Watching the recently revised format of CBC's network news show, *The National*, I'm often captivated by the sheer technological brilliance of the production. *The National*, like all other network news shows, is a complex interweaving of disparate elements – filmed reportage, live studio coverage, rear-screen graphics, minicam transmission, satellite feeds – all combined into an apparently seamless whole. Add to this complex collage the sophisticated computer animation which *The National* uses to open and close the show and the result is a sense of television technology taken to its limits.

No other TV genre brings together such a range of technological competence. Arguably, the network news show is a showcase for the latest in electronics hardware and a celebration of television itself. Seen in this light, the recurring structure of the nightly newscast reveals an interesting ideology at work behind the overt content.

Over the past 30 years, the technological goal of television news has always been to achieve more up-to-the-minute coverage of events on location. Each advancement in the television apparatus can be tied to this goal, especially the development of ever more portable, lightweight cameras. By the early 1970s, the introduction of ENG (electronic news-gathering) technology seemed to herald the approach of the ideal. The small minicam cameras are easily portable and produce a sharp image. Better yet, ENG equipment, unlike film cameras, simultaneously feeds electronic im-
Joyce Nelson is a Toronto freelance writer and broadcaster.

The link-up of live on-location transmission in real-time. He proved this by asking that the "zoomar lens... close in on the object without any simple request, followed by an answering change of frame, that established, once and for all, the unique terrain of the "on location" newscaster: Edward R. Murrow. So bedazzled. Television had found its "news beat" - live on-location transmission is an impressive terrain technologically than that of either print or film.

Yet the irony of TV news is that its distinction is a program overshadow its prestigious capabilities. In actual fact, the only part of a TV program that is transmitted live in real-time is the image of the anchorman. Even with ENG technology, we virtually never see an on location item broadcast live. The contradiction between technological potential and programming demands results in several repercussions for the news.

Because the news is a program like any other. Television's transmission schedule cast solitude in its allotted time period. Therefore, each item on its agenda must be timed and slotted into the overall structure of the show. It is not so neat. As the only part of the show transmitted live in real-time, the studio anchorman, therefore, has certain vital roles to perform. First, he or she is the signer of live coverage.

A nightly news show is a complex blending of myriad time-space meters. Of the 20 or so individual news items on the agenda, there may be a filmed item shot six hours earlier in the Midwest, slotted in to provide the signifier of live coverage in real-time, the anchorman must confer the aura of "presence" on everything else in the show. He or she must introduce each news item and thereby (as the word implies) "anchor" it within the space-time frame that the anchorman represents. Only then can the scene be set by the tangibly filmed or taped segment. The image of the anchorman brackets every item, conferring upon it the resonance of live transmission in real-time that he/she embodies.

Although reporters are not allowed to usurp the special position in the studio anchor, their news items must approximate it. As Philip Hilts has noted: "Television news annually spends thousands of man-hours chasing officials from cars to courtrooms, from committee rooms to cars. The pictures of Cronkite or the two anchors could serve as well. But TV news likes to have "same-day pictures" of newsmakers."

These "same-day pictures", whose importance is more meaningful than a still photograph, are necessary to remind us of the special promise inherent in television's unique advantages. The program signed off only by the anchorman, the "same-day pictures" reinforce a special sense of television as a news organization, that it will give us presence, even in the absence of "there-of" news.

The result, as Michael Arlen - TV columnist for The New Yorker - said in an interview, is that: "There is an enormous variety of events being presented all in a kind of illusion of presence, as if they all took place this evening. Now and then a television news organization will make an enormous and special effort to connect an item back to something. But that's all, it's always a special effort. The rest of things are just simply floating in the present."

This illusion of presence, built into the structure of the program, the bracketing function of the anchorman, works to convey an ideology in which the present frames and brackets the relatively new things. This illusion is treated as discrete and separate entities, with little or no relation to other items. The illusion of presence conveys the sense that events take place in a vacuum and are entirely self-contained. An ideology in which the present is seen as passing over the past is somewhat of a reversal of reality, wherein the past gives birth to the present and explains it. But as an ideology, this illusion of presence is useful to television's purposes.

Without historical context, information becomes bits of trivia. Viewers may find that the "zoomar lens... close in" is not usable to connect them to each other or to anything else. Without context, viewers may accumulate information and data, but they lack the ability to see why something is happening or what is behind an event. Moreover, without historical context, individual news items will lose their meaning in the broader contexts: that is, we will anchor the data within the limited confines of our own knowledge, memories, even our fears and prejudices. Another more worrying possibility is suggested by the content inherent in TV's desire for same-day pictures:

The events most amenable to this desire are those which can be planned for in advance: the arrivals and departures of statesmen, press conferences, meetings of heads of state - the so-called "media events" which so characteristically flourish in journalism these days. As Michael Arlen puts it: "Basically, I think that network news is almost entirely a news of important people talking to other important people in a room of important people. It's a news of institutional events... It is bureaucratic... By and large, network news has got out of its way to present a parade of officials everywhere making official statements about official things."

In place of wider historical context, TV news substitutes an illusion of presence populated by officials, all "making official statements about official things." In other words, history is replaced by institutions as context. As viewers, in our efforts to understand why something is happening, we are reassured that, although a particular event might seem inexplicable to us, presumably somebody else knows the necessary background and can make sense of the information. We do not simply lurch from one item to another. The network news is a process in which the present is seen as presiding over the past is somewhat of a reversal of reality, wherein the past gives birth to the present and explains it. But as an ideology, this illusion of presence is useful to television's purposes.

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