these shots seemed to be to show the different types that were present rather than depict their productive activity. And inevitably, during the late night and early morning hours, there were many shots of delegates sleeping, nodding, or leaving—"inevitably," because delegates were engaged in such activities and because television cameras were scanning the floor. For delegates, however, most of the satisfying and productive work came during the daily, or more frequent, off-the-floor delegation caucuses, and from the process of deciding how to vote after reading convention materials and interacting with other delegates. Some of these activities, such as the individual delegate's process of decision, are difficult if not impossible to depict on television. Cameras were excluded from others, including delegation off-the-floor caucuses. But television newsmen and cameras were also absent out of disinterest, because the work and satisfaction of individual rank-and-file delegates were peripheral to television's coverage of the convention. The result was to make delegates appear more disorderly, confused, and ineffectual than they felt. For how could constructive activity take place amid the confusion on the floor, among delegates who were sleeping or had departed?

There are several other reasons why the convention may have appeared more disorderly and confused on television than it was. There was the rapid switching of cameras from the booth, to the podium, to the floor, to a reporter, to a scene outside the hall, and back and forth among these. The camera rarely rested on any of these locations for more than five minutes (many NBC floor interviews lasted two minutes or less), and any one scene might be presented from a variety of different angles or depths. This method of coverage is consonant with the dictates of television journalism to avoid visual monotony. But it also creates an impression of many different activities occurring simultaneously in a rather confused, indistinct relation to each other. It must be stressed that the movement within and transition between scenes, while sometimes rapid, is rarely abrupt. Rhythm is achieved through a myriad of technical devices such as pulling out for a wide-wider shot, sound overlap, and intercutting. The objective is to achieve a smooth series and flow of images. Consequently, the viewer's impression is that the confusion is a function of the nature of the convention, not an artifact of television coverage.

[23] *Broadcasting Magazine*, 83 (July 17, 1972), 16.

Another possible reason for the impression of disorder is the contrast in setting of each location. When a reporter is shown on the convention floor, he often is packed into a crowd of people precariously stretching out his microphone. Sometimes the reporter and interviewee seem to have trouble hearing each other. Politicians most often are viewed crammed in a crowd or orating from a platform. In contrast, the segments of coverage shot in the booth exhibit the anchormen in a kind of "ivory tower" situation. One need only compare the different impressions made by Chicago Mayor Richard Daley when interviewed on the floor and subsequently in the anchorman's booth during the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

Related to setting are the function and attitudes adopted by the anchormen. NBC's Brinkley and Chancellor, more at ease on television than harried politicians, experienced in front of the cameras, apparently disinterested, sustained by the credibility acquired through years of bringing the news to viewers every evening, calmly surveyed and commented upon the seething mass of humanity in the arena below. Analysis occupied roughly 20 percent of NBC's coverage. Viewers began and ended each night's events with the anchormen and were returned to them intermittently throughout each session. For the audience, the anchormen are a visual and oral link: they strive to bring coherence and order out of the conflicting, often self-serving or candidate-serving statements of interviewees, and the apparent turmoil and confusion of the convention. In fulfilling this function, the anchormen sometimes adopted an attitude of bafflement or dismay at the convention's activities and especially at the operation of its paraphernalia of rules and procedures. This attitude may have contributed to viewer identification, but it also served to make the convention appear more confusing than it actually was. And it made the delegates appear more ineffectual than they were, because the anchormen, and through them the viewers, seemed to know so much more about convention events and trends than the rank-and-file delegates apparently pinioned on the floor.[24]

[24] There is also the argument omitted from our analysis that the television picture is inordinately powerful because of the use of close-ups, the small size of the screen, the way it emphasizes movement, and so on. See Henry Fairlie, "The Unreal World of Television News," in David Manning White and Richard Averson (eds.), *Sight, Sound, and Society* (Boston, 1968), pp. 127–135. As a possible example of the intensifying effects of television as compared to the distancing effects of the press, consider how in 1976 television might treat the decision by the Democratic presidential nominee to select George Wallace as his running mate. In addition to analyzing the bargaining between the candidates, showing the sometimes vehement opposition of some delegates on the convention floor, newsmen would also conduct interviews in which both candidates would be asked how they could reconcile running on the same ticket given their (enumerated) differences and the unpleasant things they had said about each other in the past. All this on live television to the obvious embarrassment and

Implications

Direct casual links are virtually impossible to demonstrate but Gallup Poll data suggest that Senator McGovern suffered from the televising of the Democratic convention, while President Nixon (although not necessarily his party) benefited from coverage of the Republican convention. McGovern's authority was denigrated; Nixon's was enhanced.[25] Part of the negative effect obviously was a function of the Democratic convention itself. For the first time in the history of televised conventions, viewers saw and heard (or heard about) such issues as abortion and homosexuality debated on the floor. In prime time they witnessed Governor George C. Wallace (Ala.) present a platform disdained not always politely by the overwhelming majority of the convention. Viewers saw, even if they did not hear, a far more disparate conglomeration of delegates by sex, race, and age than usually graced televised conventions. Above all, viewers watched a vigorous, sometime brutal, battle for the presidential nomination in which George McGovern, the eventual winner, was sometimes accused of representing a vocal, radical minority of his party.

This explanation for McGovern's decline is necessary but not sufficient. It is our contention that the damage to McGovern's authority and perhaps to the Democratic party's image in the minds of voters also resulted from the very nature and processes of television coverage of the convention events.[26] In our discussion of NBC's coverage we have analyzed these causal factors.

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irritation of the candidates, followed by televising of the convention debate and vote. Events would appear so much more benign and orderly in print.

[25] According to the *Gallup Opinion Index*, Report No. 87 (September 1972), the Gallup trial-heat poll conducted before the Democratic convention showed President Nixon with 53 percent, McGovern 34 percent, and the remainder undecided. Following the Democratic convention, both McGovern and Nixon increased by 3 percent. According to former Humphrey adviser Ben Wattenberg, however, "it was the only convention since the advent of public opinion polling in the United States where the nominee of the party lost ground." And, "even after the Chicago convention in '68, with blood in the streets, Hubert Humphrey gained five points." See Ernest R. May and Janet Fraser (eds.), *Campaign '72: The Managers Speak* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), pp. 182 and 183. After the Eagleton fiasco, Nixon's percentage increased by 1 to 57, but McGovern decreased by 6 to 31, while the remainder swelled the undecided vote to 12 percent. Following the Republican convention, Nixon rose to 64 percent (an increase of 7); McGovern declined by 1 to 30 percent; and the undecideds went down to 6 percent. In addition, the post-Republican convention poll revealed that President Nixon had gone from trailing Senator McGovern 48 to 41 percent among voters under thirty, to a 61 to 36 percent lead.

[26] It is our general view that to some extent a presidential nominating convention is relatively protean and can be portrayed as more or less conflictual, confused, and divided. By dint of the factors we have identified, we believe that television emphasized such politically negative characteristics. Thus, although we studiously tried to avoid the trap of discussing the reality of the 1972 Democratic convention, we should

In recent years both parties have increasingly tried to "manage" their conventions in the best interests of the party and its nominees. Changes have been made in scheduling, agenda, and rules.[27] In 1972

> the Republicans relegated the housekeeping and parliamentary chores . . . to afternoon sessions or private caucuses and cut their total days from four to three. They revamped the podium, raising a three panel rear-projection screen, which they used for the four party movies they managed to get on NBC and CBS in their entirety. The screen was also used to project television coverage of outside events such as the arrival of President Nixon at the Miami airport, and his "spontaneous" appearance before a crowd of young people at the Marine Stadium after his nomination. When the screen was in use, the house lights were dimmed, and in most instances the television cameras cooperated by focusing on the front of the hall.[28]

As we viewed the coverage on television, the middle screen lay directly behind the speaker's podium. Network cameras stationed on the camera deck arising from the middle of the convention floor could not frame the speaker at the podium without including a portion of the image on the screen behind him. These images included Nixon campaigning with Eisenhower, on a beach with his wife Pat, embracing Agnew, and in talks with Chairman Mao and Soviet leader Brezhnev. Television, then, was a conduit for the display to the viewing audience of these achievements and moments in history of President Nixon and his associates. Partly because their convention lacked surprises, but also as a result of the effectiveness of these attempts to manipulate television coverage, "the network cameras [were] on the podium a remarkable two-thirds of the time."[29] This contrasts with the roughly 46 percent enjoyed by the Democrats. In 1972 the Democrats tried to eliminate floor demonstrations and drastically reduced the number and length of nominating and seconding speeches.[30] Nonetheless, they had mixed results in trying to exploit the presence of television covering the convention. The keynote addresses took place during prime time but so did the speech by George Wallace. Debate on the abortion and homosexuality amendments was relegated to the early morning hours, but so were both acceptance speeches.

The Republican 1972 convention provided a scenario which the Democrats may be increasingly tempted to try to follow. It was a convention which minimized confusion and which was carefully arranged to create

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note our view that, if some objective measures were available and applied, then television coverage of the convention would be revealed as depicting more conflict, confusion, and division than measurably occurred.

[27] For examples see Parris, *The Convention Problem*, pp. 150–151.

[28] Barrett, *The Politics of Broadcasting*, pp. 127–128.

[29] Ibid., p. 129.

[30] Ibid., pp. 119–120.

an impression of harmony and unity. We suspect that the average convention watcher regards lengthy debate as a bore, finds procedural motions baffling, and sees no point in convention housekeeping. He wants or is at least attracted by efficiency and control. Peter Daily of the November Group, which handled advertising and media arrangements for the Nixon campaign, is probably correct in asserting that: "It was . . . very important that the Republican convention was run with a degree of precision and organization that added to the impression that the President was a man who was able to control his own destiny and therefore to control the destiny of the country."[31]

The problem with the scenario is that it appears to require a party which is renominating an incumbent president who is without significant opposition at the convention.[32] This is scarcely possible for a party nominating a challenger in a convention full of conflict over credentials, platform planks, rules, and candidates. Is it possible to structure these events in such a way as to minimize adverse voter (public) reaction, and indeed to benefit the party and its candidates? Particularly is this possible given the Democratic party's new rules which appear to encourage a plethora of candidates and representation of a wide range of issues and ideological perspectives? Given the possible conflicts of interest among and between convention managers, candidates, and issue groups, it is likely that the minority or deprived or outraged or defeated will take advantage of television coverage to publicize its position and cry injustice. And because of the nature of television coverage the convention will appear to contain far more conflict, division, and confusion than it actually does.

If a party cannot orchestrate its convention, then it might be preferable to organize it so as to have only selected segments televised—for example, nominating speeches, presidential candidate balloting, and acceptance speeches. More likely, the networks themselves may curtail their time-consuming and expensive, albeit prestige-garnering, coverage. The effects will depend upon the form the truncated coverage takes. There may be less sense of convention confusion and delegate ineffectualness generated because of a reduction in the number of interviews, shots of the floor, comments by anchormen, and so on. But any network inclination to deal more completely with the activities of individual delegates is likely to be stymied by lack of time. More important, it is

[31] May and Fraser, *Campaign '72*, p. 174.

[32] Any party which tries too obviously to control its convention and to exploit the presence of television may be quickly accused of stage managing. This happened to the managers of the 1972 Republican convention when they inadvertently distributed copies of their convention script to the media. The latter made it public without any apparent electoral damage to the convention, party, or its nominees.

probable that greater emphasis will be placed on the functions of anchormen to link, synthesize, explain, and analyze convention activities and events. The temptation to place the party and its nominees under a microscope will be increased. And, if the nature and processes of television coverage are not changed, the nominees of contentious conventions will continue to be disadvantaged.