

NEWS COVERAGE OF MANNED SPACE MISSIONS

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Thank you very much, Joe. Jules, that was very heady stuff. Who's writing your material now? I think it is an interesting twist of assignments this morning: to produce a portion of his remarks Jules Bergman looked to appraise NASA which he is certainly able to do and I'm assigned to appraising what he might be better able to do because I find particularly during interesting missions I'm so caught up in the activity of the mission that I'm really not too much aware of how the coverage is going or who's writing what. It's all by an incidental kind of thing that I've become aware of it when somebody will say in my one good ear that: "Boy, you ought to hear what Bergman is saying." I've got a monitoring set and punch up my monitoring set. You know, in the next announcement we will try to clear it up. All in all, it starts out, and through the good efforts of our librarians and our group I did become aware of what people said, at least after the fact.

I think to really appreciate our topic we ought to go back in time this morning, go back to the late 50's and even before NASA, and certainly at the beginning of NASA, to get an impression of what news coverage is like. Some of you may have been involved, I don't know, I don't see too many familiar news faces here. I know Jules Bergman was, so if he's the only one aboard, I'll press on. But in the late 50's the Department of Defense, up until the fall of 1958, had the major responsibility for missile and space activity, and they had a news coverage policy that was without a doubt the most ridiculous policy that this dear old government of ours ever concocted. I never understood it, but it went something like this. We were obviously getting into a very active era of rockets and missiles and we knew it would take a fair portion of the public's support to do or fund these projects, but somehow we were to do it without letting the public know about it, or let them in any way understand it. Furthermore, we were going to fire them off the East Coast of Florida, and with some of the larger experiments, knowing full well that they could be seen 200 miles north and south of the Cape. Now that's really an interesting assignment: how you can keep a bushel basket over something like that. But a succession of people tried, I guess Morie Synder was the last one to have to try it and the Vanguard happened in his time. Vanguard ebbed and flowed and the policy literally changed from day to day. One day they would reserve the Patrick Air Force Base theater and have a really detailed and good solid briefing, and the next day word would go out that the Cape was closed to all newsmen. The policy of Vanguard normally was exasperating more than anything else but it vacillated similarly on the early rocket tests in '56-'57 and '57-'58. On the Thor, Jupiter, and

Atlas programs, more often than not, the press would find itself huddled out on a little sand strip looking across a canal into the Cape area itself and if they had done their homework and paid someone properly, they might get a call saying maybe in about 5 minutes. It was all very mysterious and if I might sound overly sympathetic, it's because I was still an "honest" newspaper man myself at that point, having not gone over to the other side. But in the fall of 1958, NASA came into being and when I went to work there in December of '58, we still had interesting little policies that were all hangovers from the Vanguard days which went like this: All launching dates were classified up until T zero until the rocket actually launched. This I suggest is an interesting assignment too. How can you convey to people that there is going to be this launch only if you do convey it and violate security? I believe very firmly in the national security. I know there is a very urgent need for it and I defend it, and even defended it for two years in the uniform of the U.S.A., but I defend it also and I think enough of it that I don't like to see people abuse it willy-nilly. I'm afraid that's one of my favorite sayings. But on this I think you'll agree, it was certainly a ridiculous kind of arrangement — but it persisted for fully the first year and a half at NASA — that we would go right down to T zero before everything was released. I can remember the flight of two little monkeys (Rhesus monkeys) on a Jupiter which was an experiment inherited from the Army, which went sometime in early '59 and again the old policies at T zero: "It's all releasable or anything you can get your hands on." I can remember sitting in my office in Washington and passing pictures across the desk to people all of which were stamped "Secret" but, as of that moment, they were no longer "Secret."

Well, finally, it did change and it took a tremendous stride forward sometime in late '59 where at T minus 4 days we could publicly announce the launching date. That certainly was a great improvement over T zero but if it did tie up too many phones at that critical T-0 but T minus 4 obviously wasn't the ultimate solution, it was primarily a case of getting people more used to the fact that these things were going on and perhaps people could understand them. When we went into the Mercury days, and started the Mercury flight, the other in December of 1960, as a matter of fact, another very significant happening in the information program of NASA occurred, wherein the first administrator of NASA, T.G. Glennon, at what I consider an historic meeting one day in December of 1960, approved the formation of a pool to cover the Mercury flight. The pool would be drawn from all the media and would man the key locations where space and time were small and they then would feed their products in the common area of the news center from which all the other interested reporters could draw. This made a tremendous difference and it was also about the biggest, and the single greatest geographically, newspool ever attempted because we literally pooled the whole world. We had people out on the recovery ships, people in special locations should

trouble develop, and we had people at key points around the pad. We've gotten so used to it today, we do take it for granted but still, it's not without its important features.

The coverage, to make a few remarks, the coverage during Mercury is very hard to recall just what to portray this feeling of people during the Shepard flight. Which I think was sort of a pinnacle of all this coverage at least as far as reporters were concerned. The day that Alan flew there were about 400 people at the Cape which was all we could take in the first place. Even among the reporters, certainly among the public the impact of space was never more clear. People were glassy-eyed, they were crying, they were laughing, they didn't care what they were doing. The drama was so much. Naturally, this has settled down, fortunately, but it was very apparent during that period. It didn't just stop there with the Shepard flight, another curious thing about Shepard flight, that I recall very vividly, was the parade, the only parade we had that marked the Shepard flight as unusual. We really got into the parade mood there for a while after Cooper's flight we had seven parades in six cities in six days, starting in Honolulu and ending in Oklahoma. But in Al Shepard's case we had a parade in Washington, as we went down from the White House, up to the Capitol, down Pennsylvania Avenue, the people on the street applauded. I've lived in Washington for 10 years and covered an awful lot of visiting potentates and people who would acquire crowds along the curb, but I've never seen one where the people applauded. This gives you also an idea of the headiness of news coverage area and what it can do to some people if you let it.

A favorite recollection of mine happened after the Glenn flight: I went into New York for the first of two ticker tape parades and as usual, it seemed like in those early Mercury flights, wherever we flew some other, very natural news story broke and that day was certainly no exception. To give you an example during one of the early Mercury tests just as we got down to about T minus 15 minutes, the carrier exploded in a drydock in Brooklyn, (I remember) killing a lot of people. It was almost as if we were competing for Page 1 with the natural news of the disaster. In any case, the day of the Glenn flight, 45 minutes before the parade was to begin, a big American jet went in on takeoff at Idlewild, about 5 miles away from where we were circling at La Guardia. This had the effect of pulling about 3 or 4 thousand police out of the lines in downtown Manhattan where they were really urgently needed. There were an awful lot of people out there that day and the parade went ahead, of course.

The festivities were fantastic over a two-day period and it got to where if somebody wanted to go get a pack of cigarettes it always meant a police motorcade and you began to routinely to get into the sixth car

or seventh car it was just automatic, like reaching for a fork when you eat. This, believe me, was pretty heady stuff for us dear mortals, but I've often thought if you have enough elevators held for you, or if your picture's in the paper often enough, it's going to have an effect after awhile.

Well, as I say, this went on for two days and finally on the third morning we were headed back for La Guardia over the same Triborough bridge over which we had come in from La Guardia a trifle 48 hours earlier, and by this time for once there was not a huge throng of people outside the Waldorf. And we started across the Triborough bridge and naturally whizzed right through the turnstile. There were about 12 cars in the motorcade and people were looking back remembering the fireboats and how they were squirting water 2 days ago in the river. All of a sudden the Triborough bridge commission truck hailed us, stopped us in the middle of the bridge and the fella said, "that'll be a quarter a car and the gentlemen (in the front seat) from the Mayor's office, said, "No, you don't understand. This is the NASA party, Col. Glenn and all those wonderful heros?" and the fella said "Look, I don't give a damn who they are. Just give me a quarter a car!" And so help me, high above the East River, we paid a quarter a car. I think that's the greatest.

So you can't let that stuff go to your head or it will, really. That always brings me back to Earth whenever I need to be brought back, believe me, it's better than a reentry.

Where's all of our news coverage headed? Well, I don't know. In space we have been successful beyond our fondest dream, I think, in manned space flight and like any good news story, I understand this, but I'm not sure everybody in NASA does. It begins to go down as the news item if it is all that successful. You know, the Post and the Chronicle don't write stories about all the little children who get home safely every day from school, but if one of them gets squashed under the back of a truck that's unusual and that becomes a news story. If you understand that, then you can better understand a million words went into the fire last January by way of the coverage. That's probably three or four times as many words as ever went into our greatest days, Shepard's flight, or John's flight or things like that. This will be the rule from here on in and there will be some single peak kinds of achievements that will provoke great coverage, but from now on the coverage will increasingly be on the negative side. There was only a small amount of coverage the day the B-70 flew the first time. But when Joe Walker and those other good souls got clobbered out there in the desert, there was quite a bit of coverage. And that, I think we all need to remember, is a fundamental news approach.

Within NASA itself we've got a lot to do in the information area, I think, an awful lot to do, both within and without. We have

fundamentally to deal with a very conservative fellow called an engineer. He's extremely conservative, which is part of our success, of course. But he has never taken a course much in news and how it operates. He would much prefer, I think, to let something happen a few times and know that it's going to work before he wants to share his expertise with even the fellow down the hall, much less the outside world. I don't know where this terrible fear of failure starts, but I think it's the fear of failure (or putting it positively, honest conservatism) but it certainly is there. It manifests itself in many ways, I've called it frequently in-house, and again today actually, in discussing a few things, and I'm not trying to make headlines, and rather hopefully I won't.

But I think there is an importance to convey some information here, if we are to achieve a better understanding. One of my biggest criticisms are people, who within NASA and within industry (there is no difference), who invoke national security when they're really talking about job security, their own job security. Or in the case of industry, they invoke proprietary information. And if anything, it is probably more difficult in industry because within the government itself, there are other things happening, the new information law last July, that is certainly no cure-all for all the difficulties. In fact, it's probably going to start some big nasty fight that will put the whole information system in retrogression for a few years, but so be it. It wasn't getting any better in and of itself. That's a personal problem, I think, and we need to do a lot more work with Mr. Engineer.

Another device that occurs more all too often at NASA is something called, (I think it is particularly devious), is the RTQ's (the response to query). I don't know how many of you are really concerned with this, but obviously if you have an opinion or position on something, I think you should make it known and not come in and just wait for somebody to ask you the critical question. They play games with this in Washington and people would call in and say where (it's a device used more in Washington than anywhere else, I will say that) but they would call in and say, "Well, what RTQ's do you have today?"

I recall another favorite posture that occurred one day when a fellow called in and asked how business was. I said, "Well, it's so slow that we haven't denied anything all day." The denial of RTQ is a very interesting thing. There still is within our great agency a tremendous amount of indecision that I think we need to do better on, both internal and external. I think we need this largely for outside inspirational purposes. I think any agency needs at least to give the appearance that it knows exactly what it's doing.

Even if you go a little bit astray, I'm afraid you're in deep trouble. I don't think it helps much when we get into a situation like we

did back last summer the day we scrubbed the famous scrub and launched 201 in a matter of minutes. We had one almost like it last night where we put out a scrub announcement. I got a call at home around 10:00 p.m. that this LM flight was scrubbed off, at least until Tuesday, probably till Wednesday. This is something you learn to live with in the business and you just automatically let everything slide and certain things get out of kilter. And 45 minutes later, I got another call: "Well, we're not too sure of that, maybe we are going to change it, maybe we will try Monday after all." And that's bad, you know. Particularly for the poor fellow who has called up and cancelled his reservations and his plane ticket.

Another fundamental problem we have, that we have dealt with very well to date, and in fact it is going to become more of a problem, is the scientist in NASA and his right to publish in a professional journal. This is the issue that we should publish first in a professional journal. It is an issue I used to go around vigorously with Homer Newell who ran and still runs the science program back in Washington. We finally reached a policy which said that NASA would release the news the day that the publication came out. Like "Science magazine" or whatever. That is certainly as much as I think the agency should back off. I can understand an individual researcher operating under a grant, not necessarily from NASA, who might be able to strike a better bargain. But I think if he is operating under NASA funds that it should be made generally available and not go directly into a magazine. Not everybody shares my view of that within NASA.

Finally, as an apology or kind of an explanation of our job out there, despite the beautiful introduction that Dr. Rice gave us, I look upon us not as public relations people as such, although we certainly get into those areas and touch a lot of them. But we in fact do not have a PR mission; we are enjoined by law from going out and aggressively selling space and marketing it, if you will. Which is probably just as well, because a lot of people are confused and I think this is our principal job. In the information department I look upon our job very much as you would a librarian. I think we ought to have the information and I think we ought to be able to bring it up to the window or counter and if you want it, I think you should come and get it. It would be well worth your trip. Thank you very much.