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## Television Coverage of the Gemini Program

The television coverage of the manned space flights in June (GT4) and August (GT5) put one aspect of science and technology in the same league as political conventions and the World Series. The vast audiences commanded by such an effort make it important, since the time the public spends in viewing these programs represents, for many, a substantial portion of the hours it devotes to any sort of scientific or technical subject—on television or otherwise.

What did the American public see on TV about the scientific and technical aspects of the Gemini program, and what can it expect in the future?

Analysis of some 50 hours of coverage of the two flights shows that the visual reporting of GT5 was significantly better than the reporting of previous missions—a much-needed advance over the breathless chronicling of launch and splashdown, the saccharine family interviews, and the "illustrated radio" talks by technical specialists.

NBC showed the greatest change; its reporting of GT5 was outstanding in breadth of subject matter, accuracy, and visual quality. ABC, which had the best coverage of GT4, thanks to science editor Jules Bergman, maintained its breadth and accuracy but did not substantially increase its visual backup for GT5. CBS did an accurate though limited job for GT5; its coverage was of much better quality than its reporting of previous flights.

For the GT5 mission there was more emphasis everywhere on scientific and technical aspects, such as the orbital mechanics of rendezvous, visual acuity experiments, and effects of weightlessness. Visual presentation replaced many of the previous verbal descriptions—for example, the animated representation of retrofire and reentry, and a studio demonstration explaining specific impulse.

Perhaps the most significant single change was a new confidence on the part of many of the on-camera reporters. The GT4 reporting was plagued with errors, faulty interpretations, difficulty in ad-libbing, and, in one case, outright embarrassment over inability to define so simple a word as *azimuth*. One reporter commented, "It all gets so confusing," as he tried to explain how many sunrises and sunsets the astronauts would see in the course of their flight.

The GT5 programs showed many more reporters facing the cameras confidently, commenting accurately and in much greater detail. Obviously, much more attention had been given to preparation and backup.

The television achievements for the GT5 mission rate compliments and also raise important questions. With an increasingly sophisticated audience, more frequent flights, and flights of greater duration, what will be the nature of TV coverage in the future? We will certainly see more "pool coverage"—the common use of "pickups" on launch, landing, and press conferences. But television is a competitive enterprise. How will the networks compete?

Perhaps a new day is at hand, for competition will more and more be in terms of the knowledge and skill of the reporters, and of the quality of the production teams.

It is inevitable that unexpected problems (like that of the fuel cell in GT5) will arise in the future. The network with the know-how to explain and illustrate the situation immediately, without extensive research or outside help, will take the lead in ratings.

Interpretive coverage will be another area of competition. For, except for the possibility of emergencies, launch and landing are becoming almost routine. Scientific experiments and technical innovations will make the headlines for tomorrow's flights, and the subjects of tomorrow's TV programs.

In short, the networks which excel in their scientific homework will excel in the marketplace—and deservedly so.—E. G. SHERBURNE, JR., *American Association for the Advancement of Science*