Mickelson: Well, you can blame the news consultants but in a sense they’re the messengers. You know, it’s really going to kill the messenger who delivers the bad news. Who hired the news consultant? Sure, the news consultant got an idea and he went to management and said, “Look, you’ve got a lot of dollars riding on your news operation. I’ll come in and I’ll get you some more dollars out of it and some more rating points.” So the news consultant is hired. I really don’t see anything wrong with a news consultant. As a matter of fact, I think I was one of the first to hire a specific news consultant for that purpose back in the time that I knew it would be Edwards — that Doug Edwards had to be moved out of the position now occupied by Walter Cronkite — had to gather evidence to do it to prove my point which is the wrong way to use evidence, I guess. I got a motivational research company run by Phil Eisenberg to come in and find out about Edwards and Huntley-Brinkley and public reaction to it and the like. Well that’s a consultancy and I think you ought to use consultancies, but you ought to use it to back up your judgments or to give you new suggestions which you then analyze and determine whether you accept or reject. But if somebody comes in and says, “Don’t let a single story run over sixty minutes,” or “Be sure you don’t hire an anchor man over thirty-two years old,” or “You must have an anchor team of man and woman and the female end of it can’t be more than twenty-five,” and, you know, that sort of thing, that carries the role of the consultant far too far. But it isn’t the consultant’s fault, it’s management’s fault for permitting it. If consultants come in and work with news directors and make suggestions to news directors, and news directors [are] in the position to accept
or reject, then I think the consultant is all to the good. But if the consultant (dog barks) comes in solely for the point of getting ratings all costs, at any cost, and not for the purpose of finding a better way to maintain substance, then I think the whole business is perverted. And I think that's a dangerous prospect in the long haul.

Heighton: In the last couple of years the ranks of journalism have suffered some major defeats in the United States courts. I'm thinking particularly of the Farber case where it now seems clear that reporters will have to fight very hard to keep the confidentiality of their notes and sources. Do you want to talk about this trend, intrusions into newsrooms by...?

Mickelson: I'm very, very fearful that the courts are getting too far into the business of day-to-day reporting, and I think also that judges just like all other human beings are human, unfortunately, and let their own prejudices intrude. I think the judge in the Farber case let his own prejudices intrude into the matter and I think he read many aspects into that case that simply were not there. It's dangerous, it's damaging. I think the Stanford University case which in effect gives the right for search and seizure at a newspaper office or a broadcasting office is dangerous. I think some of the decisions of the Burger Court, some of them written by Warren Burger himself in which he denies that the First Amendment rights of the media are any greater than the First Amendment rights of a single individual are dangerous. I think they're dangerous because the media must serve as the eyes and ears of the public since the public can't do — since the public, the individual can't do everything for himself, he's got to have
somebody who's watching out after his interests. On the other hand, I'm troubled by too dogmatic an application of the so-called "privilege principle." It seems to me that we must take into consideration the fact that there is a Sixth Amendment as well as a First Amendment and it seems to me we have to be respectful of the rights of the accused, and it seems to me that there has to be some constraint exercised by journalism and some — and the right of privilege can't be an absolutely free and unconstrained right in any way. But that's quite apart from the fact that judges certainly should not permit their biases against the media to intrude into decisions they write.

Heighton: To conclude our interview, looking back over the last thirty five years what do you feel have been the greatest contributions broadcast journalism has made in this country?

Mickelson: Well, I suppose the greatest contribution has been taking news and information related to news out of the hands, not of the few because newspaper circulations were always broad but into the hands — in the minds I guess you should say — of the many. Broadcasting has made it possible through radio and television to reach genuinely mass audiences. It's been possible to get out of the areas where international news or national news was relatively limited — rural areas, for example, which had been dependent upon rural newspapers or into cities in the country which were given short shrift to anything but local news. It's been able to expand audiences for serious information in areas where the newspapers simply are not very good and are limited in their content to the more sensational items. I think
this has been all to the good. I think the fact that broadcasting has
tained sense of participation because it's able to sit in on a communication
Leaders come alive as real people. It's shown the public I think a lot of
been able to personalize news and information has been useful. It's made
this has been all to the good. I think the fact that broadcasting has
Mickelson: sit in on joint sessions of the Congress of the United States to hear the State of the Union Message by the President. It's been able to sit in on debates between presidential candidates and I suppose you might even say participate on moon landings by being there when an astronaut sets foot on the surface of the moon. I think all of this has been very much to the good. I think another thing that broadcasting has done — in addition to reaching parts of the audiences which were not reached in the past by newspapers, it also has served fairly well to clarify complex issues. I think some of the devices used by the networks to explain the meaning of inflation, for example, have been useful. I think the energy story has been well explained, particularly by the networks.

In general, I think, this country at least has profited enormously from the fact that enormous resources have been put into news broadcasting both by the networks and the local stations. On the other hand, it seems to me that we are now in the position where most broadcasters do have a sense of responsibility to the public. I think they feel deeply the fact that they sit in positions of power and that that power can be used for the good if they devote the right judgment to it. I think there's a danger that in another generation we might have a different generation of owners and managers. We might have a generation, or at least in some cases within a new generation, that has less of a sense of public responsibility than the present owners and managers have. I think we might have executives who would be more willing to bend the power of the medium to their own personal uses or their own personal welfare. This you can argue would be restrained by
federal regulation but, you know, it really can't be by federal regulation.

There are too many things that could be done which would be disadvantageous or actually dangerous to the public welfare without in any way coming in conflict with federal regulatory rules. As a matter of fact they'd probably be better off without those regulatory rules, letting the marketplace decide. But as the competition again for ratings and for dollars goes on and as managers, owners, executives find more and more that the medium does have a great deal of power it would be pretty difficult to restrain an individual from making use of it. I think we came dangerously close to it on occasions, even in the use of Section 315. We had to make the decision frequently who is a candidate and who isn't a candidate because there isn't any clearcut way of deciding. I had to withdraw an invitation from Hubert Humphrey at one point to appear on "Face the Nation" because it was decided in a general management meeting that because his name had been put in the race by Senator McCarthy — Gene McCarthy — and Orville Freeman that he was a candidate and we couldn't give him the time on "Face the Nation." Well you see this power which is written into the legislation of the country could very well be used — those decisions could be made — those interpretations made in such a way to serve the personal interests of the individual or the private interests of a corporation and I think this is a danger for the future that we have to guard against, and I don't know of any way of guarding against it except to hope that people who get into the business and rise to positions of power will be public-spirited citizens. I don't think the public-spirited citizens, for example, which created quite a commotion dur-
ing (6) the last two or three years in this country is at all representa-

ive of what might happen, but if the ratings wars becomes too intense

I can see in those intensive rating wars there could be a reduction in
the high standards which now prevail. What’s the next generation of news

broadcasters, for example, going to be? When Walter Cronkite drops out
of the position, when he retires which may happen very soon, is CBS then
going to decide that it’s got to stay in the ratings race? Is it going
to have the kind of successor to Walter Cronkite who is there principally
because he’s able to get ratings or principally because he’s a man of sub-

stance and has used judgment? This is a danger. As of now I think
CBS in all probability will put into that position when Cronkite leaves a
genuine self-respecting newswoman, but if the competition gets too severe
at sometime in the future what might happen? We’ve seen disintegration
in some communities because of the competition for rating points and for
profits that could even at sometime perhaps — it’s [not] likely but it
could extend to the networks. In other words, I think that broadcasters
have got to band together to maintain some kind of high

standards. I don’t think you can talk in terms of any rules and regula-
tions that must be imposed on them but there has to be this combined atti-
uide which feeds on itself of maintaining this sense of standards, sense
of public responsibility, sense of public obligation, so that the institu-
tion of broadcasting with all the power which it can wield doesn’t get
away from its present high standards. I think that answers (6)
the most important thing. I’ve seen many cases where we’ve been close to
performing acts with broadcasting in a way which could be dangerous to the
general public, but I think generally we were able to restore a sense of genuine responsibility, and having seen how close you can get to the precipice on occasion I just have a feeling that it's important that people realize that and that they keep on convincing themselves that the standards have got to be held high.

Heighton: In your book, THE ELECTRIC KIE, you had a number of interesting things to say about the mix of politics and broadcasting. Since you wrote that book have you changed any of your attitudes on this subject?

Mickelson: Well, I think I have. I think I now have quite mixed feelings about the relationship of politics and television. I think the book reflected the beginning of a change in attitude from that early period when we were absolutely euphoric about what television was going to do to the whole political process. You know, we went into that campaign of 1952 convinced that we had the most magnificent new device that had ever been created, a device that would bring politics literally into the living room, a device that would make candidates become real human beings — much more than just cold characters in print or on the radio — to all of the electorate that would bring out voters in masses which we had never heard of before, and that the result of all of this would be a functioning and pure democracy. We even talked about television bringing us as close as we could get in the modern era to the Greek city state. We projected the idea that democracy can extend out as far as a man's voice would carry. We said, "Now that we have a combination of pictures and sound and man's voice and his appearance literally carried to the four corners of the country, and therefore we can extend democracy to the four corners of the country."
something like 97 percent saturation, more than a hundred million persons listen to the political campaigns. There are really large audiences for presidential messages. There were presidential debates in 1976 that drew large audiences to hear candidates Ford and Carter in action, and the logical outcome of the thing would be a greater sense of participation in politics. But that hasn't happened and there must be some reason why it hasn't happened. And I suppose if you go back over the history of television and try to do an analysis of what television really is you may be able to find it. I have a feeling perhaps that Marshall McLuhan writes that it is a little difficult to stomach. At the same time when he talks about the cool medium and when other persons refer to television as a medium that doesn't demand any active participation on the part of the viewer, then perhaps television has a tendency to make us supine, to put the average viewer-listener in a position where he doesn't really react, he doesn't really respond, so that instead of developing enthusiasm for participation in the electronic process, instead of demanding to know more about the pro-
cess and about the candidates and about the issues, instead of insisting on going to the polls, he becomes bored by the whole process. I have no evidence to prove that hypothesis but I have a feeling that something of that sort may be happening. I also wonder whether television hasn't had a tendency to oversimplify issues, to oversimplify an approach to the point where the public thinks that everything can be solved by television. It all seems so simple on television and then we find out that inflation keeps on developing and prices grow higher at the grocery stores and gasoline becomes more difficult to get for the cars, life becomes more complex and more difficult and what they've learned on television hasn't helped them any and there's a sense of frustration. It seems to me that something of that sort may be happening, and this isn't necessarily due exclusively to television's coverage of the political campaigns but is also due to the day-to-day impression which results from watching television on a regular basis. The viewer, it is quite conceivable, goes to television more and more in the news broadcasts for a quick glance of what is happening, catches the superficial overview of the news without any real involvement in it, vicarious or otherwise, without any attachment to it, and he's become inured to what happens on the television screen and his nerve endings have been deadened and he no longer responds as he used to previously. Now it will take sometime before we find out more about a hypothesis of this sort but so far it is certainly true that everything we've said about television as an aid to political campaigning and to the more efficient functioning of democracy, has been badly exaggerated -- very seriously exaggerated. Now as to the influence on the campaign I think something of the same sort is true. I remember all the brave statements we made in 1952, '53, '54 -- we said campaigns
were going to be shorter, there was no need of a long campaign. Long cam-
paigns have actually gotten longer. We announced, for example, that it
wasn't going to be necessary any longer to get out and shake hands. Well
that's not true, but the campaign actually has taken a different form.
Rather than the big public speech in the auditorium which is heard on radio
by thousands or hundreds of thousands of persons, campaigners have taken to
the jet airplane and now they do two and three and four appearances a day which means they can fly by jet from city to city and go
to shopping centers and to big supermarkets and the like and do their cam-
paigning there. And of course out of that they also get media play on the
television news broadcasts. Now you can't -- you can give television part
of the credit for doing that but the jet airplane has been tremendously im-
portant and if it hadn't been for the jet airplane we might still be -- even
with television -- campaigning the same old way. As to expenses in campaigns,
the most recent Federal Election Campaign Act has, by cutting down on total
expenditures, substantially raised the percentage of the candidate's ex-
penses which go toward television. But at the same time another factor has
come along, the use of the computer and direct mail, and now I suppose in the
minds of most campaign executives the computer and direct mail are considered
actually almost as important as the early evening broadcast, so that the pre-
dictions again have not come true in their entirety because there have been
other factors -- the jet airplane, the computer and the like have had a ten-
dency to reduce to a considerable extent the emphasis that we thought was go-
ing to be placed on television. So I really seriously have mixed feelings
and I wonder if we have generally benefited as we thought we would from the
participation of television in the whole electoral campaign and governmental process.

Heighton: If television has contributed so greatly to the kind of political apathy we've noticed in the last ten or fifteen years, is there something that the television industry could be doing or should be doing to jar us out of this complacency?

Mickelson: Well, I'm afraid there may be certain built-in disadvantages to the use of television which means that you can't completely overcome it, but I think there are certain things that can be done. I think the networks in their regular news broadcasts in the last few years have been doing an absolutely superb job of handling serious news and not getting too concerned by chasing after the will-o'-the-wisp of the film for example. They're approaching news seriously, responsibly -- they're making an effort to present hard news interestingly and understandably to the public. I think that's a step forward and I think it may do very well in overcoming some of the apathy -- part of the apathy in the future. I'm afraid that many local stations, however, have taken the view that the ratings you get out of news are much more important than the information which you communicate. The ratings, of course, are immediately transferable into dollars and the dollars in gross income are translatable into net profits, and as a consequence in too many cases in my opinion local stations have permitted themselves the luxury of creating their news broadcasts with largely an entertainment image rather than an information communication image. I don't think there's anything wrong with it but I think this fact contributes to the apathy in the sense that news becomes entertainment. There's a tendency to shy away from any-
thing which is difficult or serious to explain or relates to serious problems which affect the individual and news becomes rather a sort of a montage of accidents and fires and crime and soft feature stories and, in some cases, Chamber of Commerce puffs and extended weather broadcasts and extended sports broadcasts, and it never gets around to grappling with the hard facts of life and the difficult to picture news stories which are developing all the time in boards of education, and planning and zoning commissions, in the bureaus which maintain crime statistics, in the urban redevelopment processes, and that sort of thing. I'm not sure how much good it would do to beef up these broadcasts and redirect them toward more serious news. It would be costly undoubtedly — it would cost station operators at least a substantial amount of investment in larger staffs. It might be damaging to some extent in the competitive battle for ratings, but in the long haul it seems to me it would serve not only the community but also the station operator as well in that it would create an aura around the station — an aura of public responsibility, an aura of public service which I'm quite convinced the evidence will show from past examples can be converted into net profits.

Heighton: A few minutes ago you mentioned the use of computers in political campaigns. Would you comment on that and how it's used in conjunction with television coverage?

Mickelson: Well, I've been particularly concerned in the past with the manner in which it's used for projecting outcomes of elections, not concerned to the extent that I'd want to withdraw the computer from the television in any way. But there has been a lot of complaint. For example,
there's been complaint from the West Coast to the effect that most of the national election is already buttoned up before the polls close in California, Washington, and Oregon, because of the three-hour time gap between East Coast and West Coast. Actually I've been seriously interested in this whole business about the projection of election returns for a long time. Before I moved into New York, when I was still at WCCO in Minneapolis, the CBS-owned station I repeat again, I did most of the election coverage on my own as the head of the News Department there, and by some careful studying of statistics I came up with conclusions which paralleled those by the statisticians. I found, for example, in the Minnesota area that a candidate who got about fifty-six percent in Hennepin County which included Minneapolis, fifty-eight percent of Ramsey County including St. Paul, and about fifty-eight percent of St Louis County including Duluth, was almost certain to be the winner. If a Democrat got those percentages he was in -- there wasn't much of any doubt about it -- but I also found out that there were some counties, some precincts down on the southern border of the state in relatively wealthy areas that normally voted between eighty-five percent Republican and ninety percent Republican. Well, it occurred to me that if one of those precincts would come in with seventy-five percent Republican instead of eighty-five or ninety percent there was a pretty good indication that the Republicans were losing. Well, I checked it out in 1948 -- we made some special efforts to cover precincts -- and found out that that's precisely what happened. We knew well before anybody else did that Tom Dewey was in serious trouble in the Middle West and that Hubert Humphrey had knocked off the popular Republican senator, Joe Ball, in that state. Well, when I got into New York, after the conclusion of the 1952 Conventions our Special Events chief, Paul Levitan, came one day and told me that if we
wanted to we could use the Univac computer to project the returns in that
election. Univac at that time had only one or two units built, IBM was just
barely getting into the computer business, and having some idea from the
Minneapolis experience of what we could do I jumped at it and said, "Let's
go." So we did use the computer to project the election returns of 1952 and
actually by 8:30 at night hit it on the nose — Univac reported that the
odds were one hundred to one that Eisenhower was going to win the election
and hit within four or five electoral votes of the total that Eisenhower
would receive. Now we never had this on the air for a curious reason. The
statistician Remington Rand had employed was a Stevenson man and he was con-
vinced that Stevenson was going to win and when he saw the odds a hundred to
one he said to himself that there must be some error in this whole process
which was haphazard at best. So he juggled his correction factors around a
little bit and added in some new data for New York State and somebody in
the process of adding the New York State data added an extra zero on the end
of the Stevenson vote in New York State, so at about a quarter to nine we
got a report that Eisenhower was going to win by eight to seven. Well, by
that time we knew that Eisenhower had it in the bag anyway. But this was a
beginning, now this was only a beginning — we caught a lot of flak after
that from a number of sources, including Scotty Reston of The New York Times
who wrote a number of columns in which he interviewed "Uniquack, the All-
Knowing Device" which could predict what anybody was going to do. But we
were convinced that we had something important although it had been haphazard
and we put it all together in about six or eight weeks time. But we went
ahead and, of course, the main use of the computer in this purpose is not
necessarily just to predict the election that's going to come up but it's
rather to try to find out how people respond to various issues. So by the
time 1960 came around we had refined the whole process in considerable de-
tail and moved from Univac to IBM. And in the primaries, for example, we
were able to find out how ethnic groups were reacting to the candidates in
the primaries, finding out how social conditions were causing voters to re-
spond. In the Wisconsin primary, for example, we discovered that in the
race between Kennedy and Humphrey that Kennedy was very strong with the
wealthier German Catholic farmers and very strong with the urban Polish city
workers, that Humphrey's strength was largely with the poorer farmers and
the poorer northwestern portion of the state who were mostly Protestant.
And we were able to project that later into West Virginia and to other
states for the two candidates, and we were able to come to a pretty good
reading of what the public mood was during this period. Now I don't think
any damage was done by that at all and I think actually the country has prof-
ited generally from the fact that television personnel have become very adept
at the use of the computer for purposes of analyzing in an election campaign
and on election night of voter preferences and being able to project.
There've been some studies made about projections -- nothing I guess is de-
finite at this point -- but the data that's been unearthed so far has in-
dicated that Californians are simply not affected by early returns or early
projections from the East. They still go ahead and vote their own impres-
sions and their own attitudes so it seems quite likely that no damage has been
done. I cite this because it was really television that brought this new wrinkle into the process of covering politics, particularly in the covering of election night. Newspapers have had their Gallup polls and their Harris polls and their Roper polls run in advance, but it was television that changed the whole process of covering election night by gathering returns faster and by running projections during the evening as the evening went along. And it has compelled a lot of attention, attracted a lot of attention to itself as a result, and in that respect I think has performed a genuine service for the public.

Heighton: This tape has been an interview with Mr. Sig Mickelson who is now the Distinguished Visiting Lecturer in the Telecommunications and Film Department. The interviewer has been Elizabeth Heighton, Professor, Telecommunications and Film, San Diego State University. Today's date is March 13, 1979.

End of Reel 5, Side 1
End of Mickelson-Heighton Oral History Interview, March 13, 1979

Transcribed by Catherine Heintz, April 19, 1979