

Where Are the Documentaries of Yesteryear?

All three networks focused attention on racial and economic inequality in the 1960s. | By Greg Vitiello

We live in an age when criticism of our government and our place in the world is too often branded as disloyal. It wasn't always. In fact, for close to two decades, from the early 1950s to the early 1970s, television documentary filmmakers consistently directed a salutary critical lens at our society's key institutions. Hardly anyone was exempt from their scrutiny: not the mining interests, farmers, bankers, military, nor the U.S. government itself. Who were these critics? Not just a radical fringe, but filmmakers whose work appeared on the three major networks and on public television.

The early network documentarians deserve special praise for speaking out at a time when the television medium was subject to a Cold War-driven blacklist. In this climate, CBS' 1951 introduction of *See It Now* was particularly noteworthy. Its creators, Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly, were veterans of radio journalism. Murrow, in particular, had imprinted himself on the public consciousness

with his wartime broadcasts from the rooftops of London. However, his stardom carried no immunity from the national paranoia induced by fear of the Red menace. In fact, Murrow and Friendly started gradually before scoring a journalistic success with their 1953 documentary "Christmas in Korea," which captured the human drama of a distant war. On the heels of its report from Korea, *See It Now* followed up in 1954 with a succession of programs dealing with the insidious impact of McCarthyism on American society. (See the Winter issue of *Television Quarterly* on the feature film, "Good Night, and Good Luck," for a more substantive discussion of those broadcasts.) Those documentaries brought their creators widespread acclaim, but eventual muzzling by CBS Chairman William S. Paley, who feared the loss of sponsorship dollars. By mid-1958, when CBS cancelled *See It Now*, a disillusioned Murrow took a leave of absence. And the heady freedom displayed during those several years seemed a thing of the past.

Later that same year, the networks



Edward R. Murrow on the *CBS Reports* program "Harvest of Shame," November 25, 1960.

were rocked by a scandal involving NBC's *Twenty-One*, one of several quiz shows that had riveted the public. Suddenly, all three majors announced documentary series: *CBS Reports*, which first aired in 1959; ABC's *Close-Up*, which premiered in 1960, and NBC's *White Paper*, also launched in 1960. Perhaps it's cynical to link these two phenomena too closely, but the networks apparently identified documentaries as a way to repair their tarnished image.

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Nonetheless, the new documentary series operated under a tighter rein than CBS had exercised over *See It Now*. In the words of the distinguished broadcast historian Erik Barnouw: "In United States television, the independence

enjoyed by Edward R. Murrow was a thing of the past...Closely watched by top executives, documentaries became institutional, depersonalized."

Despite this constraint, documentary filmmakers often created work with great bite. In 1960, *CBS Reports* produced a searing report on the economic plight of migrant workers, titled "Harvest of Shame." The cameras filmed hundreds of migrants as they traveled north in search of work, capturing penetrating images of hungry, downtrodden people much as still photographers Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine had exposed slum conditions in the early 20th century and as

Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange had focused their still cameras on rural poverty in the 1930s. "Harvest of Shame" did more than *show* the human misery of migrant existence; through producer David Lowe's interviews and

correspondent Murrow's commentary, the documentary revealed the shameful economics that "wronged the dignity of man" and made their current plight no better than that of the nomadic Okies desperately seeking work in John Steinbeck's Depression-era novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. In its reportage, the documentary harked back to earlier *See It Now* reports. All it lacked was the personal authority that Murrow brought to the prior documentaries as he spoke, almost ex cathedra, at the close of each show.

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All three networks focused attention on racial and economic inequality in early 1960s documentaries. One noteworthy example was NBC's "Battle of Newburgh," in which producer Al Wasserman and director Arthur Zegart investigated a crisis in a New York community in which a local official had vowed to rid the town of "welfare chiselers." By focusing on a family that had wrongly been denied welfare, the filmmakers brought a strong human dimension to the problem of welfare. Wasserman and Zegart weren't alone in their socially conscious documentaries; others include Nicholas Webster and John Secondari's "Walk in My Shoes" for ABC *Close-Up*; Jay McMullen's "The Tenement" for *CBS Reports*; Fred Freed's "Summer 1967: What We Learned" for NBC *White Paper*; and Martin Carr's "Hunger in America" for *CBS Reports*.

In the pursuit of journalistic truth, technology became a major ally for

documentary producers, especially through the development of mobile cameras and sound equipment. As a result, verite filmmakers such as Robert Drew and Richard Leacock were able to produce work in which images and action virtually replaced commentary. In their 1963 documentary, "Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment," the filmmakers eavesdropped on history as they explored the tensions surrounding the admission of the first black students to the University of Alabama. With only sparse commentary, the documentary

let the pictures tell the story as the camera moved fluidly from the Kennedy White House to the office of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy

and on to Governor George Wallace at the Alabama State House. Even watching the program today, we sit riveted as we see President John F. Kennedy weigh the consequences of a direct confrontation with Wallace, listen in while his brother and Assistant Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach discuss their strategy, and see the two students crossing the university campus and entering their dormitory. Drew gained access to the White House by convincing the President that, in his words, "if the look and feel and smell and passion in the White House could be recorded at certain times, it could be very valuable to history."

The "look and feel and smell" of a different kind of institution were captured by *CBS Reports* producer Jay McMullen in his 1961 documentary, "Biography of a Bookie Joint." In a work that deplored the magnitude of illegal gambling, McMullen focused on

a single operation: Swartz's key shop on Massachusetts Avenue in Boston. Using hidden cameras and microphones, McMullen went inside the shop to determine that an overwhelming number of its clientele patronized the shop not to purchase keys but to place bets. Most telling was his footage of Boston policemen entering and leaving the shop – and looking indifferently at a small curbside stove in which many bettors destroyed the evidence of their betting. CBS not only traced the various complaints against the shop that had been squelched by the Boston police but presented its information to the U.S. Department of Justice, which established that the police had been taking payoffs from the bookies. A crackdown followed. The episode served as an impressive reminder of the press' power to act as advocates for the law.

During the 1960s, documentary filmmakers' efforts to achieve social change were accorded a sympathetic ear by large segments of the public. Documentary filmmaker Morton Silverstein recalls, "All during the tremendous crucible of the Sixties, with all the movements – civil rights, the women's movement, Native Americans, antipoverty, social awareness – everything that stood for social justice was all happening at once."

As a producer for National Educational Television (NET), Silverstein continued, "I was twice blessed. I was able to do one-hour documentaries on subjects that I wanted to do. And there wasn't a question of a sponsor coming over, as once occurred in a commercial network screening, and saying, 'Why are so many dark people in that show?'"

Silverstein was part of an impressive cadre of documentary producers assembled by NET Vice President for Programming Bill Kobin and Director of Public Affairs Don Dixon. Others included Executive Producer Alvin Perlmutter, Jack Willis, Arthur Zegart, Dick McCutcheon, and Harry McCarthy; among the frequent freelance contributors were Fred Wiseman, Al Levin, Murray Lerner, and Harold Mayer. Supported by a 10-year grant from the Ford Foundation beginning in 1963, the New York-based programmers set out on an ambitious course to produce weekly documentaries on a wide range of social issues for distribution throughout public television. "We had an advantage over the commercial networks during that period because the Ford Foundation adhered to a hands-off policy," said Silverstein.

The NET producers often faced their greatest challenge from the proposed subjects of their work. When Silverstein undertook a documentary on migrant workers in Cutchogue, Long Island, a member of the local farmers' cooperative belligerently challenged him, asking, "Who are you people? What are you doing? Why are you here?" When Silverstein explained that he was working on a documentary about agriculture in Long Island, the farmer responded: "You're not going to do another of those Murrow things, are you?" Silverstein continues, "I said, 'No, I'm very interested in hearing your side.' I said this very quickly because he was reaching in his glove compartment for a weapon to brandish."

After winning the reluctant agreement of the farmers to gain access, Silverstein's film tracks a single group of

migrants through an entire season from recruitment in Arkansas in the spring to strawberry picking in June through the end of the cycle when they board busses and move on, still impoverished and in debt to the crew chief for their housing, to now work the orange groves of Florida. Aired in 1968, eight years after “Harvest

of Shame,” NET’s “What Harvest for the Reaper?” paints a poignant picture of migrant life. The workers must endure sub-standard housing, inadequate health care, long hours of stoop labor, and relentless economic exploitation. The most immediate exploiter is the crew chief, Andrew Anderson, who handles all the migrants’ transactions and, as one worker states bitterly, exchanges “dust for blood.” The film concludes with a list of recommendations that could improve migrant working conditions. However, the narrator points out that eight years earlier, Murrow had made similar, unheeded recommendations in “Harvest of Shame.” But in New York, at least, following the “sequel” some legislative changes were made, particularly in migrant housing.

We witness another virulent case of economic exploitation in Jack Willis’ “Appalachia: Rich Land, Poor People,” which aired on *NET Journal* in 1969. As we hear the music to “Our Homesick Appalachian Home,” the camera pans over the scenic hills of East Kentucky



CBS News' Edward R. Murrow in one of television's first combat reports, "Christmas in Korea," December 1952 for *See It Now*.

before zeroing in on one family's impoverished life. The Collins family's struggle to eke out an existence mirrors the lives of myriad local people who have lost their birthrights to this rich mining area. “The wealth underground is rarely reflected overground,” says the film's narrator. “By and large, coal benefits only a few.” Willis and his crew examine efforts being made by social institutions such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Vista workers to improve the local people's lot. The film also hears from members of the mining companies and their advocates. In one particularly heated exchange, a wealthy supporter of the mining interests assails Willis and his team, saying “We don't like your fuzzy faces and your boots.” He warns that anyone who advocates change in the region is “treading on dangerous ground.” By the end of the film, it is clear that change will come slowly, if at all. As a banjo plays in the background, we see the Collins family — as impoverished and lacking in options as it was when

the film began.

In a landmark 1971 film, Silverstein investigated another of the forces that perpetuate poverty in the United States: the banking industry. Titled "Banks and the Poor," the documentary tweaks our interest in the first frames with footage of Ginger Rogers singing "We're in the Money." It quickly moves on to show who *isn't* in the money, despite the lavish claims of bankers such as Chase Manhattan President David Rockefeller. The film dissects the discrepancy between Chase Manhattan's avowed policies and the bank's actual record. Rather than providing hundreds of millions of dollars in mortgages for low-income families in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant section, the bank offers a mere fraction of that sum in loans while putting its money into other areas such as gambling casinos in the Bahamas.

"Banks and the Poor" used hidden cameras to demonstrate the unfair allocation of credit involving low-income families, as they are turned down for bank loans and forced to go to higher-interest loan companies.

"Banks and the Poor" forcefully underscores the point by intercutting interviews with Rockefeller and Congressman Wright Patman, Chairman of the House Banking and Currency Committee, who argues for "a fair allocation of credit."

The film employs hidden cameras to demonstrate the unfair allocation of credit involving low-income families, as they are turned down for bank loans and forced to go to higher-interest loan companies. The cycle

of indebtedness continues, as the film examines such practices as the "holder in due course" principle, which permits a bank to buy installment sales agreements from merchants without assuming responsibility for the quality of merchandise sold. As the narrator describes, "A store sells shoddy merchandise to the consumer, then turns the contract over to the bank," which pursues the buyer even if the contractor committed fraud.

"Banks and the Poor" closes with a crawl listing all the members of the Senate and House of Representatives who are either directors of banks or belong to law firms that have banks as clients. As we hear "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in the background, we realize just how stacked the deck is for low-income families when our elected officials are tied to an industry that capitalizes on the poor.

The film aired at an inauspicious time, since NET's 10-year grant from the Ford Foundation was nearing its end, and the recently created Corporation for Public

Broadcasting and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) were now overseeing the future of public television. Despite highly favorable reviews, "Banks and the Poor" caused consternation in public-broadcasting circles and several local stations chose not to run the show. PBS even commissioned political scientist Steven Farber to critique the show. While conceding that the program was "forthright and courageous in conception, imaginative and artistic in execution, Farber found

that “its presentation is overdrawn and in some cases simply erroneous.”

The 1970-71 Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia University Survey of Broadcast Journalism dismissed Farber’s comments, saying they “tended to be general rather than specific, and he offered little research to support them. He discovered no significant errors in fact.” The report went on to praise “Banks and the Poor” for its reporting and criticizes the timidity of public broadcasting, stating: “Public television, virtually free from the threat of license revocation, was still more dependent upon governmental good will than commercial television.”

The same DuPont-Columbia survey examined the welter of controversy surrounding CBS Reports’ “inflammatory” 1971 documentary, “The Selling of the Pentagon.” The program, produced and written by Peter Davis, investigated how the Department of Defense was using a multi-million dollar budget to influence public opinion on issues of war and peace. The program ranged from dramatic displays of military might to lectures by Pentagon colonels seeking to influence listeners to support the Vietnam War. In one memorable scene, Green Berets demonstrated the most effective ways to kill opponents in hand-to-hand combat, before inviting young spectators to practice the same lethal moves. Correspondent Roger Mudd then explained how Pentagon press briefings often involved staged events, as part of the military’s systematic

“propaganda war.”

Under pressure from the Nixon Administration, CBS ran a follow-up show in which a scrupulously balanced panel debated the issues raised by “The Selling of the Pentagon.”

Despite increased governmental and commercial pressures, the networks continued to air socially conscious documentaries on subjects ranking from civil rights to the energy crisis. But as the pressures grew, the list of such programs shrank. The climate was no longer conducive to do “shows that get us into the right kind of trouble,” as Silverstein described his own mission. In his view, “the documentary is truly an instrument for social change.”

Examination and self-criticism are hallmarks of a free society. Without it, we become morally flabby, overlooking, denying, or rationalizing social bigotry, and failing to gauge whether our institutions ever use, let alone own, a moral compass.

How much of this self-criticism of our society endures today? Not a great deal, if my recent sampling is any indication. I found that the most consistent, and most penetrating work, is being done on PBS’s weekly series, *Frontline*, ranging from a strong investigative report on “The Meth Epidemic” to a probing look at the Al Qaeda-led insurgency in Iraq. In the next issue of *Television Quarterly*, we’ll examine the subject of today’s rare breed of socially conscious documentarians.

A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, Greg Vitiello is a New York-based writer and editor whose books include *Eisenstaedt: Germany, Spoleto Viva, Twenty Seasons of Masterpiece Theatre* and *Joyce Images*. From 1966 to 1972 he wrote for National Educational Television and the Children’s Television Workshop.