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Media Coverage of Substantive Issues

A cursory examination of news sources leads to the conclusion that citizens have a great number of opportunities to become well informed. They can view programs on the various television channels. Most radio stations give the news at least hourly—some continuously—and there are many talk shows. Newspapers and newsweeklies attempt to carry on their traditional function.

Yet a closer examination reveals that the news media are not effective in presenting balanced news in depth, but are to a degree contributing to a malfunctioning of society. They have participated in creating and exacerbating a series of crises by overconcentrating attention on particular topics. Typically, after a period of concentrated attention, the media suddenly drop one topic as they rush to indulge in overkill of the next one.

These tendencies were noted by Alan L. Otten in a recent column in the *Wall Street Journal** which began:

One hallmark of contemporary America, it's frequently been noted, is the short life-span of its crises.

A problem emerges suddenly, builds swiftly to crisis proportions, briefly dominates public consciousness and concern, and then abruptly fades from view. Civil rights, urban decay, hunger, drugs, crime, campus unrest, medical care, the environment, energy—one succeeds another with blurring speed, almost as though some issue-of-the-year club were in charge.

A glance at Otten's list leaves one with the impression of a variable amount of residue from the periods of great mass media attention. Most of the topics listed are now practically dead as far as the media are concerned. True, there is a considerable residue from emphasis on the environment both in legislation and in public consciousness, although with sharply curtailed media coverage, the public concern and interest have lessened. After tremendous attention, news coverage of the energy crisis has almost disappeared, and there is little indication of substantive progress in meeting the issue. The basic problems remain, but the public is bored with the subject, and the net effect of the coverage is to make it more difficult for progress to be made in the future.

Another undesirable feature of the massive attention is its lack of quality. The bizarre and the spectacular news takes precedence over reports with balance and substance. We at *Science* frequently have opportunities to evaluate the performance of the media in unearthing the facts about a given situation, and more often than not we are disappointed. This is particularly true in those areas in which science and technology interact with public policy. These issues are usually complex and enduring and not well handled by slick or sensational journalism.

The current practices of the mass media point up the value of publications like *Science* that are designed to inform rather than to excite. Although our resources are comparatively modest, we feel no handicap in competing. On any topic we choose to cover, we can if we wish produce a more rounded, complete, balanced, and scholarly story. Usually we do not choose to compete on topics that are being well covered by others. We prefer to pinpoint issues before they are in vogue, and we are not averse to dealing with significant topics after others have dropped them, provided there is new and relevant information.

In our efforts to maintain quality, we are fortunate in having a readership that expects good performance. Our authors understand this and tend to behave accordingly. We are also fortunate in having an audience that values rigor and discussion in depth and is willing to contribute ideas, time, and money to the common objective.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

* A. L. Otten, *Wall Street Journal*, 6 May 1974, p. 16.

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Philip H. Abelson

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