I

Twelve episodes
1

Police dogs, firehoses, and television cameras: shockwaves from the south

It was a tense morning when fall term at Central High School in Little Rock opened on September 4, 1957. By eight o’clock, troops of the Arkansas National Guard lined the block. A menacing-looking crowd had gathered. Opposite the main entrance stood a cluster of photographers and reporters, including John Chancellor of NBC and Robert Schakne of CBS. The night before, Gov. Orval E. Faubus had ordered the National Guard to bar entrance to Central High School to nine newly enrolled African-American students. His order defied the U.S. Supreme Court, which had ruled more than three years earlier, on May 17, 1954, that racial segregation of public schools was unconstitutional. The next year the Court had ordered desegregation to proceed “with all deliberate speed.”

On the morning of September 4 the school busses were rolling, and their riders included the African-American children. Shortly before 8:30 a school bus arrived. Out stepped a nervous but outwardly composed fifteen-year-old African-American girl named Elizabeth Eckford. Crisply dressed and carrying books under her left arm, she started toward the school, but a guardman told her to cross the street. A mob followed her. Someone shouted, “Lynch her!” Elizabeth looked for a friendly face but saw none. Instead she heard someone snarl, “No nigger bitch is going to get in our school. Get out of here!” To his later regret, Schakne went up to the girl and held his microphone in her face for a comment. She was too frightened to say a word. Years later he recalled the incident:

We had no idea that our form of journalism would essentially change the way the country thought. I think it did in Little Rock in a very substantial way. I think
Twelve episodes

people saw things [on television] they didn’t quite comprehend if they had just
read [about] them. But we didn’t know that. When I [saw] Elizabeth Eckford
walking down the street . . . and went up to her with a microphone I did what a
reporter does. You see a person there, a central part of the story, and you go in
and talk to [her], but I did not realize then [that] television changed the rules
somewhat. I wouldn’t today walk up to a fifteen-year-old girl at the center of a
mob and thrust a microphone in her face when she was petrified. . . . But we
didn’t know that this was essentially a different medium in some very fundamen-
tal ways and that the impact of what we did was going to be very different. At
the time we were very primitive.2

Schakne had come to television news from the International News
Service, which was absorbed by the United Press in 1958. He acknowl-
 edged that when he was assigned to Little Rock by CBS, largely unin-
structed, he did not yet understand this new medium. “We knew how to
cover stories as newspapers covered stories, but we were inventing tele-
vision. . . . The whole process of changing television into a serious news
medium happened to coincide with the civil rights movement.”3

Peter J. Boyer, a former New York Times writer on television, de-
scribed the movement as “the first running story of national importance
that television fully covered.” The effect on the the story and on the
developing medium was lasting. “Television brought home to the nation
the civil rights struggle in vivid images that were difficult to ignore, and
for television it was a story that finally proved the value of TV news
gathering as opposed to mere news dissemination.”4

Television in 1957 was very different from what it is today. Television
news had been in existence for only nine years at the time of Little Rock.
News programs were still in black and white and lasted fifteen minutes.
Television had covered the Korean War, crudely by modern standards,
and national political conventions. But the passion and panorama of years
of upheaval in the Old Confederacy posed greater challenge.

Chancellor was challenged that morning in Little Rock. “Sometimes
as I walked down the streets,” he recalled, “a car with four men in it
would just idle along beside me, block after block. It worked: I was scared.
Sometimes at the glass telephone booth across from the high school the
mob would wait until I had New York on the line and then start rocking
the booth back and forth, trying to knock it over.”5

Chancellor heard the standard jeer “Nigger lover” as well as the usual
litany about miscegenation. It took courage to point a camera at a crowd
looking for blood.6 In the 1950s, none of the networks had bureaus in
the South. The television reporters who were rushed there after the crisis
Police dogs, fireboses, and television cameras erupted in Little Rock were, for the most part, unfamiliar with the region and its ways. They also were relatively young and inexperienced. In 1957 Chancellor was thirty and Schake thirty-one. For years, they remained grateful for the tutelage they received from New York Times reporters already on the scene, notably John N. Popham and Claude F. Sitton. The safety of the cameramen was jeopardized by the bulkiness of the film cameras. “They were totally helpless walking around under these giant cameras and cables,” recalled Karl Fleming of Newsweek, who was long in the thick of the coverage of the South. “I saw these guys get beaten up so many times, helpless—totally helpless. They had no defenses. It was always the cops who would beat them up, practically always. For if it wasn’t them, they would stand aside and smirk while the local rednecks pounded the hell out of them.” NBC had equipped its reporters with boxlike tape recorders that hung suspended from the shoulder. Fortunately, Chancellor happened to be wearing one when he was in Mississippi in 1955 covering the Emmett Till murder case. Till, a fourteen-year-old African-American youth from Chicago, had gone to Money, Mississippi, to see relatives. Flippantly, it appears, he called, “Bye, baby,” to a young white woman clerk in a country candy store as he was departing. A group of white men tracked him down and killed him. The alleged murderers were put on trial in Mississippi before an all-white male jury and were promptly acquitted. The local atmosphere was venomous while Chancellor was interviewing African Americans and whites on their reactions to the trial. He suddenly noticed white men in bib overalls closing in on him from behind. Instinctively, he knew there was no easy way out of trouble because his pursuers were already between him and his car. As a last resort he swung around and pointed the recorder at them. “All right,” he said, “come on. The whole world is going to know what you’re doing to me.” “It worked,” he related afterward. They backed off. Evidently, the men mistook the tape recorder for a camera, which could have caught their faces and their actions on film. The largest events of the civil rights movement followed Little Rock. Faubus’s resistance collapsed on September 24, 1957, when Eisenhower deployed the 101st Airborne Division to open Central High School. The nine minority students were admitted, but the physical resistance to desegregation continued. The elemental bitterness raised by civil rights issues and the depth of regional division were of a kind that had not been
Twelve episodes

seen on American soil since the Civil War. All too often causing injury and death, the struggle was to continue until Jim Crow rule had finally been broken by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Eugene J. Roberts, Jr., who for more than three years covered the South as a reporter for the New York Times, said that it was the civil rights story that made him realize the force of television news. Police dogs looked like police dogs in newspaper and magazine photos, but on television the dogs snarled. Wallace Westfeldt, a reporter for the Nashville Tennessean in the 1950s and later executive producer of the “Huntley-Brinkley Report,” observed that television coverage of the civil rights struggle “gave that story a color and attraction and emphasis that newspapers couldn’t do. Even without any commentary, a shot of a big white man spitting and cursing at black children did more to open up the national intellect than my stories ever could.”

Hostile southerners believed that the presence of television cameras generated violence. Certainly, television reporters saw themselves as part of the story. Indubitably, the camera, especially at night when the lighting drew a crowd, was often a catalyst for disturbance. This was the case in varying degrees in the riots in Watts in 1965, in northern cities in 1967, and in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention of 1968. To lessen the problem the networks devised guidelines for coverage of tumultuous scenes. For example, cameras were to be turned off if a gathering mob tried to play to television in a way that might lead to rioting. Television cameras also could be a safeguard for demonstrators. Jack Nelson, who covered the South for the Los Angeles Times, observed this time and again.

The law enforcement people supposedly were there always to protect. Sometimes... they had confrontations with the civil rights demonstrators. What they used to do, particularly for the print media, was put tape over their badges so you wouldn’t get their badge number when they clubbed somebody. But if the camera got their face, it didn’t make any difference whether they had the tape on the badge or not. There’s no question about it, that having [television] there was a protection... for the demonstrators... [and] for the reporters.

Especially in southern rural areas, communications created exasperating problems for newspaper and television journalists. Driving from Memphis to Greenville, Mississippi, on a story and needing to make a telephone call, Eugene Roberts once found every pay phone along more than thirty miles of highway had been sabotaged. Rumor had it that the
Police dogs, firehoses, and television cameras

Ku Klux Klan had cut the wires to frustrate the press. Roberts and his colleagues complained to AT&T, and the company lent them a mobile unit that followed them for a while. At some point the reporters rented a flatbed truck to cover one of the intercity civil rights marches. Climbing back on one day they noticed a grocery counter box for cheese crackers tied with a ribbon. For the moment no one was in a mood for cheese crackers. “The driver,” Roberts related, “kept asking whose box this was, and no one seemed to know. After about three days he opened the box, and there was a copperhead in it. The driver literally went straight up.”

Despite all the hostility the civil rights movement created, many southern newspapers and the local news departments of many southern television and radio stations largely ignored what was happening. No satisfactory coverage of the regional crisis was provided even by the otherwise most enlightened southern papers. The renowned Atlanta Constitution did not send a reporter 170 miles to cover the confrontation at Selma between civil rights marchers and police forces. Instead the paper used wire service stories.

The ire of the southern press was exemplified by a dateline in the Nashville Banner after President Eisenhower dispatched the 101st Airborne to Central High School. With echoes of Confederate times, the dateline read, “With U.S. Forces in Little Rock.” On September 26, 1957, an accompanying front-page editorial entitled “Storm Troopers Must Go” referred to the division’s vehicles as “Brownell’s panzer units” (a reference to Herbert Brownell, Jr., then attorney general of the United States).

The University of Mississippi held a conference in 1987 on journalism and the civil rights movement. All but a few southern newspapers of the 1950s and 1960s were sternly criticized by the participants—editors and reporters who had been involved in the coverage of the South during those two decades. Their complaint was not simply that the southern press reneged on its duty to report the news but that they did so because of the owners’ opposition to racial desegregation.

Hodding Carter III, a journalist, the son of the distinguished editor of the Delta Democrat–Times of Greenville, told the conference, “The overwhelming majority of all southern decision-makers in journalism were people who played a very strong and active game in opposing change.”

In southern city after southern city, regardless of size, “the pressures of local government, the pressures of local business, the pressures of the
local police made themselves felt,” noted John Seigenthaler, the editor of the *Nashville Tennessean*. He added that “in too many cities cowardice ruled. Retrenchment ruled. It was a profanation of what journalism was supposed to be about.”

This “peer review” at the University of Mississippi praised a few papers for their handling of the civil rights upheaval. They included the *Norfolk Virginian–Pilot*, the *Charlotte News and Observer*, and the *McComb* (Miss.) *Enterprise–Journal*. McComb was a hotbed of segregationist sentiment. The newspaper was boycotted. John O. Emmerich, Jr., the managing editor, was knocked down in a drugstore in an argument over coverage and editorial comments on the Freedom Riders. The night his mother died a cross was burned in front of his house. For this atrocity he received a note of apology from a member of the Ku Klux Klan, regretting not the cross-burning but its grim timing.

From the start the *New York Times* took the lead in covering the story in the South. The Associated Press and United Press International played their usual indispensable role of providing daily spot news. Relman Morin of the AP won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting from Little Rock. As time went on, the news magazines, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *Washington Star*, the *Washington Post*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and the *Chicago Tribune* did good work. Newspapers from other parts of the country, however, were hard to find in the South. A few southerners subscribed to the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, but that was about all.

Only television, radio, the AP, and UPI regularly carried the daily news story from the South to all other parts of the United States. Of these, television was by far the most compelling because of its visual impact. Doubtless, television news influenced northern newspaper and magazine editors to keep playing the story year after year when they might have preferred to give readers something different for a change. Noting that his editors followed the story on television nightly, Arlie W. Schardt, who covered the South for *Time*, observed:

> I think in terms of just basic interest by editors, certainly television coverage helped. If television was giving that kind of priority to it, it can’t help but at least subconsciously be influencing the editors to feel, “My God, this is one of the main stories again this week.” There’s a tendency to want to drop something after a while, but I think that everybody’s sense of history was caught as this went along. It really was a tremendously dramatic day-by-day and then week-by-week and even month-by-month development.”

13

8

**Twelve episodes**
Police dogs, firehoses, and television cameras

It was not only southern newspapers that shunned the civil rights story. Local broadcasts, as distinct from network shows, on southern television and radio stations also to a large extent turned away. Seigenthaler said that one Nashville television station in particular and probably all three of them “absolutely refused to report on civil rights news as it broke in that town. And had it not been for the networks coming on the screen after the local news, the story of the civil rights movement in that city would not have been told on television.” At the time of the Emmett Till murder and the subsequent trial, John Herbers, who later covered the South for the New York Times, was head of a small UPI bureau in Mississippi. He found that in much of the state “a sort of blanket opposition” against reporting the case developed among radio, television, and most newspapers. “I kept getting pressures from broadcasters and publishers [indicating] that they didn’t want this kind of news reporting,” he related. “UPI at that time was very heavily dependent on broadcast stations for their revenues in this state. So I had to find a way to report news and without enraging these people to the extent they would cancel the service. I think we were able to do it by just a lot of hard work.”  

The detestation of out-of-town television crews by many southerners was mirrored in segregationists’ names for the networks: NBC was the Nigger Broadcasting Company, ABC was the Afro Broadcasting Company, and CBS was the Coon (or Communist) Broadcasting System. Some of the managers of southern stations affiliated with the networks were none too enthusiastic about transmitting to New York certain of the day’s news reports by network crews. Occasionally, Fred L. Beard, general manager of WLBT in Jackson, which was affiliated with ABC and NBC, tried to talk network reporters out of the stories they had prepared to file. “Fred would sometimes bring them into his office and sit down and try to convert them to the segregationist point of view,” Richard R. Sanders, then the station’s news director, recalled.  

WLBT subscribed to UPI service. Another UPI reporter in Mississippi was Cliff Sessions, a native of the state. One of his stories on civil rights, which WLBT received on its news ticker, threw Beard into a rage. Beard was prominent in a white Citizens’ Council. His objection to the story was that it quoted Medgar Evers, an organizer in Mississippi for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Beard denounced Sessions to his face.  

“He thought that Medgar didn’t deserve to be quoted like this, and he thought I had given him too much space on the wire,” Sessions related.
I tried to explain to him my thinking and the news business. And the more we talked the more upset he got. He turned red and you could see the veins sticking out. He finally started screaming at me. He said, “Well, you’re an integrationist, aren’t you?” And I just turned away from him and started walking down the hall. There were several people standing in the corridor, and he said, screaming louder, “Crawl back under your rock.” And as I walked away, I can remember him standing at the foot of some stairs. “Crawl back under your rock,” he said, “You’ve been exposed.”

Beard assigned a man to rummage through the waste paper to retrieve carbon copies to keep him abreast of what the network reporters were writing. The station’s egregious unfairness to the cause of African Americans was branded by the Nation as “electronic racism.”

Beard’s broadcasting policies eventually led to his ouster. In 1963 a slide reading “Sorry, Cable Trouble” cut an NBC documentary off WLBT just as the documentary was about to report on a sit-in at the Woolworth store in Jackson, according to Fred W. Friendly. In his book The Good Guys, the Bad Guys, and the First Amendment, he added:

The Huntley-Brinkley nightly news program was reportedly occasionally interrupted when it was covering civil rights, and sometimes, prior to news reports on the Today show, a WLBT announcer would warn, “What you are about to see is an example of biased, managed, Northern news. Be sure to stay tuned at seven twenty-five to hear your local newscast.”

The WLBT license was held by the Lamar Life Broadcasting Company, a subsidiary of the Lamar Life Insurance Company owned by the Murchison family of Texas. In 1964 the United Church of Christ petitioned the Federal Communications Commission on grounds of unfairness to African Americans to deny the renewal of the WLBT license. The station promised reforms. Beard was replaced. The FCC then voted a one-year renewal. But the U.S. Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia ordered a hearing. Ultimately, Lamar Life lost its license to broadcast over WLBT.

Many places in the South were dangerous for journalists to cover. Montgomery, Alabama, was such a place. Police tended to believe that reporters were allied with civil rights workers. And civil rights workers were often viewed as either pawns of the communists or outright communists themselves. Sometimes reporters and cameramen had to flee to African-American neighborhoods to take refuge in houses, churches, and, in at least one case, a funeral parlor. At the bus station in Montgomery on Saturday morning, May 20, 1961, a crowd of white men armed with
Police dogs, firehoses, and television cameras

lead pipes, bottles, and baseball bats waited for the arrival of a Greyhound bus filled with Freedom Riders. The riders were students and other civil rights activists who had been crisscrossing the South that spring, testing enforcement of a Supreme Court decision prohibiting racial discrimination on interstate buses. The waiting crowd was resolved to keep the riders out of Montgomery. As the bus rolled into the terminal, the passengers noted that the streets were empty. When the bus door opened the passengers heard nothing and could see on the arrival platform only a group of reporters and photographers. The armed men were momentarily screened from their view. Then when the reporters began to question the travelers, the waiting men attacked. Storming past Norman Ritter, Atlanta bureau chief for Time–Life, they slapped Maurice (Moe) Levy, an NBC cameraman. During the brawl that erupted, Ritter was clubbed to the ground. A Birmingham television reporter was beaten, and one of the attackers grabbed the camera of Don Urbrock of Life and kept smashing his face with it. Reporters who tried to flee were chased.

The next year a French reporter, Paul Ghiard, was shot in the back and killed on a fierce night at the University of Mississippi, in Oxford. Another man died, and others in the crowd suffered ghastly injury. Open warfare had erupted over the admission of James Meredith, an African American, by order of a federal district court. President John F. Kennedy had first dispatched a large number of civilian law-enforcement officials to keep order. Before the night was over, however, word of Meredith’s presence in the university caused such rioting and shooting that Kennedy had to send federal troops to the campus for the first time since the Civil War. Two hundred persons were arrested. Safety was purely a matter of chance. Because most of the battling was at night, the story was particularly difficult for television news to cover. Dan Rather, in the South on one of his first big assignments for CBS, later described the horror of that night:

Whenever anyone turned on a light—which meant every time we needed to film—one or more bullets would attempt to knock it out. We had to film and move, film and move. After a while we worked out a pattern: turn on our battery-powered, portable light, film for fifteen seconds by actual count, turn off the light—if we didn’t get hit—and then run, because we were bound to catch gunfire or bricks, or both. We had no way of protecting ourselves, except to avoid the crowds, keep moving and stay low.21

Reporters and cameramen developed other stratagems for averting bodily harm. To conceal their identity from hostile crowds, reporters