

## NEW YORK FORUM

### ABOUT MEDIA

# TV Can Afford Some Opinion

By Joan Konner

**T**O BROADCAST or not to broadcast? It is a serious question and someone accountable, a station or network executive, has to decide when standards of fairness, accuracy and balance are at issue.

That was the case of "Days of Rage: The Young Palestinians," broadcast September 6th on WNET/13, one of dozens of difficult decisions public-television executives make every day in the uneasy collaboration between independent producers needing a broadcast outlet and the public broadcaster needing and obligated to air independent productions.

How do you determine whether a piece of independent journalism (meaning not produced under the broadcaster's aegis) that is biased, unbalanced, unfair and, to boot, highly controversial should be shown? And, if so, under what conditions?

As a former program director of the station (1981 to '84), naturally I replayed my role as I watched the broadcast and amid all the controversy examined the entrails of past decisions.

Questions of financing and factual accuracy are usually the easy ones, items for the checkout counter in the normal course of a transaction, although in this case the funding needed more careful research. What other program has been presented without funding credits? None that I can recall.

Questions of quality and taste are harder, but even then, there are standards and conventions to provide guidelines. When the unconventional

*Joan Konner is dean of the Graduate School of Journalism of Columbia University. She is a former documentary producer and writer for NBC News. This is the first in a series of monthly columns she will be writing.*



comes along, that is the test of judgment and vision.

It's when the editorial content, and the approach to it, are in question that you're in the hellgate between the independent and the broadcaster. To navigate these rough wa-

ters. I — or should I say "we" to be, at least in some cases, accurate — drew a distinction between advocacy and propaganda. Advocacy we welcomed as a necessary and desirable part of public debate, to be balanced by the station over time. We rejected propaganda except under very specific conditions. The line is fine, and sometimes blurred, but nevertheless we drew it.

By the dictionary definition, advocacy defends, by argument and example, a particular point of view. Propaganda is the systematic, deliberate manipulation of ideas with the goal of indoctrination.

Advocacy is truth as one reporter, or one publi-

—Continued on Page 50

cation, sees it. Propaganda pretends this is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but, when, in fact, it is filled with deception, distortion and even lies.

Advocacy aims for the heart but doesn't neglect the reasoning mind. Propaganda plays to prejudice and irrational passion.

Advocacy is "the active support of a cause," says one definition. It's what John Milton had in mind in "Areopagitica," his heralded essay against censorship. He said that a virtue without advocates was one that "slinks out of the race" — out of the heat and dust of debate. He asked: "Whoever knew the truth put to flight in a free and open encounter?" The clash of advocates is that encounter.

Propaganda, on the other hand, was defined by one of its master practitioners, Adolph Hitler, this way: "All propaganda has to be popular and has to adopt its spiritual level to the perception of the least intelligent of those toward whom it intends to direct itself."

Commercial networks and stations have sidestepped, if not avoided, the issue by claiming objectivity and balance. They adopt the posture that propaganda and advocacy are equally inadmissible. Objectivity and fairness are noble goals, but in practice rarely achieved. First of all, all reporting takes place in a political and cultural context. Total objectivity is impossible. Further, equal time does not add up to equal persuasive power, and balance is not always balanced. Television is so powerful that a single statement or gesture can hit the gut like a well aimed gun. Take the CBS News report "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception," on Pentagon estimates of enemy troop strength. Putting aside the admittedly faulty production procedures, the documentary may have been accurate, but it was hardly objective or fair or balanced.

Why shouldn't broadcasters present journalism strongly laced with opinion, just so long as the station offers a hearty variety and mix of viewpoints over time? Why not proceed with proper warning and framing, when borderline cases between advocacy and propaganda on important issues appear? Where would some of the best of American journalism be, from John Peter Zenger to Edward R. Murrow, if conviction had been sacrificed to a flabby neutrality, and everything on the air had to be balanced and fair?

There is a case to be made, of course, for caution. With time and the number of outlets limited, I would not mount a very strong argument for allowing mindless mouthpieces to drown us with personal agendas. What I'm advocating, and what we practiced, is providing an outlet for the independent producer who offers a strong, convincing program with a point of view on an issue of public interest that is reasonably and honestly defended.

"Days of Rage" would not have passed the advocacy test. Its posture of objective reporting was alone a deception, along with others such as the inclusion of the views of a far-left Israeli former military commander, as if to balance the program with a representative Israeli view. The documentary would not even have passed a good journalism test, with its leading questions in interviews and presentation of many Palestinian charges without followup inquiry or investigation. Too bad! With editing and some script repair, the program could easily have become honest advocacy instead of dishonest propaganda.

Certainly there were elements worth preserving — some unreported facts and less frequently heard points of view. We can assume this accounts for, in part, public television's decision to broadcast the program and all the cost and care it took to create a context and a responsible — not timid, as some suggested — presentation.

Let me conclude with a Milton reprise. "Where there is much to learn," he says, "there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making."

Propaganda acts to defeat knowledge. Advocacy, by Milton's definition at least, helps to create it. In other words, let advocacy ring. The reason there are so many opinions is that no one knows the truth. Or is it: The reason there are so many opinions is that there are so many truths?