

CAUTION: WATCHING DAN RATHER COULD BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR  
HEALTH

(Originally published January 1975)

If the general public really worried as much about its health and the countless dangers it is exposed to daily, as do our self-appointed guardians of press and television, it would soon be reduced to a state of quivering, jelly-like inactivity. Almost every phase of living, including tricycle riding and broiling steak over charcoal, has been indicted by relentless reporting as a health hazard. No sooner—and nicely timed for Thanksgiving—had we learned that roasting a turkey with the stuffing inside could have dire consequences, than we were attacked by Dan Rather in an hour long CBS documentary exposing the evils lurking in our public drinking water.

Being attacked by Dan Rather and CBS is even more upsetting than being assaulted by Howard Cosell and ABC. Cosell occasionally forgets and manages a twisted smile. Rather can't smile; his messages are too grim and serious for levity. Ever since he got pushed to the floor at that nominating convention and cried to Walter Cronkite for help, Rather has pursued his subjects with deadly earnestness. The word for him is misanthropic.

Science, research and statistics are the religions of our century, and anything related to these disciplines is dogma to be accepted with the same blind faith as that of earlier pagans trusting the words of their oracles. The Middle Ages intellectual community is said to have debated endlessly about the number of angels dancing on a needlepoint. Today, thanks to ultra-sophisticated scientific techniques, we debate about the number of contaminants found in a drop of water and how they might do us in.

All of the television news networks are particularly fond of exposing health hazards and have developed a standard formula for health documentaries.

- Start with a scare headline deriving from some bit of obscure research (almost anything will do): *Boiled Milk Poses Danger*; *Study Links Beef, Cancer*; *Unknown Substance in Potatoes May Cause Congenital Defects*, etc.
- Send out an investigative team to accumulate miles of film and taped material; locate and interview two so-called authorities with a special bias and interest in the subject, making sure that they are personable, articulate and "doctors"—no problem now that we have doctors of Environmentalism.

- Locate and interview, for balance, one genuine authority with an opposing viewpoint, making sure that he is grouchy, unimpressive and inarticulate.
- Talk with a couple of alarmed housewives, a ghetto dweller and a grieving family.
- Photograph, for background use, industrial stacks pouring out black smoke, liquid wastes gushing into a river and a dead fish floating white belly-up on a stagnant pond.

All of this may then be organized, spliced and edited into a one- or two-part documentary, unobtrusively slanted to convey the proper message, with interruptions for commercials and suitably pointed comments and interpretations by a concerned, solemn-faced, humorless narrator who doesn't intend to alarm you (after all, his only duty is to report the "facts"), but . . .

The recent report on our drinking water supply followed the pattern well and again demonstrated convincingly that any molehill may be made into a mountain. Its only trouble was it unearthed so many potential dangers that commentator Rather had difficulty concentrating his outrage on specifics. An unintended bit of comic relief occurred when Rather, viewing a typical bayou dwelling with a typical wooden cistern beside it, seemed horrified that anyone had to think up such outlandish means to avoid polluted water. (It remains unexplained where he thought the water supply of isolated Cajun settlements in the South Louisiana marshlands had always come from). The only sensible episode of the whole program was the brief view of an angry, female, public health official pointing out that if the same detailed chemical analyses had been made of the air, food and clothing we all come in contact with daily, similar lists of potential hazards could be compiled. She went on to say, before Rather cut her off to interpret for us, what a waste of time it was to worry about potential dangers that may or may not appear twenty years from now, when everyone at the hearing would walk out of the room and get into an automobile where the present potential danger to health was thirty-five times as great.

An astute writer of science fiction, Ray Bradbury, twenty-five years ago, looking back at Earth from the vantage point of Mars in the early twenty-first century, once wrote: "Science ran too far ahead of us too quickly, and people got lost in a mechanical wilderness." Well, we are stumbling around now in a wilderness of research-oriented electronic and computerized gadgetry, lost in a forest of projected statistics where potential hazards have become more frightening than real ones.

It may never occur to CBS and worried Dan Rather, but it undoubtedly could be "scientifically" shown by appropriate investigative techniques that if the public were to be

exposed to this type of reporting once a month over the next twenty years, the incidence of hypertension and cerebral apoplexy ("serious medical conditions that often result in premature death") could increase alarmingly, decimate viewers and cause untold anguish to TV networks and news reporters.

(c) *The Bulletin of the Muscogee County (Georgia) Medical Society*, "Doctor's Lounge", Jan 1975, Vol. XXII No. 1, p.19