

## Lecture 20

### Covering Apollo: The Role of the Press

by Victor McElheny, a reporter for the Boston Globe at the time of Apollo

Plenty of projects don't have a public component, but manned space flight is not one of them.

Victor's first intellectual interest was history.

He later founded the Knight program at MIT for science journalists, and a similar program at Harvard.

"There is nothing more precious than curiosity;" it must be preserved from childhood into adulthood and always encouraged.

Being a journalist was a way for him to be a witness to history as it was unfolding.

On Apollo:

- There were many different perspectives and opinions.
- Press conferences happened all the time, which created news all the time.
- Constant pressure from editors who wanted the journalists to be addressing all the different aspects and possibilities for stories.
- International coverage; all different kinds of media (TV, newspaper, etc.)

Basically, it was a madhouse for reporters.

- Constant work; even when you were resting, you needed to be monitoring (via audio feed and transcripts) what was going on.
- People were constantly asking you questions.

Really intense emotions surrounded the launch and landing.

"good guy" interviewers vs. "bad guy" interviewers (aggressive, hostile)

There was a subtle interplay between the astronauts, their machines, and the reporter.

Though lots of people feel the science done around the Apollo missions was really peripheral, he thinks a lot of valuable knowledge and technology came out of the program. Despite not being the focus of the missions, the science and technology that came inadvertently from the manned missions to space was really important.

NASA's press group was very open with information about what was going on there. However, this might have been the government's attempt to divert attention from their "dark" programs, by masking any interest in those projects with a deluge of information about a wildly interesting, public program.

Journalists can have fantastically different perspectives sometimes:

Scene: crowds waving at the astronauts as they board the spacecraft.

One perspective: people are waving joyfully at the astronauts, as if the astronauts can see them, to send their best wishes with these fellow human beings who are going off to another world.

Second perspective: “The atmosphere at the launch was similar to that of an execution.” (here, the author is recalling the public spectacle in executions such as depicted in Dickens’ 19<sup>th</sup> century novels.)