

The Change in U.S. Television News Throughout the Cold War

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During the Cold War, news media in the United States regularly covered and reported the unfolding conflict between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. along with the many “hot wars” during this time period that pitted Capitalism vs. Communism. During this time, Americans would see news of the American-Soviet conflict in many forms, from print and radio to eventually film and television. By the end of the Cold War, television would become the new medium to surpass written documents in America; it was more meaningful and more powerful than any other previous forms of media. The rise of television had a codependent relationship with the Cold War; as the war intensified, so too did the use of television and film to portray the incidents within it. After WWII, television grew as a form of media available to the masses. By 1959, the television had become the central home appliance, with nine out of ten households owning one.¹ Within the first five years of regular network reporting, Americans learned about the many events of the beginning of the Cold War through their television sets in between commercials for the many consumer goods pushed their way.

Even in the early days of television, when only a small number of networks even existed, the U.S. government showed great interest in television as a tool to create public support of military and foreign policies. The first project in television taken on by the Office of Public Affairs was producing the program *Your Foreign Policy* for ABC in 1948, which discussed topics such as the Truman Doctrine, “Greek-Turkish Aid,” and “Is European Recovery Road to Peace?” The Office of Public Affairs’ hand in using television to promote U.S. foreign affairs is further evidenced by the office making the signing of the Japanese Peace treaty in San Francisco on September 21, 1951, the first nationwide television broadcast. The Office of Public Affairs did not stop there though and went on to produce series such as *The Marshall Plan in Action*, *Diplomatic Pouch*, and during the Korean War, *The Facts We Face* and *Battle Report Washington*, with the intention of bringing U.S. foreign affairs to the public and to demonstrate support for U.S. Cold War policies.² American television news changed drastically from the end of World War II to the end of the Vietnam War, through the fear Communists in media brought to Americans, the government’s control over networks mixed with the production of propaganda, the accessibility of news along with faster reporting, and finally via, the change in objectivity in news reporting coupled with the government’s loss of control over networks.

Early on in the life of television news and entertainment in America, many were afraid of the damage a Communist behind the camera’s lens could do in helping spread their Communist ideas and sympathies. To combat this, an attempt at controlling the entertainment industry was made in 1947 by anti-Communist organizers because of the potential danger of having the American people manipulated by Communists. The Mundt-Nixon Bill was passed that banned Communists from using broadcast frequencies for “treachery, propaganda, and sabotage.”³ However, following this,

¹ Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 4-5.

² Nancy E. Bernhard, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda: 1947-1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 74-76.

³ Bernhard, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda: 1947-1960*, 56.

the public would take the responsibility of exposing Communists and Communist sympathizers into their own hands.

In June of 1950, “Counterattack,” a privately owned and operated anti-Communist newsletter, issued a list of news personalities and entertainers believed to be a part of the Communist Party or have Communist sympathies in their publication entitled *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*. *Red Channels* explained the risk that pro-Communist peoples in the media could pose to the American people stating that these entertainers would bring “Communist ideology and pro-Soviet interpretation of current events” to the American people.⁴ However, the fight against Communistic influence in the media did not stop here.

At a Lincoln Day dinner speech to a Republican Women’s Club, Senator Joseph McCarthy stated that he had a list of 205 names of known Communists working in the State Department, giving him overnight fame. Though he first only mentioned members in the State Department, McCarthy would soon move onto members of the entertainment industry. Like the *Red Channels*, McCarthy accused people he believed to have ties to Communism or sympathies towards it. McCarthy felt the need to expose them to protect Americans from Communist influences in the media. All in all, McCarthy’s so-called *Blacklist* of suspected Communists constricted people’s freedom of speech and opinions in private as well as in the public eye, as entertainers had to be cautious of any and all things they said as not to appear to have any Communistic sympathies. Even renowned public figures, such as former President Harry Truman saw through the near censorship the *Blacklist* forced upon Americans. In a televised address on November 16, 1953, Truman stated that “McCarthyism is the corruption of truth, the abandonment of our historical devotion to fair play. It is the abandonment of the due process of law. It is the use of the Big Lie and the unfounded accusation against any citizen in the name of Americanism and security... It is the spread of fear and the destruction of faith in every level of our society.”⁵ All in all, this fear of Communists among the American people was not the only thing frightening the public when it came to the Cold War; fear of instant nuclear annihilation also did wonders to instill an “us vs. them” mentality in Americans.

Between 1951 and 1953, three atomic bomb detonations would be broadcast to the American people in a public service program sponsored by the government, as no brands wanted to sponsor an atomic bomb detonation. *The Blacklist* and *Red Channels*, coupled with the fear of atomic demise displayed on television, made for a challenging time for advertisers. Advertisers wanted to reach as wide a demographic as possible, so using television was ideal, but the fear of supporting Communism in media or frightful shows hung heavy upon advertisers. Based upon ratings and letters, television executives were constantly worried about what might offend the public, and subsequently, sponsors often folded after any pressure from the public.⁶ Walter Cronkite for CBS, Morgan Beatty for NBC, and Chet Huntley for ABC were all on the scene of the last of the three detonations in March of 1953, giving commentary to the public of the goings-on of the detonation. The detonation of such bombs brought fear to the public and helped foster the growing animosity and disdain Americans harbored for the Soviets.⁷ Also produced and brought to the public thanks

⁴ *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* (New York: Counterattack, 1950), 2.

⁵ *Former President Truman's Remarks in Response to Criticism by Herbert Brownell in Regard to the Harry Dexter White Appointment* (Kansas City, MO: American Broadcasting Company, November 16, 1953).

⁶ Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*, 61-63.

⁷ Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*, 7.

to the U.S. government was *Operation Ivy*, a 28-minute telecast about the detonation of the H-Bomb that was created by the Department of Defense and the Atomic Energy Commission.⁸ Besides actual informational telecasts about bomb detonations, shows such as ABC's *Atomic Attack*, which followed a woman left to survive an atomic bomb detonation on the island of Manhattan, helped promote fear of an attack from the Soviets and overwhelmingly promoted support for more civil defense in America.⁹

At the start of the Cold War conflict, American media presented coverage of the fear-inducing "Red Scare" campaign to sway American opinion away from that of destructive Communism and instill American patriotism. Television really got on its feet at the height of the "Red Scare" and was heavily influenced by the ensuing anti-communist hysteria, whether this be creating fear of atomic annihilation or fear of Communist influences in the media. Media significantly contributed to the continuance of the Cold War through its sensationalized propaganda and heavily politicized reporting, which created a prolonged state of fear of impending doom and paranoia.¹⁰ Although the fear of Communists and impending doom could not have been spread so rapidly and efficiently had the U.S. Government not had as great a control over broadcasting networks.

America's television industry was different from that of the Soviet Union in that it was corporate-owned and commercially sponsored as opposed to the Soviet's state-controlled information television. However, America's television industry was not as free as one might think during the beginnings of the Cold War. Most news reported during the early Cold War was heavily scripted and often produced by the government or defense establishment itself. Television networks had a dire need to produce their news programs cheaply and efficiently, as, during their infancy, networks did not have the capital to produce many programs of their own. This, coupled with government agencies seeking out control over the news reaching the public, was the recipe for the give-and-take relationship enjoyed by the U.S. government and news outlets. The networks and the government were able to come to an agreement that the government would financially help produce programs for the networks, and in return, many shows and news programs would have heavy influences from the government, giving the government further control over what information the American people had access to.¹¹ The Korean War brought to the forefront of the American people the thought that perhaps the government's control over the media would soon get even tighter.

At the beginning of the Korean War, one major threat faced by television networks was the chance of nationalization by the government. Because of the financial crisis the Korean War brought about, U.S. television networks' stocks fell, and government seizure of the networks was a real fear. This financial crisis coupled with the thought that sponsors might disappear because of their goods being less produced due to the war, as well as many television workers being drafted to Korea leaving gaps in the workplace, really proved to many broadcasters that a significant halt in television's growth was going to happen.¹² However, after the fear of nationalization of networks

⁸ *Operation Ivy*, March 17, 1952.

⁹ *The Motorola Television Hour: Atomic Attack* (American Broadcasting Company, 1954); Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*, 12-13.

¹⁰ Alexander Stafford, "The Role of the Media During the Cold War," E, October 27, 2013, <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/26/the-role-of-the-media-during-the-cold-war/>, 3.

¹¹ Bernhard, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda: 1947-1960*, 1-6.

¹² Bernhard, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda: 1947-1960*, 77-96.

subsided, the government still had an enormous amount of control over what the networks reported on during the Korean War. General MacArthur got very upset about early negative coverage of the Korean War and eventually would order mandatory censorship of news coverage, starting in December 1950. MacArthur was able to successfully censor news reports of the conflict via the Army's control of the telephone systems journalists in Korea used to dictate their news coverage of Korea. This blatant censorship of the conflict would continue until the armistice in July of 1953.¹³

In the early stages of the Cold War, the media's effect was apparent as the U.S. government used anti-Soviet-American-propaganda to dissuade any domestic sympathies towards Communism. This form of propaganda was apparent in many forms from print, radio, film, and TV, such as the 1957 film *Red Nightmare*. Since the television networks needed cheap programming, state department agencies would produce films for use as propaganda in many countries receiving aid from the U.S. and distribute them for free to broadcasters, further exemplifying how the government was able to get their propaganda received by the public. Though following the Korean War, as governmental control in television started drop, networks were able to regain their capital and bring in their own income, which they were able to invest into news and television shows with less government influence, while also investing in new television technologies that they had previously been unable to afford or that had yet to exist.

Early on, many people did not think the fad of television would last, and in its infancy, television struggled to prove itself as a legitimate news outlet. Television's early technological stature limited its power to report the news. One of television's first coverages of the U.S. political party conventions was limited by the reach of coaxial cables, making the 1948 party convention's coverage only available to the northeastern states. Also, during the early 1950s, most television networks did not have their own camera crews and relied heavily on newsreel companies to provide them with film. This would all change by the time America's next great war, the Vietnam War, was fought.¹⁴

The Vietnam War was termed the first "TV war" because of the media's high coverage of the war through television. New filming process and advanced lenses helped portray Cold War events such as the Vietnam War in a way never seen before.¹⁵ Because of these new film processes and the easy accessibility that television provided to the average American, broadcasting networks became the primary source of news for Americans by the end of the 1960s.¹⁶ Early on in the life of television, complicated and cumbersome cameras and sound equipment made field reports challenging to film and took days to broadcast because of a lack of satellite communications. By the time the Vietnam War took place, advancement in both video and audio recordings made for

¹³ Bruce Steele, "Korea: How the Korean War Changed the Way Military Conflicts Are Reported," *University of Pittsburgh: University Times*, June 22, 2000, 32 edition, sec. 21, <https://www.utimes.pitt.edu/archives/?p=3014>.

¹⁴ Bernhard, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda: 1947-1960*, 49.

¹⁵ Steele, "Korea: How the Korean War Changed the Way Military Conflicts Are Reported."

¹⁶ Kerry Mallett, "Bias and Technology Changes in Television Coverage of War," *Lehigh Review* 22 (2014): pp. 52-61, 52.

easier news coverage; TV networks even competed for the very best equipment to make their news coverage stand out among the growing number of networks.¹⁷

The last significant change in American television news during the Cold War came through new objectivity gained by television news networks during the Vietnam War. In the years following the Korean War, television networks were able to gain more freedom from governmental influence because they were attaining capital themselves and no longer had to be dependent on the government to fund their programming. During the Korean War and WWII, the relationship between the U.S. Government and news media was one of cooperation and trust moving towards a common goal. Before the Vietnam War, during times of war, the media kept modern warfare hidden from the masses, kept military secrets, almost always supported the President, reported on the bravery and respectability of its soldiers, and demonized the adversaries the U.S. was fighting.¹⁸ However, by the time the Vietnam War was at its height, the partnership between government and media morphed into a relationship of hostility and suspicion.¹⁹

Over time U.S. media would go from being an agent of the state to being more independent and owned by private companies, opening up avenues for less government-controlled propaganda and more critical of the government news pieces, none more apparent than those news stories covered during the Vietnam War. During the Vietnam War is when the media really began to stretch and show its independence from the government. At the beginning of the conflict, the coverage was often scripted and pro-western, like that of the Korean War, but by the time the Tet-Offensive came into play, this was no longer the case. During the war, the media was allowed free access to the conflict and took more independence when reporting than ever before. Television was no longer the mouthpiece of the government spitting out whatever the government pushed, and instead became more of a moderator of current events.²⁰ Journalists in Vietnam often obliged to restrictions concerning reporting on specific operations and their details, but when it came to combat conditions, troop morale, and overall conditions of the war, journalists resisted any attempts at censorship of their reporting.²¹ Although Western media largely backed the U.S. consensus on the Cold War, the new independence in media meant policymakers were continually checking to make sure the media was telling the news and stories that went along with the government's narrative.²² The Vietnam War's news coverage is vital to look at because of the enormous difference between it and WWII's and Korea's news coverage, as the networks were no longer working for government interests but against them.²³

Through Americans' fear of secret Communistic influences, the government's dispersal of propaganda over networks it controlled, the technological advancements in television, and most

¹⁷ Jessie Kratz, "Vietnam: The First Television War," National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration, January 25, 2018), <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2018/01/25/vietnam-the-first-television-war/>.

¹⁸ Bruce Cumings, "Vietnam: A 'Television War?'," in *War and Television* (New York, NY: Verso, 1992), pp. 83-102, 83.

¹⁹ Stafford, "The Role of the Media During the Cold War," 3.; Mallett, "Bias and Technology Changes in Television Coverage of War," 52.

²⁰ Stafford, "The Role of the Media During the Cold War," 2.

²¹ Steele, "Korea: How the Korean War Changed the Way Military Conflicts Are Reported."

²² James Chisem, "U.S. Propaganda and the Cultural Cold War," *E-International Relations*, August 20, 2012, <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/08/16/u-s-propaganda-and-the-cultural-cold-war/>, 4.

²³ Mallett, "Bias and Technology Changes in Television Coverage of War," 52.

importantly, the new objectivity gained by the media during the Vietnam War, American television news coverage changed drastically from 1945 to 1975. The many changes television news went through during the Cold War brought new importance to news coverage, one that was able to possibly change the outcomes of wars. Most notably, it was the change from pro-government reporting combined with the unrestricted graphic reporting of the Vietnam War that many historians have often listed as the culprit behind America's defeat in the war.²⁴ The television news coverage of the Vietnam War showed first-hand the cruelties of war, drastically changing the public's opinion of the war. After the Tet Offensive, reports of the war turned dramatically unfavorable. Full coverage of the war, the lives of the soldiers, and the combat conditions significantly changed public opinion of the war. Because the Vietnam War was so accessible to the public, news coverage created a huge public opinion against the war. The My Lai Massacre coverage sparked massive riots in cities and on colleges throughout the U.S., fueling strong public anti-war opinions.²⁵

Many key American figures within the Vietnam War blame the U.S. coverage of the war for the demoralization of the American people and, ultimately, the defeat in Vietnam. General Westmoreland is quoted as saying that "television's unique requirements contributed to a distorted view of the war... The news had to be compressed and visually dramatic," and that because of this, "the war Americans saw was almost exclusively violent, miserable, or controversial."²⁶ President Richard Nixon also went on to say that "In each night's TV news and each morning's paper the war was reported battle by battle, but little or no sense of the underlying purpose of the fighting was conveyed... More than ever before, television showed the terrible human suffering and sacrifice of war... the result was a serious demoralization of the home front, raising the question whether America would ever again be able to fight an enemy abroad with unity and strength of purpose at home." Furthermore, President Lyndon Johnson believed that Walter Cronkite's editorial of the war after his trip to Vietnam played a crucial role in destroying Americans' support of the war.²⁷

All-in-all, as the Cold War came to an end, the media Americans saw varied drastically from what they had seen thirty years ago. Gone was the heavy government-controlled media and propaganda, and in came the faster and more accessible news coverage. Gone were the heavily biased news networks, and in came the objective news reporters, not trying to go completely against the government, but willing to print the truth and, if that did not garner ratings, willing to print the sensationalized stories. However, as the '70s came to an end and the '80s began the new influx of cable television and a rise in the number of network television news stations, the field of journalism became increasingly more competitive. This competition between journalists and networks that ensued within the 1980s led to increased journalists' attention to stories encompassing scandal and drama. The competitive journalistic market, coupled with President Reagan's loosening of government regulations on media, did no favors for ensuring the accountability of network

²⁴ James Chisem, "U.S. Propaganda and the Cultural Cold War," *E-International Relations*, August 20, 2012, <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/08/16/u-s-propaganda-and-the-cultural-cold-war/>, 3.; Greg McLaughlin, "From Luckless Tribe to Wireless Tribe: The Impact of Media Technologies on War Reporting," in *The War Correspondent* (London: Pluto, 2016), pp. 63-90, 78.

²⁵ Jessie Kratz, "Vietnam: the First Television War."

²⁶ Greg McLaughlin, "From Luckless Tribe to Wireless Tribe: The Impact of Media Technologies on War Reporting," 78.

²⁷ Cumings, "Vietnam: A 'Television War?'," 84-88.

television news. It was indeed during this last decade of the Cold War that a significant decline in the quality of American journalism began to take effect.²⁸

The ending of the Cold War, the transfer of power from Mikhail Gorbachev to Boris Yeltsin, was an event unlike any in history. Never before had the images of such a large change in power been broadcast to so many nations at the time of its occurrence. Within hours almost all major nation's leaders had responded to the transfer of power on their own country's networks. The new innovations in technology and the many other changes in American television news that took place during the Cold War all led up to the moment Americans would be able to see within their own living rooms the leader of the Soviet Union stepping down from his position. The Cold War was over, and unlike ever before, every American was able to watch the war they had grown up in, been born in, and fought in, come to a whimpering end.

²⁸ Rick Musser, "The 1980s," History of American Journalism, December 2007, <https://history-journalism.ku.edu/1980/1980.shtml>.

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