is the "selling of the President" too simple?

By Debra Deutsch

"Americans vote as they do for many complex reasons that have kept the art of politics a mystery to baffled not only candidates but even their opponents. To address in their primary campaign the United States as "a nation of docile voters beguiled by television and voting sheepishly for the most tactfully packaged candidate.""

"Television, particularly when it can be used for face-to-face discussion by opposing candidates, has helped to make our elections far more enlightened, more issue-oriented, truly representative and truly democratic than they ever were before." Stanton cited the elections of 1920 and '24 as examples of this trend. "Despite women's suffrage, not even half of the Americans of voting age - in fact only 43.5 percent - went to the polls in 1920. The man they elected, Warren G. Harding, had chosen in the first place not to an open convention but to a 'smoke-filled room.' And even when the election campaign was over," Stanton wrote, "a small proportion of the nation's voters had had any opportunity to learn what the man, who was destined to be one of our worst Presidents, was really like."

"By the time of the next Presidential campaign in 1924," Stanton stated, "circumstances had changed dramatically. There were now some radio links between certain cities, and the number of communications which had grown at a fantastic rate. For the first time, many Americans were privileged to listen in on the actual workings of a Presidential election. The conventions were no longer the private domain of the delegates. They were now public property of all who had discovered the marvel of radio."

"Noting that the number of eligible voters who cast a ballot rose from less than 60% in 1920 to 61.5% in the last Presidential race, Dr. Stanton concluded that broadcast journalism has had the beneficial effect of getting more voters, better informed, to the polls."

"Equal time Stanton attacked section 315, the equal time provision of the Federal Communications Act, as being detrimental to journalism and the election process. "I think it is more than mere coincidence that 1960 was the one Presidential election where it was suspended, permitting us to broadcast face-to-face debates between the two major candidates. That year, voter turnout reached a modern high of 64 percent." Stanton called for the abolition of 315." Stanton, as an example of its drawbacks, a documentary that CBS had prepared on George Wallace which was never aired because the FCC would not be forced to give similar coverage to every candidate, from the Prohibition Party to the Vegetarian Party. The same provision of the Federal Communications Act had forced CBS, in 1952, to give an hour of nation-wide coverage to a candidate for the Republican nomination who had garnered six votes in the New Hampshire primary. When it came time for the convention, held in New York's Madison Square Garden, the aspirant was not even allowed to enter.

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"What is journalism?"

Returning to journalism's critics, Stanton held that "Journalism is more than an open microphone in a public square. It is the diligent reporting and analysis by skilled professionals who pull the substance of the news and provide the necessary news judgment. Some critics," he continued, "including a few who hold public office, want to brush aside the journalistic function of television in favor of having every station freely available to prospective candidates for all the time they want on the air to wage their campaigns. They want to expand what is now political advertising time, usually paid for at minimal rates, into a limitless and free broadcast forum in which anyone could participate, as often and as long as he liked."

"This, Stanton asserted, "flies in the face of the most fundamental facts of democratic life." He quoted Walter Lippmann as saying that, "The theory of a free press is that the truth will emerge from free reporting and free discussion..."