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Reconsidering Harvest of Shame: The Limitations of a Broadcast Journalism Landmark

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RECONSIDERING HARVEST OF SHAME: THE LIMITATIONS OF A BROADCAST JOURNALISM LANDMARK

In the years since it first aired, Harvest of Shame has become one of the seminal markers of television journalism history.[1] CBS broadcast the documentary on Friday, November 25, 1960. Airing during prime time on the night after Thanksgiving, the one-hour program examined the desperate plight of migrant farm laborers in the United States. It showed the migrants as the hapless victims of grower greed and an indifferent public. The broadcast ended with Edward R. Murrow issuing a plea to U.S citizens to help enact legislation that would aid farm laborers--a plea which was later amplified in the press and which added fuel to the ongoing Congressional debate over farm labor. Yet, despite its notoriety and its seminal place in the history of broadcast journalism, Harvest of Shame failed to spur meaningful improvements in the living and working conditions of migrant agricultural laborers.[2]

At the time of the 1960 broadcast, the migrant issue had received little television coverage. Shortly after Harvest of Shame aired, Producer David Lowe stated that he wanted the expose to "shock" the nation's conscience.[3] Lowe and others responsible for the production apparently hoped that Harvest of Shame would galvanize public opinion and thereby encourage policy makers to help the migrants.[4] This expectation may have seemed more plausible in 1960 than it does today. Executive Producer Fred Friendly and Murrow had already seen their strongest expose documentaries of the 1950s--"See It Now's" Radulovich and McCarthy broadcasts--elicit sharp public response and decisive governmental action.[5] Since Friendly considered Harvest of Shame to be at least as editorially pointed as either of those earlier "See It Now" broadcasts, it stands to reason that he and his fellow documentarians also anticipated that Harvest of Shame could have an impact on public policy.[6] However, although the broadcast did induce a large outpouring of sympathy for the migrants, even its admirers acknowledge that Harvest of Shame had little influence on U.S. agricultural policy.[7]

Some of the producers' earliest production decisions may help explain the show's ineffectiveness. Television production techniques are often looked upon as mere formal or logistical considerations, having little to do with the eventual contents and themes of broadcast journalism. However, seemingly routine and innocuous decisions about the assignment of line producers and technical personnel, the types of interviews that are conducted, the reliance on "objective" shooting and editing styles, and the use of present-tense narration and recently shot footage can result in an emphasis on certain themes at the expense of others.

A number of the initial production decisions made by the people who worked on Harvest of Shame contributed to the framing of the farm labor problem as a timeless moral struggle between greedy growers and powerless agricultural laborers. In this way, the documentary presented the migrant worker issue as an essentially a historical phenomenon. While the producers' approach encouraged viewers to experience a strong sense of indignation at the migrants' plight, it also undermined the program's ability to examine the structural policies and technological developments that led to the post-World War II glut in agricultural labor.

This thematic limitation could be significant for two reasons. First, it is possible that the emphasis on emotional appeals, at the expense of historical understanding, reduced the program's potential to encourage meaningful changes in public policy. Second, because Harvest of Shame is so frequently acclaimed as one of the best efforts and achievements of television journalists, the program's critical successes may have circumscribed the types of production strategies and contents

expected from subsequent television exposes.

This article relies on an examination of the documentary itself, interviews with production personnel, and secondary source accounts to describe some of the less apparent and seemingly innocuous aspects of the documentary's production. The analysis not only sheds light on the formal strategies that helped make Harvest of Shame a brilliant marker of the hard-hitting television expose, it also suggests the pedagogical and policy limitations of the very techniques for which the documentary is renowned.

Although farm laborers had traditionally earned a poor living, a number of technological changes and policy developments after World War II had made the plight of agricultural laborers even more precarious. These historical developments had already made the problems of farm laborers an issue in Congress and in the press years before the broadcast of Harvest of Shame. In 1951, President Truman's Commission on Migratory Labor called the migrants the "children of misfortune" and recommended federal protection for them.[8]

Mechanization was first and foremost among the developments undermining farm labor.[9] While automation had traditionally been recognized as a threat to factory jobs, it posed an even greater threat to less skilled agricultural workers. By the 1950s, crops that used to be planted by hand were being planted and tended mechanically. Land-grant institutions and government-sponsored research aided this trend by introducing mechanical planting and spraying equipment, refrigerated transport, and hybrid crops that were suited to specific climates and soils. This enabled farmers to plant and tend vast plots quickly and with far less manual labor than had been needed in the past. The possibilities of refrigerated transport further encouraged growers to specialize in vegetable and fruit crops. Agricultural markets that were once only local became national, as farmers found new ways to deliver fresh produce to outlets across the United States. Thus, the staggered planting and harvesting seasons of the multiple crop small farm were in the process of giving way to the highly mechanized and specialized farming techniques of agribusiness.

This also changed the nature of agricultural labor. The increasingly mechanized, larger, and more specialized farms had far less need for manual labor, except during harvest time. Before this era, farm labor was needed throughout the planting, growing, and harvest seasons as small farmers invested in a greater variety of crops with different cycles of intensive labor. The agricultural "stoop" laborers of the past had lived near the farm fields where they could work throughout the year planting, maintaining, and harvesting crops. But after World War II, farm labor was needed primarily at harvest time, when the crops would either be picked for a profit or spoil in the field. The harvest season became the only time when intensive labor was in great demand, and that harvest season occurred only for a few weeks of the year in each of the different regions of the country. But if there was a labor shortage during that harvest time, the specialized growers would lose their livelihoods because most of them had invested everything in one or two high-yielding crops.

As a result, the specialized farmers, who depended on automated planting and tending techniques to farm more efficiently, desperately feared labor strikes and worker shortages during harvest seasons. They lobbied hard to import large numbers of workers even when there was already a glut of domestic farm laborers. The mechanization, specialization, and government policies that supported high-yield, large-scale farming also helped push millions of small family growers and multicrop tenant farmers off the land. Many of these displaced, often poorly educated, farmers joined the ranks of the traveling migrant farm laborers. These developments contributed to the glutted labor market and great harvest migrations of the 1940s and early 1950s. But by the mid-1950s newly introduced automated picking and sorting machines had even begun to undermine the great harvest season migrations. Although migrant labor was cheap, machine harvesting was cheaper still, and it came without potential labor problems. Therefore, the number of "hired farm workers" in the United States declined from its post-World War II peak of 4.3 million in 1950 to 3.6 million by the end of that decade.[10] Many of those lost jobs were nonmigratory "stoop" labor rather than migrants performing harvest season jobs. But by 1957 the need for migrant laborers had also begun to show a steady decline. [11]

This declining demand for farm labor was exacerbated in 1960 by the temporary importation of more than 450,000 Mexican nationals, colloquially known as "braceros," or "strong-armed men."[12] Migrant worker wages and living standards were further undermined by the annual importation of still more workers from what was then called the "West Indies," along with the substantial number of children and illegal aliens who routinely worked the fields. Thus, even when domestic migrants could find work, their piece-rate earning potential was undercut by a glut of foreign and illegal labor.[13] By the end of the 1950s, the extreme difficulty of this labor market had forced some domestic farm workers to drop out of the annual cycle of migration altogether and take up residence in decrepit urban and rural slums.[14]

Although the suffering caused by these trends was great, that suffering was rarely seen by the vast majority of well-fed U.S. citizens. Farm laborers had not organized into unions like many of their factory counterparts. Most migrants lacked education, had little or no savings, and knew no one in a position of power who was not part of the well organized growers' lobby. Farmers and farm laborers made up only a small fraction of the population in 1960, and the consumers of food also had an interest in seeing that farm wages and produce prices stayed low. The 1.6 million members of the American Farm Bureau Federation strongly supported agribusiness efforts to keep farm labor cheap and plentiful.

Yet in spite of the growers' financial and political clout, by the end of the Eisenhower Administration's second term, some politicians had begun to seek solutions to the farm labor problem. In the fall of 1960, the Presidential Committee on

Migratory Labor released a report recommending a long list of safety-net government actions to support farm laborers. Those recommendations included an extension of state workers' compensation, transportation safety, and child labor laws to cover agricultural workers; a call for all states to adopt migratory housing programs similar to those already in effect in a few states; and provisions for funding local schools and health agencies so they could administer a broader range of educational, health, and vocational services to the traveling migrants and their families.[15] During the summer of 1960 the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor, chaired by Harrison Williams of New Jersey, initiated seven pieces of legislation, including a bill extending minimum wage guarantees to migratory workers. This flurry of liberal legislative activity made the farm labor issue a timely subject for the new documentary series, "CBS Reports."

"CBS Reports" first began airing documentaries in 1959. Fred Friendly maintained that during the series' first five years, when he was the executive producer, network management never yielded to pressure from the agriculture, aviation, tobacco, and chemical industries to suppress or tone down programs critical of their practices.[16] Still, the cancellation of his controversial "See It Now" series in 1958 had made Friendly acutely aware of the preference of CBS management and many affiliates for more profitable banal entertainment programming.[17] He also knew that television managers' and affiliates cringed whenever his controversial documentaries took strong editorial positions. As a result, Friendly came to view his informational and journalistic programs as falling outside the margins of what had become a predominantly commercial entertainment medium.

Looking back on the "CBS Reports" years, Friendly would later write that, over time, the affiliates did manage to exert a subtle pressure to "do controversial subjects in a noncontroversial way."[18] Yet, former CBS editor John Schultz claims that Friendly went to great lengths to insulate the producers, editors, and other "CBS Reports" staff from corporate timidity or ratings pressures.[19] Perhaps as a result, those first years of "CBS Reports" were a time described by Bliss and Gates as the Friendly years and the best period of "CBS Reports."[20] This was the period when CBS and the other networks had only 15-minute newscasts, so many members of the CBS News staff also helped produce documentaries for prime time.

As executive producer of "CBS Reports," Friendly typically oversaw the editorial thrust of each of the documentaries at the same time that he provided the producers with ample budgets and time to construct full-length journalistic efforts. The reporters who were seen and heard by viewers often played only minor roles in shaping the programs. The various behind-the-scenes field producers came to be the principal authors of the documentaries. Curtin describes this as more than an inconsequential personnel decision.[21] The "CBS Reports" producers typically had more training and background in entertainment programming and feature film techniques than did the network's correspondents. These producers used Hollywood-style shooting and editing techniques to construct documentaries that played like dramatic narratives. In contrast, the network's correspondents typically had more journalistic training and tended to emphasize issues and information over drama and entertainment. In this respect, the empowerment of producers subtly advanced commercial values over more edgy information values.

Friendly originally turned to his old "See It Now" employees when he built the "CBS Reports" technical staff. The program started with the same four camera crews that had filmed Murrow and Friendly's Sunday night "Small World" public affairs program, but by 1960 six photographers, six film editors, six sound technicians, and technical operations manager Palmer Williams were working on the series. The technical staff's years of experience on CBS documentaries and special projects had taught them to meet Friendly's demanding specifications.

During the early 1960s, "CBS Reports" continued to rely on bulky 35mm newsreel-type cameras loaded with black-and-white film. The time and effort required to set these cameras in place tended to favor preconceived shots and planned interviews.[22] The size and weight of these cameras favored a newsreel shooting technique in which the camera was placed high on a tripod and simply panned to record various views of the activity. Thus, much of the conceptual work of structuring the early "CBS Reports" documentaries occurred either before shooting started or else in the editing room.

By the time Friendly took the helm of "CBS Reports," editing together conflicting sound-bites from experts who disagreed on an issue had already come to be recognized as one of his stylistic trademarks.[23] This technique tended to frame issues as conflicts between clearly opposed perspectives and forces. Not only did this production practice add drama to subject matter that lacked visual appeal, but it also enabled CBS to avoid criticism by covering controversial topics in a balanced and objective manner.

"CBS Reports," like its predecessor "See It Now," aired many more balanced news documentaries than unbalanced ones. Only about a tenth of the programs took editorial positions.[24] Friendly contends that even those few editorial exposes usually started out as more balanced pieces. But in some cases the weight of evidence so clearly supported one side over the other that it was unfair to present a balanced or even-handed report. In a number of ways, Harvest of Shame followed this pattern of evolution from a balanced to an editorial documentary.

Murrow and Friendly had wanted to do a program on the migrants years earlier, but no such program was ever produced because the "See It Now" staff could not get fruit and vegetable growers to participate in the type of two-sided discussions that would produce a balanced report on the subject.[25] Both Bliss and Gates point to field producer David Lowe as the person most responsible for making the program a reality.[26] Even before he was hired at CBS, Lowe repeatedly appealed to Friendly to do a documentary on the migrants. Friendly eventually acquiesced by hiring Lowe and assigning him the

migrant story in the fall of 1959.[27]

Lowe's background in show business out-weighed his journalistic credentials. He was the husband of New York World-Telegram's radio and TV critic Harriet Van Horne, had only minimal documentary credits and entirely lacked network journalism experience. At the time he was hired to be a line-producer for "CBS Reports," Lowe had a law degree, experience as a producer of live theatrical shows, and had already achieved some success as a quiz show producer. Within a month after talking Friendly into giving him the job, the charming Lowe also had some of the growers cooperating and talking to him.

Friendly insisted that the growers' perspective had to be covered if the documentary was to be produced.[28] Thus, at the start, the program was conceived as a report in which both the growers and people who were interested in reforms would have an opportunity to tell their sides of the story. But Friendly would later write that the growers arguments made them "their own worst witnesses."[29] This and the harsh realities of the migrants' living conditions prevented the documentarians from presenting a balanced broadcast.[30] Harvest of Shame editor John Schultz concurs that as the production progressed, it came to a point where all of the staffers knew they would produce a strongly editorial program. They saw people being treated in a terrible manner and were compelled to document the situation. By the time the production reached its final stages, Schultz claims there was no longer any discussion that the documentary might be taking too strong an editorial stand.[31]

In addition to getting interviews, Lowe went out to capture the day-to-day realities of migrant life on film. Through much of the winter, spring, and summer of 1960, Lowe and cameramen Marty Barnett and Charlie Mack followed impoverished migrants on their journeys from one harvest to the next. This filming lasted approximately nine months.[32] After seeing some of the material Lowe and Barnett had shot in Florida, film editor John Schultz asked Friendly to assign him to the project. As a young boy during the depression, Schultz and his family had picked crops in the state of Washington. When Schultz told Friendly about his experience as an agricultural laborer, Friendly made him the documentary's editor. It was Friendly who came up with the name for the program, while Lowe and Schultz structured most of the footage under Friendly's editorial guidance.

Although Sperber notes that Murrow took an unusually intense interest in the documentary's production, the star correspondent began working on the program only after the majority of the migrant camp filming had already occurred.[33] Murrow did bring an overtly pro-union perspective to the broadcast, a perspective that was evident in the documentary's unequivocal closing commentary. His pro-union sympathies have been at least partially attributed to Murrow's stint as a farm laborer during his youth.[34]

Harvest of Shame was Lowe's first attempt at writing for Murrow, so the script was reworked many times while Schultz and Lowe continued honing the documentary into shape.[35] Finally, Murrow himself began revising the script, bringing his own sonorous quality to the narration. By that time, it had become a fully collaborative venture. Lowe and Schultz edited the program, under Friendly's watchful guidance, while Lowe wrote much of the copy. Murrow made revisions along the way, and, at Friendly's urging, Murrow wrote the pro-migrant closing commentary. While the bulk of the report could best be described as a descriptive expose on the problems and squalid living conditions of the migrants, Murrow's closing commentary was a direct plea to Congress and the public to enact the pending legislation to aid agricultural laborers.

The background and individual strengths of each of the key production personnel appear to be reflected in their highly collaborative finished product. Cameraman Barnett knew how to go out into the field with primitive equipment and bring back moving documentary images. Producer Lowe brought a flair for literate writing and an ability to establish an even-handed rapport with both migrant laborers and wary growers. Although Executive Producer Friendly had far greater journalistic credentials than Lowe, both men also had quiz-show and entertainment backgrounds--training which had conditioned them to value a sequence that would grab an audience. Friendly's prior experience with televised documentaries had also taught him to use contrasting images and sound-bites to dramatize and delineate an issue. Editor Schultz was enamored with the dramatically produced and editorially explicit documentaries of Pare Lorentz. He also had some formal training in film production and had apprenticed under commercial and feature film editor Dena Levitt. This background enabled him to employ dramatic editing techniques for emotional effect. Among broadcasters, Murrow brought an unparalleled reputation for journalistic integrity and an outspoken disdain for network timidity. Murrow's keen interest in current events, as much as anything else, may have been responsible for the documentary's timely and politically pragmatic closing commentary.

Murrow apparently had to lobby hard to ensure that the program closed with an explicit call for political action.[36] Toward the end of the production cycle, Schultz constructed an emotional ending in which a little migrant girl's song was heard as the camera panned the faces of migrants. The editor wanted to evoke the pity and guilt he felt when watching images of the migrants. At a preliminary screening of the documentary, people cried at the power of Schultz's dramatic closing. But Murrow argued that the ending be changed because he wanted the program to leave viewers with a sense of anger and indignation rather than pity. He did not want the emotional release of a good cry. Murrow prevailed and the documentary ended with his politically-partisan closing commentary.

Thus, all concerned were committed in their own ways to help the migrants by creating the strongest documentary possible. But each of the staffers appeared to rely on his own unique abilities and vision to make the documentary such a moving and

strong one. It was this collaborative mixture of training, talents, and motivation that shaped Harvest of Shame. Each did what he always did, but felt compelled to give it his very best effort. The end product reflected the producers' cumulative professional skills, as well as their strong sense of compassion for the migrants.

The finished program's story line followed the annual migration of Florida migrants northward to the summer harvests in New York, and then their autumn retreat back to Florida in time for the winter citrus harvest.[37] Along the way, Lowe interviewed migrant laborers, providing glimpses of their lives in the fields and in the camps where they settled for days or weeks before moving on. In this way viewers were introduced to what Murrow called the "little pictures," the human dimension, of the great harvest migration. In what would later be recognized as a TV journalism staple, these "little pictures" served as representative microcosms of the national farm labor crisis.[38] The "little pictures" were bridged by recurring images of migrants packed in trucks and on buses as they journeyed to the next orchard or field in the next county or state. This editing technique conveyed the enormous scope of the migrations at the same time that it highlighted the cyclical qualities of the 1959-1960 harvest season.

Sometimes the imagery of labor camp life was interrupted by Murrow stand-ups--shots of Murrow out in a field speaking directly to the viewing audience. At other times the visual presentation of the migrant lifestyle was interrupted by Lowe or Murrow's interviews with public officials and spokespeople for the migrants and the growers. The interviewees' contradictory comments helped to frame the farm labor crisis as a classic confrontation between disorganized laborers and organized agribusiness interests. Included in the procession of witnesses was a spokesperson for a national growers' organization, the secretary of labor, a clergyman who served the migrants, a teacher of their children, an award-winning print journalist who had written exposes on the migrants, a sympathetic legislator, and two growers who hired migrant workers. There were also scenes of an AFL-CIO organizing rally in California and braceros from Mexico waiting in line so that they too could join in the U.S. harvests. The bulk of these pro-and-con sound bites supported the migrants' position over that of the growers. The fact that these interviews were interwoven with stark images of migrant living conditions further advanced Harvest of Shame's pro-migrant editorial theme.

Except for Murrow's stand-ups and closing commentary, Harvest of Shame employed journalistic techniques that are traditionally associated with more balanced editorial efforts. These techniques not only included two-sided interviews, but also what might be considered "objective" camera work. Cameramen Marty Barnett and Charlie Mack filmed the migrants in natural settings under natural lighting conditions. Their cameras generally remained stationary, and there were few closeup shots which might have conveyed a more intimate view of the migrants. Objective production techniques do not permit subjects to look directly into the camera. In only a very few shots did subjects ever acknowledge the presence of the camera by looking directly into it. Thus, the footage of the migrants presented a seemingly omniscient and detached perspective on migrant life.

The program's sense of objective realism was reinforced by its many "continuity edited" scenes. Harvest of Shame is not unique in this regard, nearly all Hollywood feature films and most television documentaries use continuity shooting and editing. These techniques give viewers the impression they are watching events unfolding before their eyes. Yet, continuity requires deliberate planning and effort in both the shooting and editing stages of a production.[39] Although a scene constructed in this manner may appear to be an inherently unmanipulated and factual recording, the camera person must carefully choose certain shots and the editor must deliberately strive to build an effective continuity scene. When carried out by skilled personnel, such continuity techniques can lend authority and credibility to journalistic scenes.

While objective camera work and continuity-edited scenes provided glimpses into the squalid conditions of a few migrant camps, the documentary's thematic editing techniques multiplied and abstracted those scenes of migrant squalor into a phenomenon of national significance. Individual shots of buses in transit, a disadvantaged migrant child, or a camp's unsanitary water supply were used to recall thematic points that had already been established in longer continuity-edited scenes. For example, early in the program the plight of four migrant families had been shown in four different continuity-edited scenes. Toward the end of the broadcast, shots of the heads of those four households--individual shots of Mrs. Brown, Mr. Roach, Mrs. King, and Mrs. Doby--were edited together in a brief thematic sequence. Brief images of the four family heads--two of them white and two black, three from the East Coast and one from the West Coast--were joined together to form the larger mosaic--the big portrait--of migrant life in the United States. The technique was as efficient as it was powerful, with the entire four-shot montage lasting less than ten seconds.

Although much of the program's location imagery was shot many months before the broadcast's air date, it was contextualized with present-tense narration. The reliance on a present-tense audio track in combination with undated location footage helped reinforce the impression that the annual cycle of migration was an ongoing and predominantly a historic event. The harvest migrations of 1960 were portrayed as an age-old ritual, an unchanging phenomenon that had always occurred and would continue to occur relatively unchanged.

Within this present-tense style, place names and harvest months indicated the workers' progression along the migratory route. As a result, the documentary focused its spotlight on the migrants' living and working conditions, rather than the policies and historical developments that had reduced so many agricultural workers to the status of indigent migrants. Such presentational techniques helped frame the farm crisis of 1960 as a timeless, perhaps even natural, phenomenon. The migrations were depicted like the inevitable change of seasons, rather than the fairly recent product of specific social and government policies.

government policies.

A number of allusions to prior literary, photographic, and feature film works subtly historicized the indigent migrants. This was accomplished by pictorially associating the agricultural laborers with prior generations of downtrodden U.S. workers. When Schultz was editing the documentary, Friendly instructed him to look for shots of migrants that were reminiscent of the photography and Hollywood films of farm families uprooted during the 1930s dust bowl.[40] The production staff eventually came to refer to these images as "Grapes of Wrath" shots. On one occasion this subtle theme was stated far more explicitly. That occurred in the introductory sequence when Murrow described the migrant situation as "a 1960 Grapes of Wrath."

Furthermore, a few shots compositionally linked migrant children with the turn-of-the-century child laborers photographed by Lewis Hine. Schultz notes that these few shots of young migrant children showed them looking directly into the camera, just like the child laborers who were the subjects of Hine's renowned muckraking photographs.[41] Such subtle compositional allusions probably helped to elicit indignation and compassion for the migrants. But the compositional techniques that linked the indigent agricultural laborers with downtrodden workers from prior eras also framed the migrants as an implausible anachronism in the modern and prosperous America of 1960. Thus, it appeared that with the help of progressive legislation, the migrants, too, would take their place among the burgeoning middle class of the 1960s.

Unfortunately, this subtly-implied scenario ignored many of the historic factors--automation, specialization, and global economic competition--that had contributed to the United States' industrial modernization and prosperity in 1960. But during the 1970s and 1980s, it became increasingly evident that these trends also had darker implications, as many more small farmers were forced off the land. Now, when viewed with the advantages offered by more than three decades of hindsight, we can see that those same forces also helped to drive large numbers of industrialized blue-collar workers from the once-burgeoning middle class. In this sense, Harvest of Shame's playful photographic and filmic allusions may have subtly advanced a tragically overly optimistic notion of the existing economic structure. When viewed in this light, rather than being depicted as anachronistic, the glutted pool of displaced agricultural laborers of the 1950s might have been better portrayed as harbingers of the massive labor displacements and underclass labor formations of the 1970s and 1980s.

Finally, Murrow's in-studio editorial closing remarks were written and filmed shortly before the scheduled broadcast date. In his closing commentary, which was dramatically lit against a black studio background, Murrow called for unionization and the extension of social programs to the migrants, as well as a public outcry for legislation to protect farm laborers. The closing was ideologically constrained by strains of liberalism and nationalism. The social programs that Murrow and the other pro-migrant spokespeople advocated were safety-net reform. With the exception of education, the recommendations, like those of the President's Committee on Migrant Labor, called for the disadvantaged workers and their families to receive minimum wages and social services. Thus, although the documentary advocated raising the substandard conditions of the migrants, there was no radical discussion of restructuring the agriculture industry or reconsidering the policies that had displaced large numbers of farmers and forced them to become migrant laborers.

The producers tailored their reformist arguments to fit the nationalistic allegiance of their audience. The broadest aired in the United States, not in Mexico or the Caribbean. Therefore, CBS's version of the plight of the migrant dealt strictly with the problems that U.S. domestic agricultural laborers faced. In this regard, the Mexican braceros and the imported laborers from the West Indies were portrayed not as people whose problems were worth solving, but as threats to the well-being of the domestic migrants.

It appears that Harvest of Shame's closing was designed to have a maximum influence on a number of specific liberal and national policy recommendations. The program contained little or no analysis of how automation, innovations in crop biology, international employment patterns, government food policies, and capital and market structures had influenced farm work. Rather than encouraging middle class urban workers to identify with the dismal plight of their rural work-force counterparts, Harvest of Shame's reliance on "objective" imagery, two-sided interviewing strategies, and nostalgic allusions helped to create a program which was emotionally stirring but not insightful. While the indignation and detached pity it fostered for agricultural laborers may have produced a temporary ground swell of support for pending liberal legislation, the documentary failed to convey the types of historical understandings that might have placed structural economic reform on the public agenda.

A number of the crucial production decisions, which eventually limited the program's contents, appeared to have been undertaken without careful deliberation of their consequences. Despite the variety of strengths the staffers brought to the project, no historian or historical perspective was included among the interviewees. As a result, Harvest of Shame delivered emotional heat at the expense of historical insight. What routinely started out as an objective two-sided report on the current conditions of the migrant work force, evolved into an emotional expose pitting shrewd and coordinated business interests against disorganized laborers. In this respect, the CBS staffers showed nerve and brilliance in reconceiving the balanced report into a stirring expose.

Both the initial report and the eventual expose were guided by a particular understanding of television journalism that puts a premium on creating visual records of ongoing phenomena. Staff members' earliest production efforts were designed to do just that--capture on film images and sound bites that conveyed the essence of the migrant experience. Thus, what was eventually produced was a visceral snapshot of migrant life. But, like a snapshot that transforms an event by freezing it in

eventually produced was a visceral snapshot of migrant life. But, like a snapshot that transforms an event by freezing it in time, a series of seemingly innocuous production decisions circumscribed the content of the broadcast to a surface depiction of the present moment. Within that unsightly image, the historical trajectories of automation, specialization, global competition, and prior agricultural policies could not be found.

It has already been noted that CBS's airing of Harvest of Shame amplified the existing debate between policy makers who identified with the interests of agribusiness and those who wanted to improve the lot of agricultural laborers. A vociferous portion of the viewing public appeared to embrace the broadcast's pro-migrant editorial thrust. A few weeks after the program had aired, CBS reported receiving approximately 2,700 communications on Harvest of Shame. Only 160 of those communications were critical of the broadcast, while CBS claimed the rest were "highly laudatory."[42]

Flattering accounts in the national press suggest that the program's emotional treatment and editorial themes were well received by working journalists. Variety called Harvest of Shame a "hard hitting condemnation of the evils of labor camp life and the plight of the nation's 2,000,000 to 3,000,000 migratory workers."[43] The trade journal's review also emphasized the fairness and comprehensiveness of the broadcast, stating that the documentary was "all encompassing in its treatment." New York Times television critic Jack Gould called Harvest of Shame "one of the most moving, skillful and bold documentaries" aired in years.[44] Gould praised Harvest of Shame for refusing to "follow the more prevalent documentary course of wringing its hands and then inviting the viewer to judge for himself."

In an article entitled "The Excluded Americans," Time quoted Producer David Lowe's statement that he wanted the documentary to "shock" the American public.[45] An editorial in the New York Times even credited the broadcast with mobilizing support for farm labor legislation by bringing "the shocking conditions under which the migrants live and work" to the attention of the American public.[46] On January 23, 1961, Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin confirmed that the program had apparently stirred a ground swell of public support for migrant workers:

If an army of firebrand orators had swept into Wisconsin pleading with the 4 million people of my State to concern themselves with the plight of migrant farmworkers, their impact would not have compared to the effect caused by a single television program, the CBS documentary Harvest of Shame.[47]

On Monday, January 30, 1961, the National Council of Churches, YWCA, Bishops' Committee for Migrant Workers, AFL-CIO, and the National Child Labor Committee sponsored a film showing of Harvest of Shame in the New Senate Office Building. The viewing was offered so that members of Congress and their staffs, who would soon be considering legislation to aid the migrants, could have an opportunity to see the documentary.

Agribusiness organizations and growers wasted no time responding to the broadcast. Carrol Miller of the Appalachian Apple Service wrote to the New York Times to rebut the broadcast's depiction of migrant life.[48] Miller stated that "Harvest of Shame made clever, sustained use of this proved emotion-rouser, without correction of the spoken and implied inference that this was the full picture . . . " An editorial in the American Vegetable Grower attacked the veracity of the documentary and asserted that the "migrant problem is largely a sociological problem, for which all the people of the country have responsibility."[49] But it was also clear that the growers feared solutions that might involve unions or the Federal Government. Instead they argued for time-worn local solutions, "These problems can be most effectively solved on the state level, where programs can be more closely tailored to fit state conditions."

The American Farm Bureau Federation provided the ammunition for attacks in Congress by Representative Robert Michel of Illinois and Senator Spessard Holland of Florida.[50] Sen. Holland cited both an American Farm Bureau Federation report and an investigation by the program's sponsor, the Philip Morris Cigarette Company, to defend the fruit and vegetable growers of his state. Holland then went on to list what he considered to be the seven most serious out of the total of nineteen misrepresentations outlined in the American Farm Bureau Federation's rebuttal to the program. Senator Harrison Williams of New Jersey, chair of the Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor and the single legislator who was interviewed in the broadcast, defended Harvest of Shame by replying, "My own reaction is that the program served a definite purpose. It helped many Americans to realize that there are serious problems in this area and that something should be done about them."[51] In order to put to rest the charges and counter-charges surrounding the accuracy of the documentary, Senator Williams also had the American Farm Bureau Federation report and CBS's 20-page reply to those allegations entered in the Congressional Record.[52]

In August 1961, the Senate passed three legislative bills developed by Harrison Williams of New Jersey. The philosophically liberal bills provided funding and grants to aid the education of migrant children and required crew chiefs to keep full financial records and meet other labor standards. In addition, the bills authorized spending $3 million annually to help local governments provide health services to migrant workers and their families.[53] Yet, broader measures to improve the plight of migrant laborers were not enacted. In the same year Congress passed the above measures, it also enabled seasonal Mexican farm laborers to continue to flood the already glutted U.S. farm labor market, and it rejected a minimum wage package for farm laborers.[54] Five years after the broadcast of Harvest of Shame, most migrant laborers still worked without a minimum wage guarantee, access to collective bargaining agreements, enforceable child labor statutes, and workers' compensation. The domestic migrants continued to compete with large numbers of legally and illegally imported foreign laborers, and if the migrants were U.S. citizens--but had no long-term permanent place of residence--they generally were unable to collect welfare or even exercise the right to vote.[55] Thus, in spite of initial public response to Harvest of

Shame, federal policy makers failed to take effective action to help the migrants.

The program graphically illustrated the suffering of migrant workers, but it failed to address the structural and historical dimensions of the farm labor crisis. As a result, Harvest of Shame could evoke pity and indignation, but it did not yield the types of insights or identifications between farm laborers and middle class citizens that might have brought about more self-interested and sustainable pressure for political action.

Yet, there is no indication that the CBS production staff ever consciously decided to downplay the historic and sociological dimensions of the farm labor crisis. Instead, it appears that the staffers intuitively turned to established production techniques which, in turn, precluded a more insightful historical approach to the subject. The producers' pursuit of contemporary images of migrant squalor and two-sided sound bites nearly guaranteed a moral confrontation between the indigent workers and the more prosperous growers. Consequently, Harvest of Shame failed to stimulate public discussion on a variety of more complex and possibly more significant social issues, including automation, the decrease in domestic wages associated with an industry that had access to international labor pools, and the economic restructuring of U.S. businesses after World War II.

As a result of its emotional strengths and the great number of laudatory accounts that have cited the documentary during the last three decades, Harvest of Shame's content limitations have largely been overlooked by broadcast journalism historians.[56] This oversight is significant because the documentary has taken on such importance as a historical marker and pedagogical tool. Today, it has become almost axiomatic to conceive of television journalism as better suited for conveying the most superficial and emotional aspects of a subject than it is at presenting more intellectually provocative contents. Because of its brilliance and notoriety, Harvest of Shame probably did as much as any documentary to foster that impression about television journalism.

For this reason, Harvest of Shame needs to be reconsidered as a historic marker of the television documentary. When viewed in such a critical light, the program's brilliance illustrates both the strengths and the weaknesses of the conventional television expose.[57] Recognition of its limitations--along with its well-documented strengths--would make Harvest of Shame an even more enlightening marker of broadcast journalism history.

NOTES

1.Many broadcast journalism histories extensively discuss Harvest of Shame's virtues. See e.g., Erik Barnouw, Documentary, A History of the Non-Fiction Film (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); William A. Bluem, Documentary in American Television (New York: Hastings, 1965); Raymond Lee Carroll, "Factual Television in America: An Analysis of Network Television Documentary Programs, 1948-1975" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1978); Fred W. Friendly, Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control . . . (New York: Random House, 1967); Gary Paul Gates, Air Time, The Inside Story of CBS News (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); Alexander Kendrick, Prime Time: The Life of Edward R. Murrow (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969); Bill Leonard, In the Storm of the Eye, A Lifetime at CBS (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1987); and Ann M. Sperber, Murrow: His Life and Times (New York: Freundlich Books, 1986). Although CBS only broadcast the program once, it has been distributed widely by CBS and other rental organizations. Many public libraries and most academic libraries have a copy. One such copy was used by the author to perform a close reading of the documentary text.

2.Edward Bliss, Now the News: The Story of Broadcast Journalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 392; Jay Ruby, "The Ethics of Imagemaking; or 'They're going to make a big star out of me . . . " in New Challenges for Documentary. ed. Alan Rosenthal (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 308-318; and Palmer Williams' comments in Peter Funt, "We're Still Renting Our Slaves," TV Guide, 9 August 1980, 19-22.

3."Television: The Excluded Americans," Time, 5 December 1960.

4.It is extremely difficult to establish causal relationships between media coverage, public opinion formation, and public policy initiatives. Yet an evolving body of agenda-setting theory posits complex linkages between coverage, opinion formation, and policy actions. See e.g., Bernard Cecil Cohen, The Press and Foreign Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Oscar H. Gandy, Beyond Agenda Setting: Information Subsidies and Public Policy (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1982); Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang. "Watergate: An Exploration of the Agenda-Building Process" in Mass Communication Yearbook, Volume 2, eds. G. Cleveland Wilhoit and Harold de Book (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981), 447-468; Maxwell E. McCombs, "Explorers and Surveyors: Expanding Strategies for Agenda-Setting Research," Journalism Quarterly 69:4 (1992): 813-824; Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media," Public Opinion Quarterly 36:2 (1972): 176-187; Everett M. Rogers and James W. Dearing, "Agenda-Setting Research: Where Has It Been, Where Is It Going?" in Communication Yearbook, Volume 11, ed. James A. Anderson (Newbury Park, Calif: Sage Publications, 1988), 555-594.

5.See Erik Barnouw. Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 178-184: and Daniel J. Leab. "'See It Now': A Legend Reassessed." in American History American Television: Interpreting the

Video Past, ed. John E. O'Connor (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1983) 22-23. Although there can be little doubt that the 1953 Radulovich broadcast brought about a public reversal of an Air Force policy decision, Friendly and Leab maintain that the "See it Now" March 9, 1954, McCarthy broadcast merely contributed to Senator McCarthy's downfall and his eventual "censure" in the U.S. Senate. See Friendly, Due 'to Circumstances Beyond Our Control . . . , 19-23; Michael D. Murray, "Television's Desperate Moment: A Conversation with Fred W. Friendly," Journalism History, 1:3 (Autumn 1974): 68-71.

Murray, "Television's Desperate Moment."

7.U.S. Congress, Senate, Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin stated that many were moved by CBS television documentary "Harvest of Shame" depicting the plight of migratory workers, 87th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record (23 January 1961), vol. 107, pt. 1, 1145; Senate, letter from Thomas K. Fisher, vice president and general attorney for CBS to the American Farm Bureau Federation, 87th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record, (16 February 1961), vol. 107, pt. 2, 2218; Funt, "We're Still Renting our Slaves."

8.See A.H. Raskin, "For 500,000--Still 'Tobacco Road,'" New York Times, 24 April 1960, IV:14, 128-130. The U.S. Department of Agriculture also issued a report in August 1940 that recommended the adoption of a number of measures to help hired farm laborers and displaced farmers. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economies, Technology on the Farm, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, August 1940) excerpted in Gigi M. Berardi and Charles C. Geisler, The Social Consequences and Challenges of New Agricultural Technologies (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 51-61. The Senate even founded an ongoing Subcommittee on Migratory Labor in 1959 to address migrant issues.

9.Kennett Love, "Machines Take Jobs, Driving Migrants to Rural Slums," New York Times, 2 September 1960, 14; Berardi and Geisler, The Social Consequences and Challenges of New Agricultural Technologies,

10.Leslie Whitener Smith and Gene Rowe, The Hired Farm Working Force of 1976, USDA Economies, Statistics, and Cooperative Service Agricultural Economic Report No. 405, 2. The Smith and Rowe figures are more conservative than those cited by Rep. B.F. Sisk when he argued on behalf of the temporary importation of more foreign farm workers. Rep. Sisk claimed that between 1950 and 1961, the number of "hired" farm workers had declined "from 3,190,000 to 1,890,000 as a result of technological developments." See U.S. Congress, House, Representative B.F. Sisk of California speaking for Continuation of the Mexican Farm Labor Program, 87th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record (10 May 1961), vol. 107, pt. 6, 7706. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the USDA's weekly Farm Labor reports defined "hired farm workers" as "persons ...ing farm work for pay" during the survey period. Most of these "hired farm workers" were not migrants. Members of a farm ...rator's family could also be included in these statistics, which were solicited from the farmer operators. It should also be noted that USDA surveys were likely to exclude or drastically under-report children under age 14 who worked for wages on farms. The number of domestic migrant farm workers--hired farm workers who traveled from their residence across a county line and stayed overnight at the work site--was estimated by Smith and Rowe to be slightly greater than 400,000 in 1960. This number was slightly greater than U.S. Department of Labor and Public Welfare figure of 335,000 foreign, but legally imported, migrant farm workers in 1960. The foreign worker figures were compiled in a report by the U.S. Senate's Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, Subcommittee on Migratory Labor, The Migratory Farm Labor Problem in the United States, 89th Cong., 1st sess., 1965, Report No. 155, p. 18.

11.Love, "Machines Take Jobs, Driving Migrants to Rural Slums," 14.

12.Raskin, "For 500,000--Still 'Tobacco Road,'" 128; and Subcommittee on Migratory Labor, The Migratory Farm Labor Problem in the United States, 18. Between 1955 and 1959, the number of legally imported foreign migrants peaked at well over 400,000. After 1960, the number of legal foreign migrants declined steadily until it reached 200,000 in 1964. The foreign labor program was discontinued in 1965.

13.The January 10, 1958, Farm Labor report of the USDA (p. 23) showed that real farm wage rates had not even doubled from 1910 through 1957, despite tremendous increases in worker productivity. The real wages for agricultural workers had even decreased slightly from the peak years of 1945-1946. Thus, although farm productivity had increased dramatically and farm worker wages had been increasing slightly since the turn of the century, agricultural wages had fallen well behind the gains achieved in other industries.

14.Berardi and Geisler, The Social Consequences and Challenges of New Agricultural Technologies; Iowa State University Center for Agricultural and Economic Adjustment, Labor Mobility and Population in Agriculture, (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1961); Raskin, "For 500,000--Still 'Tobacco Road,'" 128.

U.S. Congress, Senate, letter from Thomas K. Fisher, vice president and general attorney for CBS to the American Farm ...reau Federation, 87th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record, (16 February 1961), vol. 107, pt. 2, 2222.

16.Friendly, Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control . . . , 132.

17.Ibid., 68-98, 135.

18.Ibid., 135-136.

19.Former CBS Editor John Schultz, telephone interview by author, 15 April 1991, audio tape recorded, New York City.

20.Bliss, Now the News, 404; and Gates, Air Time, The Inside Story of CBS News.

21.Michael Curtin, "Packaging Reality: The Influence of Fictional Forms on the Early Development of Television Documentary," Journalism Monographs 137 (February 1993): 24-28; and Gates, Air Time, The Inside Story of CBS News, 111.

22.Joseph Michalak, "CBS Reports' Covers Assortment of Topics in Many Localities," New York Times, 13 December 1959, II:21; Schultz interview; Palmer Williams, former manager of technical operations for CBS News, telephone interview by author, 13 April 1991, audio tape recorded, New York City.

23.Bluem notes that Friendly idiosyncratically referred to this editing technique as "talking heads." Bluem, Documentary in American Television, 99. It is also interesting to note that Friendly continued to rely on new versions of "talking heads" even after he left CBS. As a specials and series producer for PBS, he would orchestrate round table discussions in which a moderator would call upon one expert after another to obtain contrasting sound bites about an issue.

24.Friendly, Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control . . . , 121, 135, 156.

25.Sperber, Murrow: His Life and Times, 594-595.

26.Bliss, Now the News, 392; and Gates, Air Time, The Inside Story of CBS News, 187.

27.Friendly, Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control . . . ; Schultz interview; Williams interview.

28.Friendly, Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control . . . , 120-121.

29.Ibid., 121.

30.Ibid., 122.

31.Schultz interview.

32.Friendly, Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control . . . , 121; Schultz interview.

33.Schultz interview; Sperber, Murrow: His Life and Times, 595, 604. There are some significant differences between the Schultz and Sperber accounts of the production. Sperber's biography of Murrow focuses on the star correspondent's extensive editorial role in the documentary. However, Schultz's account of the production suggests that, with the exception o f the closing commentary, Friendly and Lowe had far greater editorial roles in shaping the production. According to Schultz, he and Lowe would edit portions of the documentary and show their work to Friendly, who would then comment on their efforts. Murrow was either out of this process, or else working quietly with Friendly. Although they do not go into depth on this production issue, the accounts by Bliss and Gates support Schultz's contention that Murrow's editorial role was far more limited than that of David Lowe.

34.Sperber, Murrow: His Life and Times, 595.

35.This understanding of the collaborative effort is based on a number of accounts, in particular those of Friendly, Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control . . .; Kendrick, Prime Time: The Life of Edward R. Murrow; Schultz interview; Sperber, Murrow: His Life and Times; Williams interview.

36.Schultz, interview with the author; Sperber, Murrow: HIS Life and Times. 604.

37.The discussion of the program's plot and analysis of production techniques is based on the author's careful examination of a film version of Harvest of Shame, which CBS distributed for years after the November 1960 broadcast. The film was identical to the original broadcast version, except that there were no commercial breaks in the distributed film.

38.Peter C. Rollins. "Television's Vietnam: The Visual Language of Television News." Journal of American Culture (1981).

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114-135.

39.Curtin describes the rise of Hollywood continuity editing techniques within early CBS television documentary units and CBS's early news primer advocates using specific continuity shooting techniques in journalistic productions. Curtin, "Packaging Reality," 19-24; CBS, Television News Reporting (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1958), 64-66.

Schultz, interview with the author.

41.Ibid.

42.U.S. Congress, Senate, letter from Thomas K. Fisher vice president and general attorney for CBS to the American Farm Bureau Federation, 87th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record (16 February 1961), vol. 107, pt. 2, 2218.

43."Harvest of Shame," Variety, 30 November 1960, 31.

44.Jack Gould, "Television Documentaries: Plight of Migrant Workers, the Case of the U-2 Flight and Churchill Story are Subjects of Network Programs," New York Times, 4 December 1960, II: 17.

45."Television: The Excluded Americans," Time, 5 December 1960.

46."Justice for Migrant Workers," New York Times, 4 December 1960, IV: 8.

47.U.S. Congress, Senate, Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin stating that many were moved by CBS television documentary "Harvest of Shame" depicting the plight of migratory workers, 87th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record, (23 January 1961), vol. 107, pt 1, 1145.

48.Carroll R. Miller, "Treatment of Migrants: Pay, Working Conditions Defended, Emotional Appeals Decried," New York Times, 17 December 1960, 22.

49.American Vegetable Grower, "We Can and Must Fight Back!" January 1961, 42.

U.S. Congress, House, Rep. Robert Michel of Illinois speaking on "Harvest of Shame," 87th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record (2 February 1961), vol. 107, pt. 2, 1686-1687; U.S. Congress, Senate, Senator Spessard Holland of Florida on the telecast "Harvest of Shame" being unfair to Florida agricultural employers and employees, 87th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record, (6 February 1961), vol. 107, pt. 2, 1756-1758.

51.U.S. Congress, Senate, Senator Harrison Williams of New Jersey speaking of documentary film, "Harvest of Shame," 87th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record, (16 February 1961), vol. 107, pt. 2, 2211.

52.U.S. Congress, Senate, analysis of "The Harvest of Shame" and CBS letter to Charles B. Shuman of American Farm Bureau Federation, 87th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record, (16 February 1961), vol. 107, pt. 2, 2216-2222.

53."Bills on Migrants Passed by Senate," New York Times, 26 August 1961, 28. A five-year recap of legislation passed to assist the migrants can be found in 1965 report of the Subcommittee on Migratory Labor, The Migratory Farm Labor Problem in the United States, 1-24, 62-76.

54."Unfinished Congressional Tasks," New York Times, 25 September 1961, 32.

55.Subcommittee on Migratory Labor, The Migratory Farm Labor Problem in the United States, 1-40. Also see Willard A. Heaps, Wondering Workers: The Story of American Migrant Farm Workers and their Problems (New York: Crown Publishers, 1958), 155-161; and Marc Linder, Migrant Workers & Minimum Wages: Regulating the Exploitation of Agricultural Labor in the United States (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992).

56.For an exception, see Ruby's work on documentarians' tendency to victimize the least empowered groups in the society, Jay Ruby, "The Ethics of Imagemaking; or 'They're going to make a big star out of me . . . '"

See e.g., Richard Campbell, 60 Minutes and the News: A Mythology for Middle America (Urbana: University of Illinois ess, 1991).

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): EDWARD R. MURROW