Framing Perspective: How Video has Shaped Public Opinion

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Video cameras have come a long way since Charles Ginsburg created the first practical videotape recorder in 1951. Today millions of Americans live with cameras in their pockets. The growth of video has changed the communication industry into one that is shown rather than described. Video has created a direct window into the world, one that cannot be achieved equally by other communication methods and one that reaches into the hearts of its viewers. This window has shaped public opinion, as we know it, bringing images directly into the homes of millions from who knows how far away. In this thesis, I will examine major moments in U.S. history that influenced public opinion. I will explain the event itself, what was captured on camera, the effects and aftermath of the video and how the world may be different without the coverage.

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Part I: Introduction

In the eighth grade I decided that television would be where I would spend my career. I took a few classes in high school, but did not realize the weight of my desired profession until I was in college. I thought majoring in news would lead to a future of simply smiling on a screen, but television, particularly news, is more than that. As a reporter I am more than a face; I am a storyteller. I am the crafter. I choose the details. I decide what makes the story and what does not. I am the viewer’s window to what is known. This puts a lot of power in my hands, power which the medium of video already has over its viewers.

As a college student who hopes to spend his career in the media industry, I wanted to learn more about the impact that my medium of choice, video, has had on public opinion and on history. I believe that video has the ability to penetrate into viewer’s minds, to influence their thoughts and form their opinions better than any other medium. Also, people tend to respond stronger to video proof rather than a written account.

What gave me the idea for this thesis was the 2014 case surrounding Ray Rice, an NFL superstar running back. Rice was accused of beating up his then-fiancée, now wife, in February. Initial footage from February 19 showed him pulling her unconscious body out of an elevator at a casino (Bien). The NFL responded to this footage by giving Rice a two game suspension. The NFL received many complaints about the punishment saying it did not respond strongly enough to the issue of domestic violence.

The case completely changed when TMZ released video from inside the elevator. This new footage showed Rice striking his now-wife and knocking her unconscious. The NFL says it had been denied a request for this tape from law enforcement during the investigation and had never seen it until TMZ released it. The media erupted over this new footage, and the
public outrage grew. On September 12, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell gave Rice an indefinite suspension.

The point of the story is that public did not begin to push the issue until the video showing the violence was seen. Many people believed he knocked her unconscious, but they had yet to see it. Radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh said it simply, “What do you thing happened in there? The point is everybody knew what happened in there, but they hadn’t seen it, so it didn’t quite have the impact” (Limbaugh).

In this thesis I will examine multiple moments in U.S. history that were affected or created by video. By doing so, I hope to show the power that video holds and how it can influence the public. This will help me prepare myself to present information as accurately as possible and to understand the power my profession possesses.

Part II: The Events

Event 1: The Rodney King Riots

Background:

On March 3, 1991, California State Police clocked Rodney King’s car going 110 mph on Interstate 210 (Lemon). What followed was a nearly eight-mile high-speed chase through Los Angeles neighborhoods. King was driving with his friends Freddie Helms and Bryant Allen whom he had been drinking with that evening. He was celebrating because he had received a call that day to come back to work on Monday with his previous construction company.

This chase was not King’s first run-in with the law. In July of 1987 he was charged with battery against his wife (Linder, Arrest Record). He was placed on probation and ordered to
obtain counseling, which he never received. In November of 1989, King was arrested after robbing a convenience store with a tire iron. He was charged with assault with a deadly weapon, second-degree robbery, and intent to commit great bodily injury. After pleading guilty to the robbery charge, the other charges were dropped, and King was sentenced to two years in prison. He was later paroled in December of 1990.

This parole is why King sped from the police the night of his historic beating. “I was scared of going back to prison and I just kind of thought the problem would just go away,” said King (Linder, Arrest Record.)

King says he saw a helicopter tracking him, and at that point he knew there was no way for him to escape (Lemon). He decided to stop across the street from an apartment complex hoping that someone might witness the beating to follow.

More than twenty officers were present at the scene (CNN). Helms and Allen were pulled from the car at the start of the scuffle and quickly handcuffed (Lemon). King received over 50 button blows and shocks by a Taser. He was eventually taken by ambulance to Pacifica Hospital of The Valley. His injuries, which included eleven fractures, were too severe, and he was rushed to the trauma unit at USC Medical Center. The initial surgery took five hours. Dr. Charles Aronberg, the ophthalmologist who treated King, said in a 1994 CNN interview that some of King’s bones were so pulverized that they were like grains of sand.

Five hours after the beating, King’s blood-alcohol level was slightly under the legal limit at 0.079 (Cannon, p. 39). State prosecutors and attorneys stipulated that the level was at 0.19 at time of arrest, more than double the legal driving limit in California.

Unbeknownst to him at the time, King’s hope had come true. George Holliday, who lived in the apartments across the street, not only witnessed the beating but also captured it on
film. The next day, Holliday gave his videotapes to the Los Angeles television station KTLA (Linder, Chronology). The station had the tape reviewed by Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and aired it that night on their evening newscast.

The Video:

The video itself lasted nine minutes and twenty seconds. The first minute and a half show King being constantly attacked. He steps out of his car with his hands up and lies down on the ground (Lemon). After taking a few blows, King stands up, tries to run and begins to raise his hands before being knocked to the ground. Sergeant Stacey Koon, the supervising officer at the scene, tries his Taser on King twice with ineffective results (Linder, Videotape). Officers swarmed and surrounded King. Three officers, Laurence Powell, Theodore Briseno and Timothy Wind, took part in the beating. Powell took an estimated forty swings at King. Briseno stomped on King’s shoulders one time. Wind kicked King six times and struck him with his baton numerous times. King is then handcuffed, and around three minutes into the video, he is dragged across the ground to the side of the road. Police cars begin to leave. Helms and Allen are put in police cars.

Video Impact:

The video became a national discussion topic immediately after airing, and Rodney King became a chief example of racial injustice. Even President George H.W. Bush spoke on the issue saying, “It was sickening to see the beating that was rendered. There’s no way in my view to explain that away. It was outrageous” (Lemon).

Because of the video, King not charged after being released from the hospital. The
District Attorney for LA County indicted Sergeant Koon and Officers Powell, Briseno and Wind for assault with a deadly weapon. On March 10, five days after the footage of the incident was broadcasted, a *Los Angeles Times* poll reported that 92 percent of those who watched the videotape thought excessive force had been used (Linder, Chronology). Bernard Parks, a deputy police chief in LA in 1991, said, “What the symbolism of that video created, is it validated in the mind of thousands of people that this is the way police work is being done and is done for decades” (Lemon).

Publicity and racial tensions were growing daily, so the trial was moved in November of 1991 from LA to Simi Valley, a predominately white community. The jury consisted of ten whites, one Hispanic and one Pilipino-American. On April 29, 1992, at 3:15 p.m., the jury acquitted Koon, Wind and Briseno of all charges. They were unable to reach a verdict for one charge against Powell (Linder, Chronology).

Around 5 p.m., rioting began in Los Angeles.

Rioting and rage turned to looting, as people of all races began stealing and attacking at random (Lemon). Innocent people were attacked and businesses were torn down and neighborhoods torched. President H. W. Bush deployed federal troops.
(Chan 12, 14, 15, 16)
On the fourth day of riots, Rodney King spoke to the public saying, “Can we all get along? Can we get along?” King went on to ask the public to stop the looting. “It’s not right. It’s not right. It’s not gonna change anything. We’ll get our justice. They have won the battle, but they haven’t won the war” (CNN News).

It took six days to restore order to the city (Lemon). During that time, 55 people died, 2000 more were injured and more than $1 billion in property damage occurred.

Aftermath

On August 4, a federal jury returns indictments on the four officers (Linder, Chronology). The trial begins on February 25, 1993, to determine if the officers violated King’s civil rights. On April 16, a federal jury convicts Koon and Powell on one charge of violating King’s civil rights. They are sentenced to thirty months in a federal correctional camp. Wind and Briseno are found not guilty.

On April 19, 1994, King was awarded $3.8 million in damages in a civil suit against Los Angeles. During the civil trial against the officers, King asked for $15 million in damages, but he was awarded nothing.

George Holliday, the man who videotaped King’s beating, was hit hard by backlash from the riots (Goldstein). Before releasing the video, Holliday was a married man who managed a big plumbing and rooting company. He received a “few thousand dollars” from the video, but the media and public spotlight led his wife to leave him. He says the attention also ruined his second marriage. He has received multiple death threats for being “the guy who cased the riots.” Today, his phone number is unlisted, but he still makes money through his plumbing business to care for himself and his son.
Analysis

The video showing the beating of Rodney King is considered by many as the pioneer for citizen journalism. But, the video did a lot more than start a trend. It started a nationwide discussion. This video provided clear evidence to African Americans, in Los Angeles and in the United States, to confirm what they felt about police brutality.

Milton Grimes, one of King’s Attorneys, says the video was like catching the Loch Ness Monster. “I saw it on TV and I’m saying, they have got to stop beating our brothers like that in South Africa” said Grimes. “I just imagined it was out of the country” (Lemon).

While the video was confirmation for some, it was an awakening for others. The pictures and video show whites and other races protesting along with the African Americans in L.A. So, this was not a black versus white debate. Even the US president spoke on the issue and pushed for justice.

But, when you take a step back and look at it, how did this video effect public opinion? And, how did that affect history?

For starters, the beating occurred when King was pulled over for dangerously speeding on the interstate and through neighborhoods. He was also under the influence of alcohol and violating his parole from a previous criminal offense. The officers had every right to arrest King as he was violating the law and endangering others, but did he deserve that beating?

So, there is a criminal who committed a crime. But, the video of the beating is released via television to the public. The public becomes outraged over brutality many already believed to be happening. They saw it visually and then responded. Because of the outrage, King, a man who endangered many lives breaking the law, is not charged.

Public displeasure continues to boil. The pressure sparks a trial against the four officers
involved in the beating. When the four are acquitted of their alleged crimes, the public responded with a rampage on the second largest city in the United States (Top 100). This six-day nightmare was ignited by sympathy for Rodney King and anger against the police officers. It could be said that the destruction in Los Angeles was driven by more than just this anger and racial tensions. People were destroying, looting and attacking at random. They were taking advantage of a chaotic opportunity in horrible ways. But, there is no opportunity if there is no video evidence.

55 people killed. 2000 more injured. $1 billion in property damage.

Because of video.

**Event II: The Kennedy – Nixon Debates**

The 1960 United States presidential election featured the first televised candidate debates in the nation’s history. Not only did the video impact the outcome, it also introduced the importance of a public image for political figures and showed the power of media exposure on votes and campaigns.

**Background:**

John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon’s bout for the Presidency occurred at a decisive time in American history. Internally, the domestic struggles for civil rights and desegregation split the nation in two (The Kennedy-Nixon). The U.S. was also deep in Cold War gridlock with the Soviet Union, whose successful launch of the Sputnik satellite put them in the lead in
the national space race. To top it all off, the West was terrified of the spread of Communism, which was fueled further by the rise of Fidel Castro’s Revolutionary Regime in Cuba.

The nation, desperate for strong, decisive leadership, found itself with two immensely different presidential candidates. Richard Nixon was finishing up eight years as America’s Vice President. This run followed a career in Congress where he participated in crucial votes on domestic issues, became one of Communism’s greatest critics and helped expose the espionage attempt of convicted communist Alger Hiss.

John F. Kennedy was a young senator from a potent New England Family. He had served in the House of Representatives from 1947 to 1953 and then in the Senate until 1960 (Kennedy, Biography). His name gained national prominence for his work on the Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor and Management Field. He was also a best-selling author and Pulitzer Prize winner for his work Profiles in Courage, which described acts of bravery and integrity of eight U.S. senators.

All things considered, Kennedy lacked the experience in extensive foreign policy that Nixon brought to the table (The Kennedy-Nixon). Also, Kennedy was Catholic, and in 1960 anti-Catholic prejudice was a mainstream staple of many American lives (Kennedy, Religion). Only one other Catholic, Governor Alfred E. Smith of New York in 1928, had run for president under a major party ballet. His campaign was tarnished under the idea that he would amend the Constitution to make Catholicism the nation’s established religion. He was crushed in the final votes, even losing many from his own party.

Kennedy adamantly pushed for the separation of church and state, and he was able to diffuse the religious issue. His strongest stance was in his address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association in September 1960, which occurred after 150 Protestant ministers
proclaimed Kennedy could not remain independent of the Church without ignoring its teachings. In his speech, Kennedy denounced this notion and promoted an America rich in religious freedom.

“'I believe in an America where religious intolerance will someday end, where all men and all churches are treated as equal, where every man has the same right to attend or not attend the church of his choice, where there is not Catholic vote, no anti-Catholic vote, no bloc voting of any kind, and where Catholics, Protestants and Jews, at both the lay and pastoral level, will refrain from those attitudes of disdain and division which have so often marred their works in the past, and promote instead the American ideal of brotherhood’” (John F. Kennedy Speeches).

Kennedy’s religious beliefs never resurfaced again in a way that required his full and immediate attention.

While Kennedy’s stock was rising, Nixon’s was taking a few hits (The Kennedy-Nixon). That August, a reporter asked President Dwight Eisenhower to name some contributions of the country’s second-in-command. Exhausted after a long press conference, Eisenhower said, “If you give me a week, I might think of one. I don’t remember.” The remark was meant to indicate the president’s own fatigue, but Democrats pushed it to demean Nixon’s credibility.

That same month Nixon was sent to the hospital after hurting his knee on a car door and developing an infection. When he surfaced two weeks later, he was frail and twenty pounds underweight. When he arrived for the first televised debate on September 26, he banged the same knee getting out of his car, aggravating the injury. He was also recovering from the flu, running a low fever and coming off of the campaign trail. In contrast, Kennedy had spent the entire weekend quarantined in a hotel room, fielding practice questions from his aids. He was
well rested and also tan from weeks of open-air campaigning.

The Video

The debate lasted just under an hour, but it could be argued it was the most crucial hour Kennedy spent campaigning. Concerning substance, the two candidates presented extraordinarily similar agendas focusing on increased national security, strengthening the U.S. military, the importance of building a future for America and of course the threat of Communism (The Kennedy-Nixon).

The difference between the two was the overall telegenic appearance of Kennedy. He also understood the mechanics of television better, which were still pretty new at the time. Kennedy looked directly into the camera while answering questions, appearing as though he was speaking to the American people. Nixon’s eyes wandered back and forth from the camera to the reporters asking the questions, making him look like he was avoiding eye contact with the public.
"Kennedy is very conscious about image, about how he appears in the television camera," says Julian Zelizer, Professor of History and Public Affairs at Princeton University (The First). "[Nixon] looked as if he was nervous, and in some ways he looked like someone you might not be able to trust."

Another factor was cosmetics (The Kennedy-Nixon). While both candidates refused the services of CBS’s top makeup artist, sources later said that Kennedy received a touch up from his team before going on air. Nixon submitted to a drugstore makeup he had previously used to cover up his five o’clock shadow, but the makeup melted off when he started to sweat.
Nixon early on, before his makeup started to fade. (Kennedy-Nixon First)

Nixon after his makeup had faded. (Kennedy-Nixon First)
“Nixon never seems to understand that style does matter,” says KC Johnson, history professor at Brooklyn College (The First). “And, he tells his advisers well this doesn’t matter. What matters is the substance of my message.”

What matters is winning the debate.

And, who won? That answer is not so simple. It all depends on whom you ask.

According to surveys, radio listeners felt that Nixon won, while the television audience picked Kennedy (Danesi 635). Viewers of the debates stated that Kennedy seemed more honest and attractive whereas Nixon came off as rigid and confused.

On Election Day, voters turned out in record numbers, and Kennedy won the popular vote 49.7 percent to 49.5 percent (The Kennedy-Nixon). Polls revealed that many of the voters were influenced by the televised debates, and six percent said the debates were the deciding factor. It is unfair to say that television won the debates for Kennedy, but it is clear that they helped him in his campaign.

Aftermath

Kennedy hit the ground running with his inaugural address where he famously said, “my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country” (Ask). Some of his accomplishments include establishing the Peace Corps by executive order, announcing and pushing his goal to get a man on the moon and calling for a blockade of Cuba in order to minimize Soviet power in the West (John, Timeline). Kennedy also advocated for civil rights, choosing to address the nation via television. Kennedy’s overall presidential approval rating average was 70.1 percent, the highest since Gallup started the ratings (Presidential Approval). He was assassinated on November 22, 1963 while
campaigning for re-election in Dallas (John, Timeline).

Analysis

The results of the Kennedy-Nixon debates embody the idea that television can reach people on a deeper level then other forms of media. Kennedy’s image and performance benefitted his case enough to propel him over Nixon to win the presidency. Nixon had the credentials, eight years as vice president, a great Congressional career and experience in domestic issues and foreign policy. But, Kennedy had the image. Kennedy continued to take advantage of television throughout his short Presidential career. His assassination was also a historic television moment, setting a new standard for delivering breaking, national news stories.

Had television not been a factor in the 1960 election, Kennedy would likely have not won, and he could possibly still be alive today. Also, Nixon may have never been part of the Watergate Scandal that tarnished his political record. The competitive race in 1960 may have been what pushed Nixon and his associates to seek every possible advantage, leading to Watergate. This is hypothetical thinking, but it is worth a few lines of wonder.

What is not hypothetical is the influence of television on this election and on the thoughts and votes of the American people. Marcel Danesi, the author of Encyclopedia of Media and Communication, described it best. “This event showed that TV had become the dominant medium in the United States and that the visual image had more emotional power than media, print, or audio” (635).
Event III: The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was known as the first “television war” because of its consistent video coverage (Hallin). It was also called the “living-room war” by author Michael Arlen due to the unfailing reports brought to each American home with a television. Video highly contributed to both the raising of early moral, the growing skepticism and late distaste of the American people. Some have even argued that the influence of one of televisions greatest celebrities encouraged Congress to seek a way out.

Background:

The United States sent their first round of military advisers for the Vietnam War to South Vietnam in May of 1961 (History Place, America Commits). Just 400 Green Berets went to train soldiers in methods of “counter-insurgency.” But, U.S. involvement in the Asian country began many years earlier.

In 1941, the U.S. military intelligence agency Office of Strategic Strategies (OSS) allied with the Viet Minh, otherwise known as the Vietnam Independence League. U.S. troops and the Viet Minh worked together to rescue downed American pilots and harass the Japanese troops that had taken over Vietnam from the French.

The Viet Minh were run by Ho Chi Minh, a communist activist who had returned to Vietnam after 30 years of exile. Minh had wanted to free Vietnam of French rule for many years, even trying to convince America to speak out for him during the talks that led to the Treaty of Versailles (Ho Chi Minh). Minh returned to
Vietnam to free his people from the Japanese after they took over in World War Two. He and his Viet Minh troops learned a great deal about guerilla warfare from the Americans.

On September 2, 1945, the Japanese signed the surrender agreement, formally ending WWII in the Pacific (History Place, Seeds). That same day, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the independence of Vietnam, quoting lines from the American Declaration of Independence, which he gained from the OSS. He declared himself president of the new Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and he pursued American recognition. President Harry Truman ignored him repeatedly.

With WWII concluded, France was granted a request by the Allies for the return of all pre-war French colonies in Southeast Asia. But, French retention was not on Minh’s agenda. From May to September of 1946, Minh attempted to negotiate full independence from France. In June, France proclaimed a separatist French-controlled government for South Vietnam. After the French bombarded Haiphong Harbor, 30,000 Viet Minh launch a large-scale assault, starting an eight-year war known as the First Indochina War. In May of 1954, the French begin to withdraw from Vietnam. The war resulted in 400,000 total deaths.

The Geneva Conference of Indochina followed, and Vietnam was split in two, the northern half governed by Ho Chi Minh and the southern by Bao Dai, a puppet leader for the French. Minh agreed to the split for political reason, but he had no intention of leaving the country divided (Ho Chi Minh). He declared that he had authority over the whole state and soon formed a partnership for his northern regime with the Soviet Union. During that time, the U.S. pledged assistance to South Vietnam after installing a new leader, Ngo Dinh Diem.

The soon-to-be Vietnam War was fueled by the Cold War tensions of the time period. North versus South became the Soviets versus the Americans. America was willing to do
anything at the time to prevent the spread of Communism (History Place, America). When John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1961 he said, "... we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to insure the survival and success of liberty." The issue for America was that the war was being fought in Vietnam, and their citizens wanted Communism, not Capitalism (Ho Chi Minh). Minh had little doubt that the Vietnamese people wanted a communist government, and President Eisenhower (who was in office before Kennedy) believed that 80 percent of the overall population backed Minh.

Eventually, the southern government becomes corrupt under Diem’s guidance (History Place, Seeds). More than 50,000 people who challenged his regime were arrested and many others fled to the north. Minh later sent many back to infiltrate South Vietnam as part of a force that Diem called the Viet Cong. By 1960, the Viet Cong, who were trained in guerilla warfare, had blended into the countryside and were indistinguishable from the South Vietnamese.

When the U.S. started sending troops to South Vietnam in May 1961 their mission was to train the South Vietnamese. The Viet Cong, however, controlled much of the countryside and was launching many successful attacks. By December of the same year, the cost of maintaining the depreciating South Vietnamese army of 200,000 men had risen to one million dollars a day.

The war that ensued featured many military disagreements and coups on the South Vietnamese side. In November 1963, Diem is betrayed by his army generals and assassinated. Other coups and betrayals followed. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson dispatched a large number of U.S. troops to aid the South Vietnamese army. (Hallin). The United States withdrew forces in 1973 after 58,000 American deaths (Vietnam). More than 3 million people in total were killed in the conflict. The U.S. defense department reported the cost of the war at $173 billion (Gagnzel). That number is equivalent to $914 billion in today’s dollars (CPI). Also,
veterans’ benefits and interest add another $250 billion, or $1.32 trillion today.

The Video

The video brought images of war back home in a way and at a rate never experienced by the American people. They were accustomed to still images and print stories from the front, but video has the ability to hit people in a different way. The war is still potentially the biggest and longest news story ever covered (Hallin).

Most of the coverage was upbeat for the first few years of the war. Newscasts would begin with typical “news from the front” headlines, and stories would focus on “American boys in action” that featured the bravery and skill of soldiers. Rarely did stories feature anything that would negatively reflect on the Americans, but they did happen. One CBS report in 1965 showed Marines lighting thatched roofs of a village and included critical commentary. This received an angry reaction from President Johnson. Other reports later used the same images but emphasized the actions as necessary because they were Communist villages.

As troops began to withdraw in 1969, television coverage shifted, mirroring the changed opinion of the public. The emphasis was still centered on the good, loyal “American boys,” but news reports took a skeptical tone as journalists started to question the claims of progress. Rather then a series of victories, the war was portrayed as an eternal recurrence. One particular report by CBS reported the death of a soldier on Thanksgiving Day by interviewing his friends who shared their feelings about a war they found senseless. There was also a major anti-war push on the “home front” which received increasing airtime, as it became an acceptable political movement.

Slightly under a quarter of all coverage from Vietnam featured blood, gore, the dead or
the wounded. Concerns over audience sensibilities along with inaccessibility kept many of the horrors off the screen. Action footage was dangerous to get. Nine television workers died covering the war, and others were injured. Still, graphic violence did occur that showed the brutality of war in a way Americans at home had never seen. Key examples include a NBC report on the Tet Offensive in 1968 where a colonel shot a captive through the head in the middle of the street, and footage of South Vietnamese planes mistaking their own fleeing citizens for northern troops after an errant napalm strike in 1972.

(Photo from the napalm strike mentioned above, includes 9-year-old Kim Phuc, center, who ripped off her burning clothes while fleeing. (Ut))
Another particularly shocking example was that of Buddhist monks in the summer of 1963 (History Place, America). The monks had been denied the right to celebrate the Buddha’s birthday earlier that year by the corrupt South Vietnamese government. In response, some monks publicly burned themselves to death. The footage truly flabbergasted America’s politicians and the public.

(Monk burning himself alive in protest. (Newton))

One of the most important video contributions to the war was the impact of Walter Cronkite, the anchorman for the CBS Evening News who was known as “the most trusted man in America” (Editors). Cronkite reported on the most triumphant and traumatic moments of the 1960s, such as the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 and the Apollo 11 moon landing in 1969. In early 1968, Cronkite made key comments about the war on his segment “Report from Vietnam: Who, What, When, Where, Why?” (Hallin).

“He had a voice that everybody recognized... in five seconds everybody in America
knows who’s talking,” said Douglas Brinkley who published a full biography on the star anchorman (Galant). “Cronkite got up from his anchor desk, and flew to Vietnam, and put on a helmet and flak jacket, and interviewed anybody and everybody he could.”

At the end of his report Cronkite expressed his own personal view on the situation of the war, clarifying his analysis was “speculative, personal, [and] subjective” (Cary).

We’ve been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders both in Vietnam and Washington to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds. For it seems now more certain than ever, that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate. To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past.

To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, if unsatisfactory conclusion. On the off chance that military and political analysts are right, in the next few months we must test the enemy’s intentions, in case this is indeed his last big gasp before negotiations.

But it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could. (Final Words).

Reports show that after his report, President Lyndon Johnson told his staff, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America” (The Editors). A month later, Johnson declined to run for reelection and started seeking ways out of the war (Hallin). David Halberstam, an American journalist and historian, wrote, “it was the first time in American history a war had been
declared over by an anchorman.” At this time, polls were already reflecting the public’s distaste with the war, and Cronkite’s message helped enforce what many already believed.

Aftermath:

By January of 1969, less than a year after Cronkite’s historic broadcast, peace talks started in Paris with the United States, South Vietnam, North Vietnam and the Viet Cong in attendance (History Place, End). In July, 800 American soldiers were sent home in phase one of the 14-phase withdrawal.

An important video moment occurred on April 21, 1975, when the South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu resigned his position during a 90-minute TV speech (he was coaxed to resign by the U.S.). In his speech, Thieu read a letter from Richard Nixon citing the promise of the United States to pledge sever retaliatory action” if South Vietnam was threatened. He expressed his anger over the negotiations of the U.S. in Paris and said, “The United States has not respected its promises. It is inhumane. It is untrustworthy. It is irresponsible” (History Place, End).

Full U.S. withdrawal was achieved almost six years after peace talks were initiated. The last Americans, just ten marines, depart from Saigon on April 30, 1975, 8:35 a.m. By 11 a.m., the Viet Cong flag was flying from the presidential palace, and the South Vietnamese had surrendered unconditionally.

Analysis
Video coverage of the Vietnam War brought the visual and personal elements of war into American homes in a way that had never been done before (McLaughlin). The visual element of video allowed viewers to feel as if they were part of the action. The stories of battle and death were more than just the news; they brought viewers into the jungle, into the war itself.

Some have argued that this window into the “horrors of war” was an anti-war influence, saying the coverage inspired revulsion and exhaustion (Hallin). Overall though, video coverage kept blood and gore off the screen. However, the way journalists told stories did impact and reflect attitudes of the time. Upbeat and positive stories highlighted the first few years. But as time went by, stories reflected skepticism and displeasure.

It’s important to note that while the video coverage was able to influence public opinion, it was not the only factor. Polls in the fall of 1967 already showed that the majority of Americans believed their involvement in Vietnam to be a “mistake” (Hallin). Still, video played a crucial role. It gave storytellers such as Walter Cronkite the ability to earn the trust of the public, and to extend their influence across the nation.
Part III: Summary

In this paper I have discussed three key historical moments that show the outreach of video and the power it can have on its viewers. Video removes the imagination element from storytelling and replaces it with real, concrete visuals. Some prefer to create the images themselves, but video has captivating characteristics. Common Knowledge describes video as, “consistently evaluated as more attention-grabbing, interesting, personally relevant, emotionally involving and surprising” (Neuman, 56).

The Rodney King riots show the influence that video can make on an issue. Racial injustice has been part of American history since before the country was founded. Still, this incident caught on camera was able to connect with much of the nation. If George Holliday had not recorded the beating on video, if he had stood from his window and took notes with a pen and paper, the Rodney King beating would probably not have even made the news. The car chase might have been, but the racial injustice would have never been discussed and public opinion would not have been so moved. The video took the incident beyond the crime in a way that no other media could, making it a national concern. It connected to its audience, and it played a part in the outrage that upset an entire country and led to the destruction of a city.

The debates between Kennedy and Nixon helped to establish video as the most influential form of media. It is incredible to see from research that the people who watched the
debate picked Kennedy as the winner, while those listening on the radio picked Nixon. This shows the extra element that video can bring, taking storytelling beyond the story and into the visual realm. Image and presentation became key elements for influencing public opinion, and the political election process was forever changed.

Finally, video of the Vietnam War was able to show the cruelties of conflict in a completely new way. In the past other media forms were able to inform the public about war and what happened. Video coverage did more. Video took the public to Vietnam. It showed them the good, the bad and played a role in influencing the public’s morale and opinions. This influence sparked much political backlash and put public pressure on political leaders to end the war.

Overall, the research from this thesis has shown me the power and responsibility that I could have in my future profession. As a reporter, I will be the voice that people hopefully trust, and I will control the public’s window to information. The words that I choose, the images I show, the way I present stories, all can make an impact and relay a message. My job will influence public opinion in the medium that connects stories to viewers like no other can. It is my responsibility to do so accurately and fairly. In the famous, sign-off line of Walter Cronkite, “and, that’s the way it is” (Editors).


Spector, Ronald H. “Vietnam War: The United States negotiates a withdrawal.” Encyclopedia


