PS1 for 9/1/88#MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE REPUBLICAN CONVENTION

I'm tired of hearing complaints from the television media that the Republican and Democratic National Nominating Conventions are too long, too boring, should be shortened to two days, or should be better adapted to television. Such comments are usually accompanied by predictions (or implied threats) that the parties must change their act or else the networks are unlikely ever again to offer four-night, live prime-time convention coverage.

Who do the television moguls think they are that our political system should be changed to accommodate their profit-making prime-time schedule? Are these complaints sour grapes because the drop in audience ratings meant a corresponding loss in advertising income?

It's possible that the loss of audience was due less to disinterest in the convention itself than to overexposure of the same network faces telling us what to think about the convention. Or, perhaps the decline in audience percentage was due to public frustration with watching the media reporters try to make the news themselves by the way they frame and repeat the questions.

We have been told for years that ""journalistic ethics'' prohibit covering events that are merely staged for the TV cameras. Supposedly, television only reports and films the real thing.

Well, the National Nominating Conventions are the real thing. They are America's unique democratic/republican way of choosing our Presidents. They have stood the test of time. The participants perform an important function and, for the most part, they enjoy doing it.

What's behind the journalists' criticism of the ritual and the pace of political conventions may be that the media are chafing at the bit to be players in the game rather than reporters of events. However, they really can't have it both ways and, when they try, they

lose credibility.

The media have become so entranced with themselves that they have taken to reporting more about themselves at the Republican National Convention than about the political figures. The media personalities are trying to give themselves superstar status.

Except for the Ronald Reagan, George Bush and Dan Quayle speeches, the TV networks spent more time showing media persons on the tube than political persons. The TV camera showed the reporters and the anchors as much as the Republicans they were interviewing.

Come on, now. People who tune in to view the Republican National Convention want to hear the speeches of the Jeane Kirkpatricks, the William Bennetts, the Jack Kemps, the Phil Gramms, the Henry Hydes, and other Republican leaders from all over the country. They do not tune in to see the same tired faces of Dan Rather, David Brinkley, Tom Brokaw, Sam Donaldson, Lesley Stahl, or Andrea Mitchell asking repetitious questions.

Most of the newspapers followed the same pattern, giving more celebrity status and coverage to media personalities than to the politicians who attended the Convention.

Is it really Republican Convention news that NBC's Bryant Gumbel is the ""coolest dresser,'' or that CBS's Andy Rooney wore the ""most-wrinkled shirts,'' or that NBC's Jane Pauley and CBS's Kathleen Sullivan had a new humid-weather hairdo, or that Tom Brokaw changed his suit between NBC's Nightly News and the evening Convention coverage?

The (BF)Washington Post(end BF) and other newspapers not only reported media social events as though they were political news, but elevated these gatherings to ""power parties.'' CBS had a ""power breakfast atop the posh Windsor Court Hotel.'' Mortimer Zuckerman, owner of (BF)U.S. News & World Report(end BF), had a buffet supper at

the world-famous Antoine's, and other star-studded events were hosted by Gannett's (BF)U.S.A. Today(end BF) and the New Orleans (BF)Times-Picaynue(end BF).

Despite the way that television kept its own favorites at center stage throughout the Republican Convention coverage, the media still hanker to run the show. They were so angry that George Bush announced his choice for running mate at a time and place of his own choosing that they retaliated against Dan Quayle by having a tantrum of ""pack journalism.''

George Bush described the savage media attack on Dan Quayle's National Guard duty as ""a bluefish feeding frenzy.'' Its purpose was to drown out the message of Bush's acceptance speech.

In the famous 1982 Lichter-Rothman opinion survey of the media elite, the nation's top media persons admitted that they think they should have more influence on American public life than any other group. In a free country, everyone is free to pursue power, influence or celebrity status. But let's not confuse that with reporting the news.