

By THOMAS COLLINS

ABC's "Nightline" and public broadcasting's "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour" have come under attack recently for being too restrictive in deciding who does and does not get a chance to express their views on the programs.

The complaint, based on a six-month study sponsored by a liberal organization called Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, is that both programs keep discussions mainly within the closed circle of journalists and the people they cover and rely on: government officials, corporation executives and largely conservative think-tank experts. Labor groups, representatives of public interest organizations and minorities and women get short shrift, according to the study.

Both news programs tend to deny and defend their policies at the same time. On the one hand, they say that FAIR's study is flawed because a wide range of opinion is usually represented on most major issues in the taped reports that precede discussions by experts, as well as in the discussions themselves.

On the other hand, they acknowledge that they rely on mainly policy makers and other influential types in the selection of their guests on the grounds that those are the opinions that count as the matter under discussion draws closer to resolution.

It should be said at once that both "Nightline" and "MacNeil/Lehrer" are programs that anyone who wants to be well informed should be thankful for. They fill a vacuum left by the regular news programs, whose headline treatment of the news is little better on most nights than a summary of what is moving on the Associated Press wire.

The evening news shows are very good on earthquakes and assassinations, but for understand-

Narrow guest lists stifle views

ing as well as information on most issues you have to turn to print — or tune to "Nightline" and "MacNeil/Lehrer," which are often more thorough and more interesting than the newspapers.

Their rationale for choosing the people they do, however, is journalistically stultifying. For one thing, their policy of selecting guests has never, to my knowledge, been spelled out for viewers, no doubt for good reason. When people turn to "Nightline" and "MacNeil/Lehrer," I believe they expect to hear a range of voices representing various positions on an issue, not the narrowly defined positions staked out by people who, while they may still disagree, have already made their compromises.

That is what is lacking and that is the flaw in the reasoning of the programs' producers. The viewing audience has not been made aware that a journalistic "policy" has been imposed on what purports to be free-ranging discussion. The format itself encourages the expectation that here at last is a chance to hear from all participants.

Jeff Cohen of FAIR was right when he told Robert MacNeil the other night, on PBS' "The 11th Hour" program, that "friendly discussions between the government elite and the corporate elite (are) really leaving out most of the story." He was referring to the Exxon Valdez oil spill coverage, in which not a single environmentalist was invited to participate on "MacNeil/Lehrer."

MacNeil bristled at the suggestion that the discussions had been friendly, but his and the program's approach to that coverage was still indefensible, and it showed.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate how claustrophobic some of these discussions get to be is to recall an instance when the usual format was dropped and a more radical view was presented to the audience.

That occurred on "Nightline" several months ago when Forrest Sawyer was interviewing a flag-burner. When the young man began giving his reasons for choosing such a provocative way to make a political statement — citing the Reagan and Bush administrations' policies in Central America, U.S. support of dictators and so forth — Sawyer looked visibly disturbed and could not cut to a commercial quickly enough. My recollection is that he cut the flag-burner off twice, as though out of concern that the audience should hear such shocking and forthright criticism of the country.

That was too bad, but unfortunately typical of what has been happening to an entire body of opinion that exists in this country, and in no small quantity; it seldom is allowed the chance to be heard, not only on "Nightline" and "MacNeil/Lehrer," but throughout the media.

Stop and think about the coverage of flag-burning, for example, and the impression is that the people who do it — and they are a handful — simply hate America, not that they are repelled by some of the incredibly arrogant, hypocritical and criminal policies that have been carried out by two administrations in America's name.

No, FAIR may have its ax to grind — although it insists that, unlike its right-wing counterparts, it wants more, not fewer, voices to be heard — but it has put its finger on something that is journalistically untenable and wrong in the guest lists of "Nightline" and "MacNeil/Lehrer."

Collins is media columnist for Newsday.

I've seen Jeff Cohen on CNN