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Watching the News

Television has a special power to touch human feelings. And TV news has touched the conscience of the world to right many wrongs. But, because of its nature, it must not be taken at face value. Not by people who insist on thinking for themselves ...

For many years now, television has been North America's leading carrier of news, far outstripping all other media. Most of the people who get most of their news on TV are unlikely to see anything very significant about that fact. They have simply chosen one way of receiving information over the others, as though a television set were a stationary newspaper or a radio with pictures. News is news, and what does it matter if it comes in a certain type of box?

Though TV-bashing is a popular sport, news programming usually escapes its attention. Most of the assaults on the medium take the form of flailing away at the entire body of commercial (as opposed to educational) TV. Such a blunt approach leaves little room for consideration of its news component as a separate quantity. Even in the ongoing debate over violence on television, the terrible real-life violence children witness over their parents' shoulders on "the news" is seldom taken into account.

Yet there is a large body of evidence that television is by no means just another conveyor of information. The sensation of seeing things with your own eyes gives it a special psychological grip. Discussing its power to mould public opinion, Ira Glasser, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union, described the phenomenon nicely: "Television has a magical capacity to wield influence so that, if the very same ideas and words come through a different medium, they are not received or perceived in the same way."

This is mainly because its visual images appeal more to the emotions than the intellect. An American program executive once wrote that "joy, sorrow, shock, fear" were the stuff of television news. Its pictures strike directly at the viewer's sentiments. It drives home a message more

affecting than the best printed account of an incident could possibly deliver — of how the people involved in it really feel.

The medium's knack of making us subordinate our thoughts to our feelings forms one of the chief reasons why televised news should be viewed with vigilance. It goes a long way towards creating our mental picture of the world. Our perception of the world shapes our general attitude towards society. That attitude, in turn, intimately influences the way we live.

The nature of the medium makes it difficult to maintain the analytical vigilance its news content warrants. Psychologists have noted that television has a kind of hypnotic effect. Studies show that TV-viewing makes people feel less alert than normally. The passive quality of the viewing experience can translate into passive thinking; a scholarly study recently reported: "Attraction to comforting, low-complexity, easy-to-digest information is one of the prime reasons that television viewing typically supports the viewers' existing set of beliefs, why the use of the medium will tend to support the status quo."

It would seem that the information conveyed through television is so easy to digest that it can run straight through the mental system without any challenge to the critical faculties. Surveys have shown that newscast viewers remember only a fraction of the total number of stories they see. It might be argued that, in thus lulling people's consciousness, television is doing its job admirably. TV-viewing is, after all, a leisure pastime, by far the most popular on this continent.

So it is only natural that, with the exception of all-news and other specialized channels, television's primary prod-

uct is entertainment. News is secondary to it, in contrast to newspapers, in which the order of priorities is reversed.

There is not, however, a clear dividing line between the two categories of content. You *know* when you are doing the crossword puzzle or reading the comics in a newspaper that you are not receiving information. But when people watch television, entertainment and information tend to get mixed up in their minds.

There are numerous documented cases of people swearing to erroneous "facts" which they thought they had learned from the news but actually absorbed impressionistically from entertainment programs. When viewers do differentiate between fact and fiction, their opinions still may be influenced by the fictional images they retain. Crime series, for example, have helped to spread the perception that violent crime is far more prevalent than it is in reality. Viewers of soap operas may

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also believe that adultery is more common than it actually is.

To add to the confusion, the same basic techniques are used in writing the television news as in writing

drama. Back in the 1960s, the head of news for a major American network circulated a memo which said: "Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle, and an end."

The writing of the news for dramatic effect is only one of the ways in which TV's principal *raison d'être* influences the preparation and presentation of news broadcasts. The fact that newscasts must compete with entertainment programs for the audiences upon which advertising revenues depend puts intense pressure on their producers to lure viewers with theatrical techniques. News "shows" originate from the same kind of stage sets as game shows. They are introduced with theme music, like soap operas and situation comedies. Like the stars of other shows, the anchor-persons wear theatrical make-up, and are generally exceptionally appealing in facial features, voice, manner, and dress.

Out in the field there is more artifice. That reporter in the trench coat does not need to be standing in front of the Kremlin or the Peace Tower on a cold day with her breath pluming out as she tells you what took place inside there a few hours ago. She could just as easily have delivered her report from her office, where she

probably wrote it anyway. But the illusion of on-the-spot reporting must be maintained.

Lately the networks have carried the on-the-spot movement to new lengths by sending anchor-persons to the venues of world news developments. There, from Madrid or Mogadishu, they say essentially the same things as they could have said back in their studios in Toronto or New York. This is consistent with a star system which tends to place glamour ahead of journalistic effectiveness. For instance, the beautiful anchor-woman of a network show may not be the best person to interview a cabinet minister; fuller and more pertinent information might be elicited by a reporter who regularly covers the beat or an academic who specializes in the minister's field of jurisdiction. The value of an anchor-person interviewing a reporter at the scene — "well, Joe, what's going on out there?" — is also more theatrical than journalistic. The time might be better spent by the reporter giving you as many facts as possible without interruption; for time is at a premium on television news.

Time constraints limit the number of stories that can be used, making the viewer more reliant on the editors' selections than a newspaper reader. The stories themselves are extremely brief; news items on a typical newscast run an average of about 75 seconds, and an "in-depth take-out" might take up three minutes, interviews, file footage and all. The news is delivered with such speed that it is difficult to pick out errors in it. Nor is there sufficient time to make corrections to set the record straight. Unless an error is very serious — or somebody credibly threatens to sue — it is allowed to stand.

Since no one can cover all the facts about anything in such little bits of time, information must be delivered in generalities shorn of details. A correspondent might have a minute and a half to explain a complex piece of legislation which took up weeks of debate in Parliament. A 30-minute interview with a scientist who carefully qualifies his every statement might be edited down to 30 seconds, with all the "ifs, ands and buts" left out.

Like all generalizations, those of the televised news skim over the ambiguities, paradoxes, and loose ends that make real life so hard to view with certainty. TV may come in colour, but it tends to see the world in black and white. The screen is populated with good guys and bad guys; rarely with guys who, like the rest of us, are sometimes good and sometimes not so good. In cases where it is left up to viewers to decide what is bad or good, they are often asked to choose between stark opposites. For example, an environmentalist recently

remarked that stories in her field invariably implied that the aims of preserving the environment and of creating jobs were inherently in conflict. Never was the possibility raised that both could be achieved at the same time.

The need to generalize has given rise to the personalization of issues, in which individuals are presented as symbols of events and policies. Television has a way of informally appointing spokespersons for various groups as though the groups presented monolithic fronts, whereas they may encompass a variety of views. Since it is impossible to interview everyone involved in a complicated story, TV news people are inclined to opt for the person whose case holds the most "human interest." This explains how a whole set of profound changes in world trade and agricultural policy may be reported through interviews with one or two farmers whose livelihood is threatened by the move.

In no field has the personalization of issues had such an effect as in politics. By employing such shorthand as "the (Prime Minister's name) government," television spreads the misleading idea that the responsibility for everything done by the whole government apparatus resides in a single human being. This has its effect on elections, which are covered like horse races among the party leaders. Public opinion polls determine who is leading or trailing at a given point. Reports and commen-

A trick of perspective and the 'media event'

taries on the tactics and techniques of the campaign take up precious time which might be more usefully spent in the public interest on examinations of the issues. But there are moments when there seems

to be only one issue as far as television is concerned, and that is who is going to win.

And who is going to win? To a great extent, the one who makes the best impression on television. The medium hands the advantage to those who are most skilled at self-presentation, although it must be said that constant exposure searches out their blemishes in the long run. The candidate who delivers the most memorable 15-second sound bite putting down an opponent has a special advantage, since it is bound to be replayed over and over. The obverse is that one slip of the tongue before the camera can doom a candidate. The candidates' clothes, facial expressions and body language assume outlandish importance. In "photo opportunities," they literally put on performances for the camera, attempting to attract votes by dint of personality rather than policy.

Political organizers have long been aware that the narrow focus of television cameras can make things look bigger than they are in reality. Thus at election rallies, they will arrange to have their candidate's supporters crowd together before the cameras, waving and cheering in a show of enthusiasm designed to make onlooking voters feel that a political bandwagon is rolling irresistibly, so they might as well hop on.

Stripping evil of its guises with a searching, penetrating eye

Organizers of demonstrations similarly capitalize on this trick of perspective to promote their causes. They have caught on to one of the central facts of modern western life — that television not only reports the news; it can make the news. The TV camera has given birth to the "media event," in which its presence or absence determines what people believe to be worthy of attention. Media events — news conferences, rallies and marches — are sometimes staged for quite trivial reasons. At the same time, however, television allows people who are genuinely crying out for justice to put their cases before the public with maximum effect.

Though people have rallied in public to air their grievances since ancient times, television has lent enormous strength to the politics of protest. It is doubtful that the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s could have gone as far as fast as it did without the televised scenes of repression that moved the conscience of a nation into political action to right historic wrongs. The success of that movement opened the door to other successful protests by people suffering similar injustices in other countries. The peace movement which swept through the United States into other western nations was a further demonstration of the tremendous power of television. And it all began with television coverage: In Vietnam, the televised news lifted the horror and brutality of war off the battlefield and delivered it into "America's living room." America was never again the same.

In these and other ways, television news has acted as a mighty agent for change in human conduct. It has focussed attention on human needs that might otherwise have been ignored. It has exposed corruption and criminality with a searching, penetrating, and uncompromising eye which strips evil bare of its guises. A man can easily hide his bad intentions when he is quoted in a newspaper; before the camera, his face may reveal more about his true motives than his words.

On balance, then, television news has contributed



greatly to the progress of humankind, but its manifest strengths should not be allowed to obscure its inherent shortcomings. To watch it intelligently, the independent-minded individual should keep these shortcomings in mind. First of all, it does not tell the whole story about anything, nor does it give you the full picture. The pictures used are likely to be chosen for dramatic effect, leaving out dull footage which might convey a more accurate representation of what is going on.

As the psychologists say, television is a medium which demands little mental elaboration. You therefore must do the mental work of elaborating on its generalizations by fleshing them out with specifics from what you already know yourself. By so doing, you will be forming opinions in your mind, and not out of gut feeling. Researchers have found that inveterate TV-viewers are

*Talking back
to the box
when it talks
to you*

likely to arrive at opinions from the general impressions they gather from watching the news, rather than from particular facts.

It should be remembered that television is a medium

in which pictures come first, and pictures are distracting. Therefore you have to get past the visual images and actively listen for the meaning of what is being said. Through intent listening, you can develop the habit of viewing the news in such a way that you are not automatically taking what it says at face value. In many cases, of course, you have no choice but to do just that, as when a hurricane or shipwreck is reported. But much of the content of a newscast is not "spot" news: it deals not with events, but with ideas.

Indeed, many of the stories that seem on the surface to be about events — riots, strikes, demonstrations, even wars — are fundamentally about conflicting ideas. In quieter moments, viewers are treated to a steady stream of verbal opinions on human rights, economics, politics, social policy and the like. With its shorthand style, television makes an ideal vehicle for propaganda, which always dwells on generalities and depends on the selective use of facts and distortions of logic. As a free citizen, you should make a conscious effort to detect when the persons shown are trying to pull a fast one,

made all the faster by the dazzling pace with which the pictures and commentary flash in front of you.

When the bushmen of New Guinea first encountered a radio, they are said to have named it "the box that talks but does not listen." At the present state of the art, television qualifies for the same description: it talks to you, but you cannot talk back to it. Nevertheless, to assert your sovereignty over your own mind, you must talk back to it mentally. You must question the implications it suggests in the light of your own first-hand knowledge and experience. You must assess the logic of the assertions it carries by insisting that the people talking prove that their propositions make sense. You must be aware that every fact is subject to interpretation, and question the interpretations which television journalists put forward. Why? Because if you do not have all the salient facts or you are misled by false logic, you might come to mistaken conclusions. And this might lead you to mistaken actions that end up hurting others or yourself.

To do all this, you need back-up. That is where the other media come in. You must take advantage of newspapers, magazines and radio (Canadians are blessed with excellent public affairs programming on CBC Radio and Radio-Canada) to fill in the blanks of information that are left by TV news coverage. You must read articles and books giving the detailed background of events, and books on the history of how we have come to the present state of affairs. You must not rely on your TV set to tell you everything about political issues. You must attend political gatherings and see the whole, real picture for yourself.

Being thus equipped will enable you to fulfil your part of the communications transaction, in which the media gives you the information and you process it according to your own standards. That means thinking for yourself — hard work, but indispensable to the exercise of free will. In a democratic society, you have a positive responsibility to make up your own mind, and television news can be a valuable aid to doing so. But it must be watched — closely watched — to ensure that you are not basing your opinions and actions on a simplistic view of the world, which is what comes of treating it too casually.

