

TV NEWS



● What is more reassuring than Knowlton Nash at the end of a long day?

A structure of reassurance

by Joyce Nelson

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, light-weight 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-

pulse back to the studio for immediate transmission or for storage on tape. Film, on the other hand, needs to be processed in a lab, thereby causing a delay of several hours before the material can be broadcast. By the mid-seventies all North American network news agencies had invested in ENG technology, not only for competitive reasons but because the equipment was the latest breakthrough in achieving the technological goal of TV news.

Behind this desire for more up-to-the-minute coverage on location, there is, perhaps, a deeper motivation. As Wallace Westfeld, former executive producer for NBC News, said in an interview:

"Television people have always been worried and fearful of a comparison with print people. It started really in the fifties when television news became a fact. It was in a 15-minute form on a daily basis and, I think, in those days the broadcast journalists were always somewhat embarrassed. They felt that they suffered by comparison with print... I think this sort of set the mode for broadcast journalism."

It has been common knowledge for decades that TV news does not achieve the depth of analysis possible in print. The verbal portion of a network news show would fill less than half-a-page of a newspaper. Given this unfavourable comparison, TV news has always sought its own uniqueness. In almost defensive fashion, each technological advancement has been an attempt to stake out television's specific terrain in terms of delivering the news. Simply put, the mode set for broadcast journalism was a fascination with the technology of the medium.

We can sense this vividly in a transcript from a *See It Now* program broadcast on November 18, 1951, and hosted by Edward R. Murrow. The occasion was the first TV link-up, through cables and relay stations, of East and West coast USA. Murrow states:

"We are, as newcomers to this medium, rather impressed by the whole thing; impressed, for example, that I can turn to Don Hewitt and say: Don, will you push a button and bring me in the Atlantic coast? Okay, now San Francisco, could you use what you call, I think, a 'zoomar lens' and close in on the bridge a little? We, for our part, are considerably impressed. For the first time man has been able to sit at home and look at two oceans at the same time. We're impressed with the importance of this medium. We shall hope to learn to use it and not to abuse it."

In our present era of satellite telecommunications, the excitement expressed here may seem oddly quaint. Four times Murrow says he's "impressed", revealing a bedazzlement which cannot be masked by the sudden solemnity of his closing lines. But what is of interest here, for our purposes, is the specific object of Murrow's fascination: the simultaneous live transmission of on-location visuals. Had the images of the two oceans been *filmed* images, made earlier in the day on both coasts and then linked-up for simultaneous transmission through the cables and relays, the reporter would certainly have been less impressed. In other words, it was not the link-up of the coasts which so bedazzled Murrow, but

the link-up of live on-location transmission in real-time. He proves this by asking that the "zoomar lens... close in on the bridge a little." It is this simple request, followed by an answering change of frame, that established, once and for all, the unique terrain of the medium. No wonder a dedicated TV newsman like Edward R. Murrow was so bedazzled. Television had found its "news beat" - live on-location transmission in real-time: a more impressive terrain technologically than that of either print or film.

Yet the irony of TV news is that its dictates as 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 in the studio. 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, it must fit within the broadcast schedule in its allotted time period. Therefore, each item on its agenda must be timed and slotted into the overall rhythm of the show. Reality, of course, is not so neat. As the only part of the show transmitted live in real-time, the studio anchorman, therefore, has certain vital functions. Primarily, he or she is the signifier of live coverage.

A nightly news show is a complex blending of myriad time-space parameters. Of the 20 or so individual news items on the agenda, there may be a filmed item shot six hours earlier in the Middle East, another filmed in Europe, an item using hour-old ENG coverage from downtown Toronto, a satellite feed from another network earlier in the evening, etc. As the signifier of live coverage in real-time, the anchorman must confer the aura of "presentness" 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 screen be relinquished to a previously 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 status given to the studio anchor, their news items must approximate it. As Philip Hiltz has noted:

"Television news annually spends thousands of man-hours chasing officials from cars to courtrooms, from committee rooms to cars. The pictures mean nothing at all; a still photograph could serve as well. But TV news likes to have 'same-day pictures' of newsmakers."

These 'same-day pictures', whose content is no more meaningful than a still photograph, are necessary to remind us of the special promise inherent in television's unique terrain. Though the promise is fulfilled only by the anchorman, the 'same-day pictures' reinforce a special sense of television as a news organization, that it will give us what Stuart Hall calls the "having-been-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 presentness, 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 it's always a very special effort. The rest of things are just simply floating in the present."

This illusion of presentness, built into the structure of the program through the bracketing function of the anchorman, works to convey an ideology in which the present frames and brackets the past. Individual news items are treated as discrete and separate entities, with little or no relation to other items or to a larger historical context. The illusion of presentness conveys the sense that events take place in a vacuum and are entirely self-contained. An ideology 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 presentness is useful to television's purposes.

Without historical context, information becomes bits of trivia. Viewers may find these bits "interesting," but be unable to connect them to each other or to anything else. Without context, viewers may accumulate information and data, but have no real understanding of why something is happening or what is behind an event. Moreover, without historical context, individual news items will simply be given our own personal 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 characterize much of 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, or about important people. It's a news of institutional events. ... It is bureaucratic. ... By and large, network news goes out of its way to present a pageantry of officials everywhere making official statements about official things."

In place of wider historical context, TV news substitutes an illusion of presentness 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 may rest assured that, although a particular event might seem inexplicable to us, presumably somebody else knows the necessary background and context for the information: undoubtedly one of the many officials we see arriving and departing, shaking hands and making official statements.

Thus TV network news continually reassures us of the viability of our society's official institutions. Since television itself is one of our most eminent official institutions, it has quite a stake in this reassurance function. Again, let us return to the figure of the network news anchorman.

The studio news anchorman is the official *par excellence*. In the structure of the news program, his role is a mirror image of officialdom in the wider socie-

ty. That is, his statements carry more authority than anyone else's, at least given the structure of the program. And, as the signifier of live coverage, his presence is vital to the show, whereas individual reporters (and events) may come and go. Interestingly, almost a full year in advance, viewers were being prepared for the retirement of Walter Cronkite as CBS anchorman. Over the ensuing months, we could, in effect, watch Dan Rather take on the anchorman "aura." Presumably, through such advance notice, no undue rupture would occur in our perception of the signifier of live coverage.

Moreover, only the anchorman is invested with the special status that television technology claims for itself: live transmission in real-time. As Arthur Asa Berger has written of Walter Cronkite, "his presence has come to be regarded, by many people, as an indicator of the significance of any event." Before his retirement, Cronkite's presence on a TV special often meant not only that the coverage was important, but also that the transmission was live in real-time. On CBC, anchorman Knowlton Nash has come to signify this same combination of important coverage transmitted live. He, too, appears on special event programming, conferring the status he represents onto the show. In a sense, then, the network news anchorman signifies the institution of television itself. As the only medium which can bring us live on location transmission in real-time, television as an institution seems larger than any and all other institutions. It can show and comment on them all, overseeing and bracketing them within the illusion of presentness which the technology claims as its own.

It has become commonplace for news items to include images of television crews at work covering events. On our screens we see a cluster of camera, lighting, and sound personnel busily pursuing the ostensible subject of the item. On the old 11:00 p.m. format of CBC's *The National*, the program ritualistically ended with the image of a studio camera crew at work in front of the news desk. This reflexive style does more than suggest the "newsworthiness" or importance of a particular figure or event. In a larger sense, this stylistic convention proclaims the institution of television at work and describes its own image within its own process. This reflexive style refers us to the higher-level system of television as an institution.

As president of CBC News, Richard Salant once commented that: "Our reporters do not cover stories from *their* point of view; they are presenting them from *nobody's* point of view." Perhaps the "nobody" referred to here is the institution of television itself - that seemingly disembodied, all-encompassing entity which embraces the present, showing us not only the world, but itself showing us the world. As viewers adrift in a sea of information, swept away by a deluge of 'presentness' without historical context, we are meant to find reassurance in the fact that there is one institution which sees and frames all others. Whatever ripple of disquiet, whatever wave of potential disruption may sweep over the status quo of other institutions, we know, by the very fact that television is showing it all to us, that all is well, or at least reassuringly institutional, bureaucratic and official, in the calm and wise visage of the studio anchor.