

## TO BE EQUAL

# None Knows What 'Majority' Thinks

By WHITNEY M. YOUNG, JR.

Vice President Agnew's attack on television news coverage has opened up a hornets nest. Angry TV executives denied that newscasts are biased, and other Washington officials made statements that sounded ominously like the application of federal pressure for self-censorship of dissent.

We've heard some of the accusations against the media before, but some are new. Television has certainly been guilty of overemphasizing the dramatic at the expense of responsible dissent in the past, but my impression has been that the situation has greatly improved. If any thing, the media undercovered the dignified anti-war demonstrations in Washington last week.



But one of the new accusations leveled against the broadcasters is that they "do not represent the views of America."

It is dangerous to require newsmen to represent majority viewpoints. The tremendous educational potential of television would be lost if networks faithfully hewed the line set by majority opinion.

Let's face it—none knows what the "majority" thinks. Often "majority" opinion is simply uninformed prejudice, and television coverage helps broaden the knowledge of people so their opinions can be better grounded on facts.

Television may have sorely neglected the full story of black Americans—their contributions to our society, their hopes and aspirations their daily lives—but it has also brought the plight of the black and the poor to national attention through superior news coverage and special programming.

In fact, television's biggest shortcoming comes not from failing to present majority views, which it does all too well, but from its failure to present enough diversity of opinion.

The public airwaves should be used to reflect as much diversity as possible. Our multi-colored, multi-national society demands adequate representation for all groups if Americans are to be aware of the cultural diversity of our population.

And television needs to become more relevant to people in the neighborhoods. New technology can open up new TV channels—channels that ought to be turned over to community groups and operate for the benefit and interest of their localities. True citizen participation can result in neighborhood-run programs and services.

And one big area in which the networks can improve their performance is in affording more opportunities for minority performers.

Leslie Uggams, for example, is the first black singer to have a regular weekly variety hour. It's a bit late in the day for such "first's," and indicates that much remains to be done in providing black entertainers with national showcases.

Miss Uggams' show was cynically placed in the "suicide slot" opposite two popular programs with such strong ratings that it was doomed to failure. The absurd laws of tv's rating game meant certain death for the show.

Announcement that it would be dropped caused pained reactions from black viewers. It further endangered opportunities for black performers and backstage personnel.

If broadcasters had equality in their programming and in prime-time casting, there would be many more shows headed by black performers and the rise or fall of any particular one would be of little significance. The merits of individual shows are less important than the principal that all groups should be adequately represented on the public airwaves.

It's just possible that the barrage of criticism from Washington will panic broadcasters to go slow on innovations in the future. That would be a disaster. Diversity, not the stifling of dissent and controversy, are what both television and the nation need.