

**TV NETWORK NEWS COVERAGE OF THREE MILE ISLAND:
REPORTING DISASTERS AS TECHNOLOGICAL FABLES**

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Nightly network news coverage of the accident at Three Mile Island raised questions about the nature of TV news as well as the capacity of the three major networks to inform viewers during disasters. A key emphasis in TV news is story-telling, especially the weaving of fables. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of the content of network news coverage of TMI reveals differences between networks in techniques of newsgathering and reporting, but even more so in stories told: CBS narrated a tale of responsible political and technological elites, ABC a nightmare of common folk victimized by elites, and NBC a story of resignation and demystification. Coverage of TMI, when compared to network coverage of other crises, suggests that in reporting disasters CBS, ABC, and NBC respectively and consistently construct rhetorical visions of reassurance, threat, and primal assurance.

The Three Mile Island nuclear plant (consisting of TMI-1 and TMI-2) went into operation on March 28, 1978. One year later, almost to the minute (36 seconds after 4:00 a.m. on Wednesday, March 28) a series of pumps supplying water to the steam generators at TMI-2 shut down, thus triggering a second shut down, that of the plant's steam turbine. But with steam cut off water circulating in the nuclear reactor expanded, building up pressure. The build-up opened a valve releasing steam and water, but since pressure continued to rise the reactor "scrammed" and nuclear fission ceased. The elapsed time from pump trip to scram was but eight seconds.

What was to become "one of the most heavily reported stories of 1979" (Presidents Commission on Three Mile Island, 1979b:104) was first broken at 8:25 a.m. by a local "Top 40" radio station, then by Associated Press at 9:06 a.m. By the time the three major U.S. television networks aired their nightly newscasts

that evening the newsworthiness of events at TMI was apparent. Both ABC's "World News Tonight" and NBC's "Nightly News" led off their newscasts with the TMI story, carrying studio and field reports before breaking for advertising commercials. The CBS "Evening News" exercised a different editorial judgment by delaying TMI reports until almost four minutes into the newscast following accounts of British Prime Minister James Callaghan's loss of a vote of confidence in Parliament, an incident at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, and commercials for "Mrs. Goodcookies" cookies and Chrysler automobiles.

The importance of Three Mile Island as a televised news story can be gauged by a comparison. From the year that the Vanderbilt Television News Archive began to record the nightly newscasts of the three major television networks in 1968 through March 27, 1979, those newscasts devoted a total of seven hours and 52 minutes to coverage of nuclear energy. This amounted to but .26 percent of total available news broadcast time (Theberge, 1979). In the period March 28-April 30, 1979, stories of TMI alone accounted for six hours and nineteen minutes of nightly news programming, or almost one-fifth of the nightly news of the three networks. Between 1968 and March 27, 1979, the networks carried a total of 348 stories on nuclear energy (Theberge, 1979); between March 28 and April 30 of that year the networks doubled that number, 350 stories on TMI alone.

Much has been written about the accident at TMI and its consequences. Surveys of public opinion have charted changes in attitudes toward nuclear energy as a result of the widely publicized accident (Schulman, 1979; Vogel, 1980). Practitioners of public relations now employ TMI as a notable case study of a corporate failure to design and execute an adequate program of public information (Bernays, 1979; Friedman, 1981). Rhetoricians (Farrell and Goodnight, 1981) have explored what TMI teaches about "accidental rhetoric." Related to these and other concerns have been studies of news coverage of the accident. Journalists have described the problems of covering such a highly technical emergency (Sandman and Paden, 1979). Scholars associated with the President's Commission on the Accident at Three Mile Island have prepared accounts (Rubin, n.d.) and published public documents (The President's Commission on Three Mile Island, 1979a). Researchers have also published other reports (Theberge, 1979), and scholarly articles (Stephens and Edison, 1982) describing how newspapers, the wire services, and television news reported events surrounding the emergency.

Although investigations of news coverage of TMI have been concerned with news content, such research has generally limited itself to categorizing the types of news statements or stories that

reported the emergency. For example, Stephens and Edison (1982), Rubin (n.d.), and the President's Commission on Three Mile Island (1979a) report the percentages of statements coded as "reassuring or positive" and "alarming or negative" contained in TV news reports, wire service stories, and selected daily newspapers. The Media Institute study (Theberge, 1979) classified TV news accounts as essentially hard news, background, or peripheral in content.

The research reported here had a different focus. Instead of categorizing the type of assertions or stories contained in news accounts the analysis examines nightly television network news coverage of TMI from two perspectives. First, from the standpoint of the technical aspects of television news we report similarities and contrasts in how each network reported the disaster at Three Mile Island. Second, we employ a rhetorical analysis to discern whether technical similarities and contrasts in network coverage reveal and/or mask thematic differences in coverage of TMI by the three national TV networks.

Analyzing Televised Coverage of TMI

Although the analysis of news content of the print media has a relative long history, content analysis of the electronic media, particularly television news, is obviously of more recent vintage (Adams and Schreiber, 1978). In one of the earliest systematic efforts to content analyze television news Frank (1973) distinguished between what he called "hard" and "soft" approaches. The hard approach examines discrete and quantifiable items of data--seconds of airtime, story placements, frequency counts of printed, audio, and visual symbols, etc. The soft approach is more subjective and evaluates entire news segments, stories, and broadcasts in keeping with selected criteria. The labels "hard" and "soft" are unfortunate for they imply a distinction often frowned upon, namely, between a legitimate hard-headed view and an illegitimate soft-headed view. A less perjorative labeling is that between quantitative and qualitative techniques.

In the analysis that follows we employ both quantitative (hard) and qualitative (soft) approaches. For purposes of quantitative analysis we employ the news report as a basic analytical unit. Following Sperry (1981) we take a televised news story to be a narrative account introduced by an anchor's report. The anchor may then complete the story during his report or, more typically in network television news, cut to a filmed or taped package report by one or more correspondents, to a live report, or to

a live interview. If such cuts are made, the anchor then returns with another report that summarizes the story or bridges to another story about the same event. A report, then, consists of a single presentation by an anchor or correspondent within the framework of an overall story.

Within each report we identified discrete, concrete data for coding. In addition to coding such obvious variables as report length, number of reports per story, and reporter identity we quantified the following variables which are of particular relevance to coverage of TMI: (1) locale of the report--network studio, government office, crisis site, private home, or other; (2) source of the report--public official, technical expert/scientist, or average citizen; (3) newsgathering mode--briefing by press officer or public official, speech or statement by public official, interview with press officer or other public official, interview with technical expert, interview with private interest spokesperson, interview with average citizen, or reporter quoting an undisclosed source.

Such data involve newsgathering aspects of reporting, the "who, where, when, and how" of journalism. They do not, however, distinguish techniques of TV news from radio or print journalism. To take into account the visual quality of TV news we also coded the following: (1) did the anchor read the entire story? (2) was a slide, map, or other graphic used in the background? how many? (3) was a still picture or graphic used on the total screen? with "voice over"? how many? (4) was a film rolled during the report? with voice or interview? (5) was a second film rolled during the report? with voice or interview? (6) did a correspondent take over with a packaged report? if there were interviews, how many? (7) was a second packaged report used? if with interviews, how many? (8) was there a cut to a live report, microwave, or phone?

Krippendorf (1980:22) notes that qualitative analysis is "a method of inquiry into the symbolic meaning of messages," a meaning not always revealed by the quantitative measurement of manifest verbal and nonverbal materials alone. Our qualitative analysis of the "what" of televised coverage of TMI derives from two sources, first, a set of assumptions regarding the nature of news and, second, a method of rhetorical analysis suited to the study of TV news. Our assumptions regarding the nature of news begin with the classic work, *PUBLIC OPINION*, published in 1922, in which Walter Lippmann took great pains to distinguish between news and truth. They are "not the same thing," he wrote, for "the function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them in relation with each other, and to make a picture

of reality on which men can act" (p. 358). Hence, "journalism is not a first hand report of raw material," but a "report of that material after it has been stylized" (p. 347). And, unless it can be clearly demonstrated that news deal with "accomplished fact, news does not separate itself from the ocean of possible truth" (p. 340).

Lippmann's views remind us that news is a form of knowledge that is but tenuously related to some abstract notion of reality. But if news cannot be likened to truth, then what are the roots of its appeal? In recent decades the idea has evolved that the social roots of newsmaking are rhetorical. They stem from the ancient and universal impulse of human groups to explain reality by telling stories. The philosopher George Herbert Mead noted that since journalism reports "situations through which men can enter the attitude and experience of other persons," news possesses elements of drama that pick "out characters which lie in men's minds," then express "through these characters situations of their own time but which carry the individuals beyond the actual fixed walls which have arisen between them" (1934:257). For Mead the bulk of news was not "information" journalism but "story" journalism that presents accounts to generate gratifying esthetic experiences and to help people relate events to their everyday lives (Diamond, 1982).

As communication scholars have explored the nature of news in the electronic age, especially the character of television news, the distinctions made long ago between news and truth, and between information and story journalism, have proved useful. Increasingly scholarly literature refers to the "created reality" of the news media, particularly to the realities constructed by nightly network TV news (Epstein, 1974; Altheide, 1976; Tuchman, 1978; Hawkins and Pingree, 1981; Iyengar, Peters and Kinder, 1982). The realities formulated through journalism conform to the logic inherent in each medium, or what Altheide and Snow (1979:19) term "media logic," i.e., the "format" of "how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behavior, and the grammar of media communication." So conceived, write Altheide and Snow, "format becomes a framework or a perspective that is used to present as well as interpret phenomena". Media logic suggests that different kinds of news stories can be told about identical events depending upon which medium does the telling. The medium may not be the message, as Marshall McLuhan (1964) said but, to borrow Lippmann's phrase, the stylizer of the message.

Recalling Mead's emphasis upon the dramatic character of story journalism, media logic may be viewed as the logic of

drama. The choices of format for reporting news in a given medium are choices of dramatic presentations. Certainly TV news exemplify a logic that favors the portrayal of happenings in dramatic ways, making reported events sometimes larger than life (Berg, 1972). Reuven Frank, at the time executive producer for the nightly news programming at NBC, wrote a memo to his staff when the network moved from a fifteen to 30-minute format in 1963. According to Epstein (1974:4-5) it reads:

"Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle and an end. These are not only the essentials of drama; they are the essentials of narrative."

News accounts thus serve as what Walter Fisher calls "real-fictions," i.e., rhetorical compositions that concern the actual world of experience (they are about "real" things) but cannot be demonstrated true or false in detail (are fictional). Writes Fisher (1970:132):

"Although its aim is to express a reliable guide to belief and action for one's daily deeds, it ultimately is a fiction since its advice is not, in the final analysis, susceptible of empirical verification. The fiction is not hypothetical; its author wants and intends that it be accepted as the true and right way of conceiving of a matter; and if he is successful, his fiction becomes one of those by which men live."

Real-fictions select and organize experience into an intentional unity that might not otherwise exist. Thus, the world evoked by TV news as a series of real-fictions is a dramatic pseudo-reality created from an ongoing flow of happenings "out there" but transformed into an entertaining story that conforms to the logic of the medium while assisting people to relate those events to their everyday lives.

Viewed in a dramatic light, then, all news is storytelling, be it print or electronic (Darnton, 1975). Or, as Schudson (1982) contends, the accepted conventions of news in both print and television are narrative in form. The TV news format, as Sharon Sperry argues (1981) is a narrative employing verbal and nonverbal, both sound and visual, imagery to construct a real-fictional world. In this sense the reporting process is a literary act, a continuous search for "story lines" that goes so far as to incorporate the metaphors and plots of novels, folk traditions, and myths (Knight and Dean, 1982; Breen and Corcoran, 1982). Indeed, Lawrence and Timberg (1979) argue that TV news stories

often appeal to broadcasters and viewers alike precisely through their "mythic adequacy," i.e., the degree that they are deeply rooted in cultural mythology and exploit appealing aesthetic qualities.

Drawing upon narrative theory Sperry constructs a framework for exploring the nature of TV news. She notes that there are three elements in any narrative--teller, tale, and listener. The teller, or narrator, is an authority who relates the real-fiction. The ultimate narrator of any network's nightly news telecast is the anchor, assisted by correspondents of lesser stature. As Sperry points out, the anchor frames each story, reading brief reports, introducing and reviewing filmed, packaged reports from correspondents. The anchor-correspondent-anchor format is ingrained in nightly newscasts. It identifies the anchor as clearly in command of storytelling. The anchor's words, says Sperry, "move the program along, linking story to story according to some larger pattern of meaning, as if the stories of the half-hour were thoughts from a single mind, ordered and moving in rational progression" (p. 299).

The anchor-narrator element of TV news links the other two, tale and listener. The tale is not narrated merely to provide information "but also to affect the listener in some way: to persuade or change him, to evoke an emotional response, or simply to interest him" (p. 298). The viewer-listener accepts the news-tale as only an approximation of truth, but suspends belief willingly to share in the real-fiction spun by the narrator. The credibility of the tale, not truth or falsity as such, is key; it increases to the degree that it conforms to standard mythic plots, especially that of a hero struggling against the odds.

Sperry quotes Av Westin, former president of ABC News, to the effect that he expected viewers to come to his news programs asking, "Is the world safe, and am I secure?" (p. 301; see also Westin, 1982). The hero motif, according to Sperry "man's simplest and most pervasive myth," offers a standardized news formula responding to Westin's question, namely, "Men muddle through life as best they can, but when tragedy strikes, they require and seek a leader, a single individual of superior worth and superior skill, who will meet the problem and conquer the evil" (Sperry, 1981:300). In TV news the heroic figures need not always be cast as saviors. Demonic hero, foolish hero, plain folk hero, even bumbling but well intentioned hero--each enters the cast of televised news dramas.

Since news is only an aspect of the more general fare in television programming, it is not surprising that TV news draws from the same tradition of production values that pervade the entertainment medium. Adventure, mystery, romance, pathos,

and nightmare fill children's programming, sports coverage, soap operas, situation comedies, docudramas, and other shows. We should not be surprised if we find variations on these formats adapted to disaster coverage as well. Reporting about emergencies offers opportunities for what is known in the trade as a "continuing story," one that runs night after night, simplifies complex details around a few easily grasped symbols, and can be related almost in the vein of the mini-series format. When continuing stories strike a responsive chord among viewers, the possibilities for successful audience delivery to advertisers are enhanced.

One of the most typical of such narrative formats employed in television news is the fable. A fable is a brief tale told in prose or verse--in television news also illustrated with pictures--to point a moral. Although the characters in many fables are animals they need not always be since people and inanimate objects also serve as central figures (Thrall, Hibbard and Holman, 1960). It is our contention that in covering Three Mile Island each network related a distinctive fable, namely, CBS a tale of technological danger, ABC a time-honored beastly fable of nightmarish proportions, and NBC a story of demystification.

The appropriate qualitative technique for analyzing televised news coverage of TMI, given these assumptions about the nature of news, is that of dramatistic analysis. Dramatistic analysis borrows from the critical work of Kenneth Burke (1966). In Burke's perspective human conduct takes the form of symbolic action, i.e., people know the world and relate to one another only through the creation, manipulation, and exchange of symbols. For Burke symbolic action makes life dramatic, that is, life is not merely like drama but is in fact a series of unfolding dramas. Various rhetorical critics have built upon Burke's teachings, extending his methods to the analysis of presidential addresses (Fisher, 1980), television news (Bormann, 1972), and other messages.

For Burke the essential elements of dramatistic analysis appear in a pentad: acts, actors, agencies, scenes, and purposes. Acts make up the script, plotline, or scenario of a drama, of any news event. Actors are dramatic personae--heroic, villainous, and foolish characters of a fable. Agencies are the means actors use to achieve their aims and to legitimize--or fail to--their ends. The scene is the setting or locale of symbolic action. Purposes consist of motives, intentions, and meanings actors bring to and take from a drama, an event.

In analyzing TV news from a dramatistic point of view the researcher seeks answers to specific questions regarding each element in the dramatic pentad. We examined the following:

(1) Acts: Who is reported doing what to whom? What general plotline organizes these acts--tragedy, comedy, epic, elegy, satire, quest, or what? Is there a pattern in reported events, i.e., a repetition of accounts? Is there a resolution to the problem posed by the narrative? (2) Actors: Who are the *dramatis personae*? Are there patterns of actor portrayals, i.e., role types, in the drama? If so, what types emerge--heroes, villains, fools, victims, objects of desire, incorruptible people, supporting actors? Are there role reversals? Does an abstraction personified as a character play a role--"The People," "The Nuclear Industry," "The Expert," etc.? How concrete and detailed are the role portrayals? Are insiders praised, outsiders/enemies damned? For what? (3) Agencies: What reported source justifies and promotes the acceptance and promulgation of the narrative? What acts are performed by sanctioning agents--"The People," "Government," etc.? Which acts are praised, censored? What lifestyles are exemplified, praiseworthy, condemned? What metaphors are evoked and repeated? (4) Scenes: What is the scope of the setting? What are the reported features of the locale? What props exist? Where is the drama set--wilderness, rural areas, urban ghetto, enemy territory, supernatural place? (5) Purposes: What meanings do reporters give the drama? How does the event fit into the great scheme of things, i.e., of what is this a case? What emotions dominate--hate, pity, love, patriotism, indignation, resignation, etc.? What motives do reports attribute to actors? What judgment of the present and prophesy of the future does the report imply?

Efforts to answer these questions informed all stages of our analysis of coverage by nightly network television news of TMI. We do not treat each question separately in reporting the results of our qualitative analysis but reconstruct network technological fables from what we found.

Thus the content analysis on which this study rests includes quantification of discrete data regarding newsgathering and visual report items and a qualitative dramatistic analysis of network fables. The data base consists of videotapes of TMI coverage contained in all nightly network television newscasts of CBS, ABC, and NBC for the period March 28-April 30, 1979. In the course of quantitative coding six persons examined all or portions of videotapes. Intercoder reliabilities were calculated between coder pairs since at least two coders, working independently, coded identical materials. Reliability measures, namely Scott's pi for nominal scale coding (1955), were uniformly high (.87 being the lowest intercoder reliability coefficient for any coding pair). Of course, reliability measures are not appropriate for reconstruction of the networks' technological

fables; qualitative findings must thus be evaluated in light of the logic of the dramatistic scheme employed.

Network News Coverage Techniques at TMI

The networks treated the technical aspects of coverage of TMI in different ways. One of the most notable differences was in newsgathering modes. Each network's narration had a differing scenic background: ABC's motif (indeed almost a filmed logo) was the stand-up report with a correspondent framed by the cooling towers of the plant in the background--Max Robinson, Tom Jarriel, or Bettina Gregory; CBS concentrated on stand-ups outside Washington, D.C., offices of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Department of Energy, or Congress; NBC typically filmed conversations between neighbours in backyards or patrons in bars. The data in Table 1 indicate network differences in report locale.

Note especially the locale of CBS reports, namely, government offices by almost two-to-one margin over the studio and with few locales consisting of private settings and none from the crisis site itself, namely the plant. TMI for CBS was primarily a Washington story, not a localized one. Washington means two things, i.e., either reports originated from the nation's capital or about federal officials on the ground at Harrisburg and/or in local communities. Not so for ABC. Although ABC's penchant for studio reporting is pronounced in Table 1, it used the crisis site and government offices with equal regularity. NBC concentrated more on private settings--homes, offices, businesses, etc.

These differences do not appear as marked in turning to the sources preferred by the networks. All three networks relied to a large degree on public officials. Also, each based a substantial percentage of citations on the words of average citizens. It is worth noting that if we combine the categories of public officials and technicians/scientists as sources, the overall emphasis is indeed one of a technological tale. When it comes to how the networks claimed to have derived their information, it is clear that in more than one-third of the instances reporters simply cited an unnamed source, for example, "a spokesman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission" (unidentified) or "a farmer residing near the crippled plant" (again unidentified). These unidentified sources were usually public officials. There are, however, network differences. The official briefing was a preferred newsgathering technique for NBC in contrast with its rivals. The formal statement of a public

official served as a primary device for CBS. All three networks made use of interviews with citizens.

From the standpoint of visual presentations--at least as

Table 1: Newsgathering Modes for TMI News Reports: By Network. Percent.

Mode	ABC	CBS	NBC	Combined
Locale^a				
Network studio	56	30	54	47
Government office	17	59	19	32
Private home/office	10	11	21	14
Crisis site	17	0	6	7
Number	102	126	121	349
Source (when identified)				
Public official	62	58	62	60
Technician/scientist	5	8	7	7
Interest group leader	0	0	2	1
Average citizen	30	34	28	32
Number	110	158	129	397
Means^b				
Briefing by public official	10	12	20	14
Speech by public official	10	19	5	13
Interview with public official	7	8	12	9
Interview with technician/scientist	11	8	14	10
Interview with average citizen	18	22	18	20
Reporter quotes a source	44	31	31	34
Number	124	192	127	443
Source of reporter quotes				
Public official	87	79	82	82
Technician/scientist	2	0	5	2
Interest group leader	0	1	0	1
Average citizen	11	10	13	15
Number	47	56	39	142

^a Chi square=72.423 with 6 df.; p=.001

^b Chi square=28.923 with 10 df.; p=.01

measured by variables such as those listed in Table 2--the contrasts between the networks are not of statistical significance. ABC is the network of the anchor read story to a greater degree than its rivals, which rely upon a higher percentage of cuts to packaged reports. Furthermore, CBS anchors were more prone to dress up their "talking heads" with one or more graphics displayed in the background. Full-screen stills or graphics played

Table 2: Visual Elements in TMI Stories: By Network. Percent.

Visual Elements of Story	ABC	CBS	NBC	Combined
Anchor read story	61	55	52	55
Cut to packaged report(s)				
One or more without interview	16	18	21	18
One or more with interview	23	27	27	27
Number	94	130	108	332
Graphic over anchor/reporter shoulder				
None	70	57	61	62
One	26	32	34	31
Two or more	4	14	5	7
Number	94	130	108	332
Still picture/graphic on total screen				
None	82	87	80	83
One	12	5	11	9
Two or more	6	8	9	8
Number	94	130	108	332
Film rolled during story				
None	57	56	52	55
Film without interview	31	29	38	33
Film with interview	12	15	10	12
Number	94	130	108	332
Second film during story				
None	70	67	67	68
Film without interview	12	16	15	14
Film with interview	18	17	18	18
Number	94	130	108	332

no major role in reporting, although TMI did lend itself to several full-screen diagrams of the working of nuclear power plants. In a majority of stories for each of the three networks no film, with or without interviews, rolled on the screen.

In fact one must again be struck by the nonvisual quality of the visual medium of television news. This is particularly noteworthy if we recognize that across all three networks a majority of stories were anchor read. Of stories read by anchors few were accompanied by illustrative graphics or stills, less than a majority were augmented by rolling films. Add to that the fact that packaged reports were frequently without films or interviews as well, and almost three-fourths of stories on the crisis of TMI were essentially talking heads or stand-uppers.

We calculated visual prominence scores for each of the three networks by assigning points to visual items on the basis of whether a report consisted of one or more graphics, stills, films, interviews, and live cuts. The lowest score was zero (for an anchor read, "talking head," account without accompanying visuals); the highest score was a 65 in TMI coverage. NBC was the most visual of the three networks with a mean score of 24 for its stories compared to twenty for CBS and seventeen for ABC. Means between networks all have F-ratios where $p=.05$. Thus, from the standpoint hinted at but not demonstrated solely by data in Table 2, NBC's coverage of TMI relied less than the other networks on talking heads, stand-uppers, and on stories without stills, films, or interviews.

Danger, Nightmare, or Crisis at TMI

During their coverage of the crisis at TMI all three networks presented special programs on events surrounding the accident. Although our focus is upon nightly news coverage rather than these specials, the title each network used in its special program says a great deal about how it approached the story in its regular newscast. CBS called its program "Danger at Three Mile Island." For ABC it was "Three Mile Island: Nuclear Nightmare." Finally, NBC labeled its program as "Crisis at Three Mile Island."

A standard dictionary definition of a danger is an exposure or vulnerability to harm, a source or instance of risk or peril. A way to avoid danger is, first, to understand that it exists, second, to identify its source and deal with it. "Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking is Dangerous to Your Health," is such an effort. A warning says danger exists, a statement identifies its source. Nightly CBS

coverage of TMI followed precisely such a pattern, nightly warning, nightly explanation.

The CBS warning each evening emanated from the newscast's anchor, Walter Cronkite during weekdays, Bob Schieffer or Morton Dean during weekend telecasts. The warning came in the form of metaphorical introductions to subsequent reports. The result was akin to what Herzog (1973:166) has called "thermopolitical rhetoric," a language device that presents things as "hotter, flatter, mushier, massier, messier" than actually is the case. The first hint of the pattern to unfold came in the CBS newscast of March 28, the first following the 4:00 a.m. accident. "It was the first step in a nuclear nightmare," warned Cronkite. Then, with more assurance, "But as far as we know at this hour, no worse than that." Yet, he continued, "a government official said that a breakdown in an atomic power plant in Pennsylvania is probably the worst nuclear reactor accident to date." Thus, the warning was narrated by Cronkite. Correspondent Gary Sheppard's follow-up report then provided what would be the characteristic response to the anchor's thermopolitical lead. Without detracting from the danger at hand, Sheppard led viewers through a data-based, technical report of how a nuclear power plant works (using filmed graphics similar to those found in Nuclear Regulatory Commission technical manuals) and what had gone wrong. The plant would remain closed until further notice, he concluded. With danger warned of and identified Cronkite warned again, but in subdued fashion, citing a parallel of the TMI accident and fictional events in the film "The China Syndrom." Once more there followed a data rich report, this time from Robert Shakne in Washington, D.C., on radiation levels and cooling rates. The source of danger had again been laid bare.

A fable of viewers alerted, viewers informed was basic to the content of CBS coverage throughout the crisis, but examples drawn from the opening week make clear the narrative. Consider "Black Friday," the March 30th venting of radioactivity, revelation of the hydrogen bubble, and evacuation advisory. Cronkite's lead stated:

"The world has never known a day quite like today. It faced the considerable uncertainties and dangers of the worst nuclear power plant accident of the atomic age. And the horror tonight is that it could get much worse. It is not an atomic explosion that is feared. The experts say that is impossible. But the spectre was raised of perhaps the next most serious kind of nuclear catastrophe--a massive release of radioactivity. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission cited that possibility with an announcement that, while

it is not likely, the potential is there for the ultimate risk of a meltdown at the Three Mile Island atomic power plant outside Harrisburg, Pennsylvania."

Correspondent Robert Shakne's report identified the "problem" stated by "the Government's top nuclear specialists," namely, "a fifteen to twenty foot wide bubble of trapped radioactive gas at the top of the damaged reactor, gas that cannot be removed." Shakne went on, "One of the dangers is meltdown." There followed a technical explanation by NRC spokesmen of efforts to void the bubble. "The experts say that the risks of catastrophic disaster are very small" but "the the experts say they're not absolutely sure."

With that danger alerted and explained, Cronkite turned to another--the danger of confusion. Said Cronkite, "Earlier on this incredible third day of the accident confusion, contradiction, and questions clouded the atmosphere like atomic particles." Viewers then learned that radiation would continue to leak for five more days, a million residents would not be evacuated from four counties, children and pregnant women were advised to leave a five-mile radius, all 23 schools were closed, 20,000 residents within ten miles were to stay indoors, and care centers were set up fifteen miles from Harrisburg. Fallout there was, but it was a fallout of numbers from the lips of CBS correspondents.

The warning-identification exchange between anchor and reporters continued throughout Black Friday's newscast. Cronkite asked rhetorically, "Just what is the meaning of all those confusing dose levels we've been hearing about?" A packaged report from Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York gave the answer--the average American absorbs 100 millirems of radiation per year, a normal chest x-ray adds ten more, 5,000 millirems per year is "considered allowable by the Government," and 200 yards from TMI radiation was measured at 30 millirems, "equivalent to three chest x-rays." Also faced with "waves of confusion that reached tidal proportions," Cronkite turned to another correspondent who reviewed technical details and data of the March 28th accident identifying the source of the confusion--this time Metropolitan Edison spokesmen.

By Monday, April 2, NRC representatives had announced that the size of the gas bubble had diminished and the reactor had stabilized. Cronkite was not so sure. "Like doctors reporting from the bedside of a seriously ill patient, the nuclear authorities gathered at Pennsylvania's crippled Three Mile Island atomic power plant were cautious in their announcement today," he reported. But, he went on "the tone is optimistic," even though "the convalescence promises to be dangerous, long, and costly."

Why? True to the CBS fable a packaged report followed with the data-laden answer: "The \$600 million structure is 365 feet high and contains two steam generators, four pumps, and a pressurizer," and "the troublesome bubble is inside this 8-inch thick, carbon-steeled pressure cooker." It was reduced from 1800 cubic feet to an estimated 47 cubic feet," even though the 2.6 percent concentration of hydrogen was not too far below the four percent level at which hydrogen burns. The correspondent closed explaining technicians were coping with that problem.

Over the course of the crisis CBS warned of other dangers, identified their sources, and detailed how "experts," "scientists," "officials," or "technicians" were dealing with them--"catastrophic economic costs," reactor "design problems," and "psychological problems," to name but a few. By April 4th Walter Cronkite had lumped them together as the "eighth day of the Harrisburg Syndrome" which he defined as the "economic, psychological, and health costs of the cleanup." No one knew, he said, what the precise costs would be for there were only "guesses." Yet, in painstaking detail, CBS offered viewers a nightly parade of facts and figures pertaining to each and every portion of the syndrome. It even extended to an unbeatable report on how to make a "Radiation Cocktail," a drink popularized in a local bar as a sales gimmick--"For \$2.25 you get a shot of vodka, lemon-lime soda, and a luminescent swizzle stick for people who really want to get a glow on."

In keeping with its emphasis upon technical, data-based coverage of TMI, CBS provided viewers with numerous reports concerning nuclear power plants in other parts of the country either built by the same manufacturer as TMI or along similar design lines. Reports from Cleveland, Ohio, Crystal River, Florida, Rancho Seco, California (all on March 31), Zion, Illinois (April 1), Green River, Utah (April 21), and Oconee, South Carolina (April 25), as well as several studio reports, provided "experts" with opportunities to detail how technical points of plant designs differ and thus make it unlikely that an accident similar to TMI would occur again.

Although the CBS fable was one of detail, data, design, and technique featuring experts grappling with danger, the network did not ignore the human interest content of the news--it simply placed much lower priority on such accounts than did the other networks. CBS did report the fears of local residents and of evacuees. However, even those fears took on a technical ring. For example, CBS reports covered potential problems residents might have in selling their property as a result of the reputation of TMI. When reporting health fears CBS covered the exact symptoms of radiation poisoning, even to the point of filming

one mother bringing her child--who displayed the symptoms--to her local doctor (the child was diagnosed as having a virus much to the mother's relief). On two occasions CBS filmed students in classrooms discussing their fears about TMI, but also included their science teachers' data-based, technical explanations minimizing any direct threats.

Finally, on April 9, Walter Cronkite decreed that the danger at Three Mile Island was over, the accident had--after all--been an accident. "The 'All Clear' sounded, in effect, in Middletown, Pennsylvania, today," announced Cronkite. "The Governor," he said, "declared that life could now return to normal in the area of the stricken Three Mile Island nuclear plant." It was "the official end of twelve days of terror." The story of TMI did not thereby fade from CBS newscasts, but only two more times during the remainder of the month did it lead, and it never again followed the pattern of warning-identification that had been the CBS trademark for the previous twelve evenings.

Viewed dramatically, then, CBS coverage of Three Mile Island had overtones of an adventure tale in the tradition of "disaster averted" movies (for example, Walt Disney's films of men conquering forest fires). In such dramas responsible people take concerted action to bring an unfortunate situation under control. That they were able to do so in the case of TMI, at least from the CBS perspective, resulted from knowing that dangers existed, discovering their technical sources, and coping with them in a trained, skilled manner. That was the story CBS narrated, a tale filled with metaphors of danger and data of explanation.

Theodore Gross, provost of Pennsylvania State University's Capitol Campus located in Middletown, the community but a few miles from the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant testified to the President's Commission investigating the accident that (The President's Commission on Three Mile Island, 1979a:81):

"Never before have people been asked to live with such ambiguity. The TMI accident--an accident we cannot see or taste or smell ... is an accident that is invisible. I think the fact that it is invisible creates a sense of uncertainty and fright on the part of people that may well go beyond the reality of the accident itself."

In the face of such ambiguity and uncertainty, CBS alerted viewers to the danger, then explained it. CBS told of a threatening situation and how governing and technocratic elites dealt with it. ABC took a different approach. Its news reports also narrated a fable of a threatening reality, but one with which elites could not cope. The ABC drama is one of farm and factory, cottage

and castle, little people haunted by a nightmare of forces set in motion by insensitive rulers. ABC's narrative revolved about the theme of a technological nightmare created by scientific elites, a monster--much like Frankenstein's--out of control. Unlike CBS (or NBC as we shall see) there was little effort to educate viewers with "a crash course in nuclear physics" (as CBS anchor Morton Dean described his network's reports), no automatic assumption that ruling elites were honest or responsible, and only scant encouragement that things would turn out all right.

The ABC image of TMI can be illustrated by the themes the network developed in the early days of the crisis. The thrust of the verbal, visual, and sound imagery conveyed the basic elements familiar to fans of nightmare melodramas: A Gothic setting, a populist leaning stressing sentimental values, and unrelenting threat.

The tradition of fear contained in many popular fables has long favored a Gothic setting wherein the threat to peace, tranquility, and happiness is embodied in a forbidding structure overlooking the community of simple folk. It may be the despot's castle, the smoke stacks of robber baron's mills, or the guard towers of a prison. Dr. Frankenstein's castle in Transylvania, set in a bucolic countryside above a quaint village, is the classic motif. Romantic literature favors the juxtaposition of Castle and Cottage, the arrogance of educated aristocrats against peasant pleasures, urbane sophistication against country bumkins.

ABC's filmed reports of TMI captured such imagery. Visuals of the nuclear plant possessed a Gothic quality, especially on days when ABC correspondents did stand-up reports with the plant's massive cooling towers, enveloped in mist, looming in the background. Frequently the network's films cut from such a plant setting to panoramic views of farms, cattle grazing in fields, or school buses departing the area. As ABC correspondents narrated accounts of school closings, evacuations, worried farmers and housewives, lead-ins and summations took place before the turret-like cooling towers, the icons of a Frankensteinian castle. Aerial shots, too, captured a technological intruder in a rural setting.

It is not possible to say what the cumulative impact of such visual fare is on viewers. But, with audio added they may be striking. Consider how ABC dealt with "Black Friday," March 30. First came anchor Frank Reynold's lead, one that rivaled Walter Cronkite's announcement of danger:

"The news from the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, nuclear energy plant is worse tonight. For the first time an official of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission said today there is

the possibility, though NOT YET the probability, of a meltdown of the reactor core. In plain language, that would be a catastrophe!"

As correspondent Tom Jarriel narrated the follow-up, a shot zoomed in on the plant's cooling towers, then back to houses and children's bikes in the foreground. A day earlier Jarriel had included interviews with concerned residents in his accounts, concluding that their main "concern is over wind direction to answer the question, 'Is it blowing my way?'" Now as on-site anchor he introduced reports on the meltdown danger. In one correspondent John Martin in Middletown interviewed an eight-year old girl wearing a leg brace. "She rode home from school early today," he reported, "to find her mother, brother, and sister packing clothes to leave their home." The girl then expressed her fears, fears the reporter did not bother to inform viewers were scarcely plausible: "When the radiation goes on I'm afraid all the houses will fall down and my mother will be in there and I'm afraid she'll get locked in." Martin did go on to report the family had no car and so a friend drove them away. The camera caught the mother in the right front seat on the car, the girl on her lap. The car had a rear-view mirror outside the right front door. Reflected in it were the plant's cooling towers.

After the crisis had started to ebb ABC did not yield its Gothic portrayal. On April 3 as a correspondent hinted at "new problems," a camera panned back from a close-up of the towers, across the river to houses, abandoned bikes and an abandoned little red wagon. Radioactive iodine was showing up in milk, said the reporter (actually it did not). The camera, with the cooling towers still visible in the background, focused upon grazing cows. Off camera came the cry of a baby and the crackling of a Geiger counter.

A nightmare fable appeals to many people not only because of its fearful setting but also because it casts as heroes and victims the people who live near the castle and who are threatened by what goes on inside. In the tale of Frankenstein's monster, for example, it is the creation of science and technology that threatens the townspeople--the scientist is villain, the villagers are victims. Family, community, and the simple life (centerpieces of ABC's narrative) must prevail over large-scale organization, wealth, complex technology, and sophisticated scientific data (the very attributes prized in a CBS account).

This populist leaning in ABC news reports is illustrated by the types of interviews contained in packaged accounts. For instance, it was not to any official spokesman that ABC turned on March 28 for its first report of the accident, but to a farmer

living across the river from the plant. He said that he had heard "an explosion" that morning and witnessed "smoke coming out of the plant." ABC featured another farmer on April 3. As he walked up a country path (cooling towers visible in the background) he spoke of his fears of radiation and how since the plant was built he had experienced problems with his sheep and goats ("loss of the young," "deformed"). His cows' milk, he said, was "definitely, no doubt" contaminated. The farmer's dream, concluded the ABC correspondent, had been destroyed by the plant, "a place that looms over his home, his dream, his life." The Machine had destroyed Eden.

The populist leaning is also manifested in reporter's characterizations of what people think of public officials. Here are samples from the reports of four correspondents:

- March 30: "People frightened by the unknown invisible rays of escaping radiation are not reassured much by officials who try to explain the potential in technical terms, like millirems."
- March 30: "The last two days have demonstrated that when it comes to nuclear safety, there are no certainties."
- April 1: "The President came and went and while most people here give him high marks for coming, they'd prefer some straight answers."
- April 2: "Of course, those people who, live in this area, they do not wear dosimeters. And they don't have much faith in experts or their gadgets."

With respect to a third theme of ABC coverage, the persistence of threat, the network was unrelenting. In accordance with the tradition of nightmares, the people of the village have more to fear than immediate danger. There is no "All Clear" to be sounded. For once the monster lives, it cannot be destroyed, It can always return to work its evil ways. Howard K. Smith in his ABC News commentary on April 5 reminded viewers that the remnants of nuclear power--plants, buried wastes, etc.--might "like some secret monster break their chains and return to destroy life later."

On the evening of April 2 anchor Frank Reynolds introduced ABC World News Tonight by saying, "Good Evening. It is at last possible to say 'Good Evening' tonight and mean it for there is relatively good news now from Harrisburg and the nuclear energy crisis that has seized the world's attention for the past few days." Such an introduction was rare for ABC as it was short-lived. For a theme of persistent threat was carried in the message that, "Things are bad but they may get worse" which underlined many ABC reports. On March 29 correspondent Bettin Gregory concluded, "There are many questions, few

answers about why and how this accident occurred." But, she said, "In the sobering aftermath officials of Metropolitan Edison have admitted that if this happened, its possible for a much more serious accident to occur." ABC correspondent John Martin reported that doctors treating evacuated pregnant women "could not say what might happen later" following exposure to radiation. Bill Zimmerman concluded on April 1 that "People around here aren't sure what to do, and no one is telling them." Max Robinson reported the next day that "there are still many engineering unknowns." And, just as things seemed to look brighter on April 3, Bettina Gregory pointed out that "before anyone could break a sigh of relief, the shadow of a new problem appeared" (radioactive iodine).

But the most anxiety provoking feature of ABC coverage was the narration of a fable of multiple monsters. CBS, as noted above, had featured reports of plants in other parts of the nation similar to that of TMI-2. But the general CBS message was that there were technical differences which obviated the likelihood of a reoccurrence of the TMI accident elsewhere. ABC, however, portrayed other plants as clones of TMI, reporting on April 10 that 42 had the potential for disaster. Even on April 27 when TMI finally reached "cold shutdown," there was no rejoicing. ABC noted "still another malfunction" in a California plant. Moreover, the NRC suspected eight other reactors of significant problems.

We do not say that ABC World News Tonight is a product of the New Romantics, since we know nothing of the corporate attitude toward technology that prevails in that organization. We do suggest, however, that ABC's Three Mile Island narrative had clear themes that differentiated it from CBS. In fact, on one pole stood CBS alerting viewers to danger, but implying technological problems had technological solutions. On the other was ABC presenting a nightmare for which there was no solution. Between the two was NBC News treating an emergency as a crisis.

NBC Nightly News in covering events at Three Mile Island took almost literally the dictionary definition of crisis, that is, an unstable condition in which an abrupt or decisive change is impending. Unlike CBS warning of danger in order to avert disaster of ABC unfolding a nightmarish tale, NBC took a low key, almost resigned approach to TMI. A crisis is something people must live with until change has occurred and stability is restored. People can do that if the mystery surrounding the unstable condition is removed and the course of likely change charted. Hence, for NBC the basic themes of coverage were demystification and debate. Through didactic instruction and

placing events in context NBC demystified TMI, rendering (as we shall see) ABC's monster into a "tea kettle." Through unedited discussions NBC presented a calm but Great Debate over the future of nuclear power.

Anchor David Brinkley set the low keyed tone of NBC coverage from his first report. "In a nuclear power plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania," he began, "the cooling system broke down this morning, some radioactive steam escaped into the air, radiation passed through the four-foot concrete walls, and was detected a mile away from the plant." But, he continued, "the radiation was said to be at a very low level, and not dangerous." Mentioning that "some workers may have been seriously contaminated" and that "the plant is shut down," Brinkley introduced three reports.

The three reports established a pattern which NBC was to make a ritual in the days to come. The first told what happened and why. The second reported how the populace was adjusting to unstable conditions. The third narrated what company, government, and other personnel knew and were doing. The "Mr. Wizard," "Real People," "Today" triad of stories formed NBC's functional equivalent of CBS's warning-identification and ABC's persistent threat coverage styles. It is a style particularly well suited to NBC's penchant for multiplying the number of brief reports it packages for a single event in contrast to rival networks use of fewer, longer accounts. Thus, NBC presented 138 reports averaging 55 seconds in length, CBS 135 averaging 66 seconds and ABC but 97 averaging one minute from March 28-April 30. The result is a pluralizing of correspondents, sources, and points of view on the NBC Nightly News.

Given its pluralist news format NBC covers, as it did at TMI, a crisis from a host of different angles. No single angle dominates. Hence, analysis of NBC's coverage at TMI included, to name but a few topics, accounts of the accident proper, safety hazards, evacuations, dislocated families, the future of nuclear power, long-range health problems stemming from the accident (both physical and "psychological fallout"), unemployment rates in the area, and economic consequences (even presenting one report speculating that people might not buy Hershey's chocolate bars since they are manufactured close to TMI). Some of these items were carried by competing networks, but not all. NBC reported all and more.

NBC's demystification efforts differ substantially from the informative model employed by CBS (and from ABC's tendencies to mystify rather than clarify). CBS's coverage of TMI was in the tradition of print journalism--technical explanations,

data-based, and documented with printed reports used as visuals. The NBC Nightly News, by contrast, went out of its way to simplify the complex, minimize technical jargon in reports, eschew numbers and statistical measures, and to present readily understood visuals--diagrams, graphics, and films. The NBC model of demystification was that of the calm, professorial classroom lecture, almost a "chalk talk" on the complexities of nuclear power generation.

The NBC approach is best illustrated by how that network covered "Black Friday." Consider first how anchor John Chancellor signed on the evening of March 30th as compared to how Walter Cronkite of CBS and Frank Reynolds of ABC had introduced the day's events:

"There was serious trouble today at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania, trouble serious enough to cause the evacuation of small children and pregnant women from a five-mile area around the endangered plant. The problem is that it is more difficult than had been thought to cool the radioactive fuel inside the power plant, and until it is cooled, it is very dangerous. The situation was described this afternoon as stable, but the experts are going to have to decide in the next day or so just how to cool the nuclear material, and there's no option they have that's guaranteed to be safe."

With that calmly, almost flatly, delivered introduction Chancellor went on, using diagrams, to explain that, "Here's the problem. The building in which the nuclear fuel is located is filled with very radioactive gas, xenon and helium, which is too dangerously radioactive to release into the atmosphere." But, he continued, "the gas in there is intensely hot, so hot that it is making it difficult to use normal methods to cool the nuclear fuel." Then, adding a note of resignation, Chancellor concluded, "So for the moment they're stuck with the gas. They can't release it into the air but as long as it's there they can't cool the nuclear fuel." And, "If they can't cool it, the risk of a meltdown, of turning the nuclear fuel into a molten mass, increases."

Chancellor then introduced a packaged report which further simplified for viewers what was going on "inside the plant." Chancellor then returned to close the "what and why" report. "What is a total meltdown and why are people so afraid of it happening?," asked Chancellor of his viewer-students. He provided an answer: "If the nuclear fuel is not cooled it will get so hot that it begins to melt and turn into a molten mass with enormous heat and radioactivity. In this fluid and highly dangerous state it could burn through the walls of the building and spill out on

the ground venting radiation." But, instructed Chancellor, "More likely is that a total meltdown would melt through the foundation of the building and sink into the ground below. There it would slowly cool emitting radiation and causing just all kinds of difficulty."

In five consecutive evenings of coverage from March 29 through April 3 NBC Nightly News presented a total of nine reports of this nature consuming eleven minutes of coverage. On the day prior to "Black Friday," for instance, Chancellor described how a nuclear power plant operates. "A nuclear power plant is really just a big tea kettle," explained Chancellor. Using a simple, uncluttered diagram, Chancellor went on, "Nuclear fuel in a chain reaction produces heat. The heat turns water to steam. The steam moves turbines. The turbines produce electricity." No mystery about that. He continued, "The nuclear fuel has to be cooled or it will get so hot that it melts down. Water is used for cooling." Chancellor pointed to "a regular system and an emergency system." At TMI, he noted, the regular system broke down automatically shutting down the plant. Then the emergency system "should have kept the fuel from getting too hot." But that system was not on "for awhile" and "the fuel began to heat up." This, he said, turned the water in the building into radioactive steam. Now, "some of that radioactive steam had to be released into the air, vented, or the pressure would have blown up the tea kettle."

This motif of demystification, of making the awesome an everyday occurrence, repeated itself with respect to other topics--Robert Bazell lectured again on the operations of a nuclear power plant for weekend viewers (Saturday, March 31) and diagrammed the bubble problem as well (Sunday April 1); Andrea Mitchell placed the TMI accident in historical context (April 1); Bazell reviewed the entire accident, with diagrams, on April 2, then reviewed the entire history of the TMI plant on April 5.

Each of these "show-and-tell" reports was followed by reports on how residents around TMI were responding. Like CBS and ABC the network took note of the confusion produced by conflicting reports from company and governing officials. NBC also reported fear. But it was not the confusion and fear of the panic stricken. It was the fear of the resigned. "The people here in Goldsboro," reported correspondent Steve Delaney, "don't seem to know whether the nuclear power plant is more beneficial or dangerous; some are scared, some are not." Then, diverting from the lecture model to a seminar one, NBC presented two elderly ladies talking in the backyard of one's home. "I'm

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not scared and I'm not scared of that over there" (pointing in the direction of the plant), said one. Delaney, noting she has "lived with it a long time," asked whether she had ever been afraid something might happen. "No!," she responded. But her neighbor said, "Yes, I have." The two women then debated whether there was any reason to be afraid. "They aren't goin' to hit just us, Mabel, if it goes up its goin' to take more than just us so why worry about it?" concluded one. Delaney closed the one-minute seminar that captures the NBC view of a resigned citizenry: "This village is not out of danger but the people who live here don't seem to know what they can do to make the danger any less."

The third feature in the tripartite NBC format of what-and-why, popular response, and official action was markedly different than carried on other networks. For CBS official action consisted of the highly technical workings of a technocratic elite. For ABC it was victimizing beleaguered masses. NBC, although reporting how company and regulatory officials were dealing with the crisis, focused more on debates emerging from what had happened at TMI.

The debates took two principal forms and covered a range of topics. The first form was debates between local officials regarding how to deal with evacuations. Again a note of resignation prevails. A typical report was filmed in a civil defense office in Middletown. It was one of three reports constituting three minutes of coverage, each report essentially repeating the message of the others, a feature characteristic of NBC Nightly News. The report carried a filmed exchange between the fire chief and civil defense director. The officials debated what was to be done to assure evacuation. "What can we do? I'm not acceptin' responsibility of all them people. I will if a state of emergency is declared," said one. "They talked until the sun came up," reported the correspondent, "with comments like 'The power company says one thing, the federal and state government say another.' And they said a lot of people here don't know who to believe, if anybody." Hence, the officials stayed put and did nothing.

The second debate forum covered by NBC was in the U.S. Congress. Here the focus was the Great Debate over the future of nuclear power. In largely unedited exchanges between congressional members of investigating committees and both company and regulatory officials, NBC informed viewers that a major change in the nuclear industry was about to take place. Indeed the problems of safety, health, and costs raised by TMI, opened one correspondent, might lead to the end of the industry itself. In ten separate reports over a two-week period NBC

covered the Great Debate from various angles, but frequently featured the same pros and cons. In the end, for NBC, the debate, like life after TMI, went on.

The NBC Nightly News, then, presented a different fable of the emergency at Three Mile Island than did its competitors. It was a version that said crises there will always be and there is not a great deal people can do about it. But things at least seem less critical once their mystical sources are revealed, once it is clear, as the Wizard of Oz said to Dorothy, "I'm not a bad man, just a bad wizard." Perhaps David Brinkley best exemplified the NBC attitude the evening before "Black Friday" when he said, "These plants are designed with numerous safety systems, back-up systems, emergency systems, and so on. Even assuming all the systems always work, which is an assumption, there's still the possibility that some human in the plant will do something wrong, and cause a disaster."

Implications for Other Emergencies

The findings from quantitative and qualitative analyses of the content of network television coverage of TMI have, in their own right, implications for how television news reports mass emergencies and disasters. It is clear, for example, that there is no single formula for packaged news shared by all TV networks. In the technical details of newsgathering locales, sources, and modes and in styles of news presentations the networks differed. This implies that, depending upon which of the three networks viewers might watch regularly, they could receive distinctly different interpretations of that emergency.

Moreover, we argue that our findings indicate that it is plausible-- as scholars cited earlier suggest--to regard news presentation as a process of story-telling, specifically the weaving of fables. To the degree that the networks recounted different fables of the TMI emergency, then they went beyond what Dennis Wenger, as quoted by Kukich (1982:9-10; see also Wenger, 1980), notes is characteristic of media coverage of disasters, namely, "the perpetuation and dissemination of such general disaster myths as panic, looting, and shock" and the tendency "to distort the extent of physical damage, human loss, and social disruption associated with a specific disaster." If our findings regarding television network coverage of TMI are correct, then by adopting a melodramatic format for emergency coverage the networks may well construct overarching myths not only of particular disasters, but of how people do and should respond to disasters in general.

Our findings regarding coverage of TMI are part of a larger

study in which we compared nightly network TV coverage of six major crises. The remaining five were the mass suicides of members of The People's Temple in Jonestown, Guiana, in 1978; the crash of American Airlines Flight 191 departing O'Hare Field from Chicago to Los Angeles in 1979; the eruptions at Mt. St. Helens in 1980; the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979-1981; and the Tylenol poisonings in 1982. For each we followed similar modes of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the content of televised news coverage. In all instances we found differences in networks' newsgathering techniques and styles of presentation that parallel patterns revealed in TMI coverage.

What we have concluded is that, in coverage of the emergencies which we studied that took place from 1978-1982, three views of the world flow from U.S. television news. First, that associated with CBS is one of reassurance. For that network mass emergencies are stories of professionals acting as responsible members of the community, calmly alerting people to dangers and bringing those dangers under control. The implicit vision is one of reaffirmation--elites can be trusted, technology is beneficial, society is orderly, and reality (although threatening) is controlled via expertise.

For NBC the story of emergency itself tends to be de-emphasized. In its place priority goes to descriptions of how the emergency happened, that the best laid plans will never prevent such crises so long as humans are the fallible creatures they are, and, hence, people might as well resign themselves to the fact that life will and does go on in spite of disasters. Reality, in effect, is almost non-threatening. The result is a vision not so much of reassurance in the face of emergency but of primal assurance and affirmation that life will survive whatever elites and masses do.

ABC coverage of emergencies suggests another vision, namely, reality is threatening because rulers and technocrats make it so. To be sure there will always be emergencies, crises, and disasters. However, they derive not from fallible human nature, but from the selfish and power-seeking proclivities of those in charge. Forces are beyond control, hence, life is a continuing crisis. Eventually the common folk will have to pay the price of their rulers' folly: life itself will end.

We cannot, of course, identify the sources of these visions from mere content analysis. Whether they lie in organizational traditions and/or editorial judgments is beyond our speculations. We are also unable to say that the visions identified with the three major U.S. networks extend to other news agencies or even whether they persist at CBS, NBC, and ABC over time. Moreover, how regular viewers of each network might--if they

do at all--perceive and respond to such visions is a problem that our analysis is not able to address. We do believe, however, that it is useful to think of televised coverage of mass emergencies and disasters as a form of storytelling and that differing news agencies, for whatever reasons, present different fables. Policy planners faced with coping with future disasters must take this into account in urging that news stories be less fictional and more factual not only in the details of their coverage but in the fables they weave and visions they disseminate as well.

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