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Are Television News Programs Becoming Nothing More Than Infotainment?

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Infotainment: The History Behind a New Phenomenon

Television news. Upon hearing the phrase, images begin to flash through one's head. Images of house fires, car accidents, round table discussions, and reporters peering through one's television screen. When asked *which* of these images truly represents television news, you will receive varying answers. The more difficult question to answer may be exactly what is television news and for that matter, what is infotainment? The answer may be as simple as news that is broadcast on television, and that seems to be there are loose parameters of labeling something as television news or even television journalism. Part of the original assumption of journalistic practice is that there is going to be some biased news and hopefully some objective news, but that the reader, or viewer in this case, would be knowledgeable enough to decide of their own what was real news and what was simply opinion.¹ While this idea may have suited originally, television news changes that entire assumption. The medium is designed to get you the information fast, for people who don't have time to read a whole newspaper. But do those same people who don't have time to read a newspaper, have the time or resources to decide if what they're watching is genuine news or just some prepackaged infotainment, or just some screaming head's opinion?

Television news, like many advances in technology, started out with humble beginnings. It was far from the up to the minute coverage spoken by perfect looking reporters that bombard us every day. While many may argue that the golden age of true journalistic, hard television news has passed, others may argue it was never far from what it has become today, which was an inevitability. "Television journalism started with in a

¹ Kovach and Rosenteil *The Elements of Journalism*, (Three Rivers Press, New York 2001) p.22

medium designed for entertainment,”² forcing it to compete with entertainment programs and evolve and change rapidly to keep the audience engaged. Not unlike the way many look adoringly on the greatness that was old Hollywood, journalists and some viewers alike seem to long for the days of a young Walter Cronkite or the famous Edward R. Murrow delivering straight news with actual substance. However, the essence of television journalism shows that although packaged differently, it was created and has been maintained for one reason: to make money. As early as 1931, broadcast journalism, at the time only limited to radio, had its critics; radio commenter Hans V. Klatenborn wrote that “today’s chief purpose is to make money for those who control and use its mechanical devices. It threatens to prove as great a disappointment as the moving picture for those who sense radio’s underdeveloped power as an agency of education, vulture and goodwill.”³ Klatenborn speaks of the most popular use for radio to be as an entertainment outlet rather than a news outlet, and foreshadows the change that television journalism may be well into. Klatenborn’s opinion failed to include that in the 1930’s and 1940’s, the government was working hard to ensure that at least some of what was broadcast over radio waves and soon television sets was done so in the public interest. What Klatenborn saw wrong with what was broadcast on the radio may not have been as bad as what was rejected from the radio. There were huge numbers of applications for radio stations and with the limited number of frequencies, the federal government and more importantly, the FCC, wanted to make sure that as many view points as possible were provided on station and that that station was not used for the sole purpose of

² Quoted in, Winch, Samuel P. *Mapping the Cultural Space of Journalism*, (Praeger, Westport Conn. 1997) p.28

³ Winch p. 29

promoting a singular agenda.⁴ The course of action taken was what became referred to as the fairness doctrine, which became policy through the FCC in 1949. This legislation seemed to pave the way for a fair and just coverage of news and issues on the relatively new mediums of radio and television.

By the early 1950's television had taken America by storm and it became apparent that it had amazing advertising potential, "television was a license for making money."⁵ It was only natural for this popular and profitable business to begin expanding into the area of news and reporting. Television news was not immediately popular and began to increase in popularity as people got "hooked" on the images and stories of the world around them that were broadcast into their homes every night.⁶

The 1960's brought a whole nother dimension to television news due to such events as the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam. In fact, Eric Burns a former television news reporter argued in first hand experience with television news at the time that it was not taken seriously until the beginning of the civil rights movement.⁷ Americans soon began relying more and more on their televisions for the most updated news around them. If American's were becoming more dependant on television as a source for their news, then Vietnam cemented that fact. Some argue that this news dependence on television as images of horrible war scenes flashed across the screen piqued the public's interest and trust in television news but also began exhaust viewers from the round the clock news coverage, and very early on signaling a change in the style of news the audience desired.⁸

⁴ Museum of Broadcast Communications (2005) retrieved 23 Nov 2006, from <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/F/htmlF/fairnessdoct/fairnessdoct.htm>

⁵ Quoted in Winch p.34

⁶ Winch p.35

⁷ Winch p.36

⁸ Museum of Broadcast Communications (2005) "Vietnam on Television" retrieved 28 Jan 2007, from <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/V/htmlV/vietnamonte/vietnamonte.htm>

“In 1968, during the Tet offensive, viewers of NBC news saw Col. Nguyen Ngoc Loan blow out the brains of his captive in a Saigon street. And in 1972, during the North Vietnamese Spring offensive, the audience witnessed the aftermath of errant napalm strike, in which South Vietnamese planes mistook their own fleeing civilians for North Vietnamese troops. These incidents were dramatic, but far from typical of Vietnam coverage.” It is important to note that images like this were relatively rare in the war coverage. This gives credence to many of those who said that the coverage did not exhaust the viewer or change their desire for news.⁹ This intense news coverage would follow through out the 1960’s and into the 1970’s. It is hard to say whether this style of in your face imagery and reporting came as a result of the tumultuous time the nation was in or whether it was the best received style during these years.

Although this may have been a signal of the imminent change in the style of broadcast news, in the 1970’s the best-known and most renowned reporters were those who did investigative style reporting.¹⁰ In fact many of the issues had with television news revolved around investigative reporting and the question of fairness. For example, a court case that involved fairness and the fairness doctrine, which was to ensure all viewpoints, had the opportunity to be represented was the case of *In National Broadcasting Co v. FCC* (1976). This cases resulted from an NBC aired documentary titled, “Pensions: The Broken Promise.” NBC won the case arguing they had a right to make their own decision for content. The FCC later found the Fairness Doctrine out of date and unnecessary, perhaps paving the way for such one sided programs those

⁹ “Vietnam on Television”

¹⁰ Cook, Phillip S, *The Future of News*, (Woodrow Wilson Center Press 1992) p. 73

borderline talk shows that air under the auspices of news today.¹¹ The 1970's also made an impact on hard and investigative news by airing the Watergate hearings. However as the investigative style and television news fulfilling its duty as watchdog by televising things such as Watergate, the end of the decade also marked the beginning of a new era of news with the premiers of the Today and Good Morning America which offered news segments mixed with everything from cooking demos to how to segments to human interest stories.¹² This newest television news magazine perhaps promoting more criticism from newspapers, but they became immensely popular.

Though many of the television news programs were relatively new compared to print media they seemed to have functioned in the 1970's very similar to how they do now. In the late 1970's an article appeared in TIME magazine revealing the ugly truths behind television news that are all too common today. "For 15 years or more, nightly network television news has been of a predictable muchness—earnest, responsible, muted. Behind the scenes, huge sums are involved in ratings rivalries, in promotional buildups of anchormen, in bouncing live pickups off satellites, in devising ever more elaborate news stage-sets..."¹³ The article which was written in 1977, then goes on to sound all too familiar, leaving one questioning if there every really was that blip of a hey-day where television news had the trust and the eyes and ears of many Americans. "During most of the broadcast day, with game shows and trashy sitcoms, the networks do so little else to earn it."¹⁴ The article also alluded to the change that would come in the

¹¹ Cook p. 73

¹² History of Television News (Dec 2002) retrieved 12 Feb 2007 from <http://history.sandiego.edu/gen/recording/television9.html>

¹³ Quoted in, Time Magazine 22 August 1977 "Revving up TV News" retrieved 12 Feb from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,915316,00.html>

¹⁴ Quoted in, "Revving up TV News"

1980's, that the reporter and the talking head delivering the news may have been more important than the news itself.

As it began in the 1980's and seems to carry in to today, the audience's preference for one news show over another may stem from the person delivering the news. "If all three network broadcasts are essentially alike, and it comes down to which anchorman you trust most."¹⁵ However, this article talks about anchors presumably delivering straight news, in the 1980's the style that is still popular today of analysts and pseudo-newscasters offering their own opinions became prevalent.

"In the 1980's the mantle of the most famous and most influential moved to those members of the press corps who sat around in TV studios and officered quick opinions—high practitioners on the art of assertion."¹⁶ In the 1980's however, it was mostly print journalists appearing on television. Writers for popular newspapers would be tapped to offer their opinion on a range of news stories. This is still done today, but what is more popular are programs like Anderson Cooper 360° on CNN. CNN itself was an invention of the 1980's and revolutionized the way Americans thought of news. Its creator, multi-billionaire, Ted Turner "envisioned constant access to the news no matter where you might be in the world."¹⁷ No matter how noble its vision, CNN was still like any other network and needed to maintain viewers and make a profit. The creation of CNN would set of a prototype that would take like wildfire. Today there are no fewer than four `round the clock news station as well as many others that are close or may not have a broad a viewer ship or range. Those who argued that the change in the style of the nightly news came as a result of the nightly shows of horror from Vietnam would be hard pressed to

¹⁵ Quoted in, "Revving Up TV News"

¹⁶ Cook p. 73

¹⁷ Quoted in, Arden, John Boghosian, *America's Meltdown*, (Parager Westport, Conn 2003) p.49

argue that the biggest change may have come from the horror and fight that resulted from local stations and once daily newscasts having to fight with the behemoth that is 24 hours news.

With the advent of constant news outlets and television stations offering breaking news with more ease, there is one more change toward the television news we see today, that is the problem of proportionality. With the advent of new technologies and the ease to quickly report and remain with breaking news it is all too common for there to be a severe lack of proportionality in the news. Case in point, and the turning point in the 1990's, is the OJ Simpson Case. Starting with the White Bronco chase and going all the way to the trial, this is the type of news we seem to be most familiar with today. As Americans watch their 24-hour new station, coverage will often switch to a high-speed car chase somewhere in California. Who is in the car and why they refuse to pull over is often information that is revealed long after news choppers and news stations have been following the vehicle all over some highway. As studies have shown, this type of disproportional news coverage leaves an informed public but not on the things that are most important to their own self-government. During the time of the OJ Simpson trial, one poll showed 74% of Americans could identify Kato Kaelin but only 25% knew who Vice President was.¹⁸ Even well into the 2000's this intense popularity of this figure carries on, partly because the media focused so much on him, bring more coverage and hype to him and the case than the previous trial of the century, since the Lindburg baby kidnapping trial and the Manson murders trial.¹⁹ Most recently Simpson tried again to capitalize on this media created fame and interest by attempting to release the book "If I

¹⁸Crime Lab (2007) "Notorious murder/ Most Famous OJ Simpson", retrieved 25 February 2007 from http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/famous/simpson/index_1.html

¹⁹ "Notorious murder/ Most Famous OJ Simpson"

Did It,” luckily the publication was blocked perhaps showing that Americans have not gotten so off kilter in their desire for news that they want a “how to” book on a real life tragedy. However this obsession with celebrity has not died down and seems to be finding more and more of a place in the nightly news and not just in the pages of gossip magazines. This can be exemplified by the recent coverage the media has focused on the death of former model and Playboy playmate, Anna Nicole Smith. Although some news outlets like the network nightly news tried their hardest to give minimal coverage to the story, other stations went all out in the coverage. “In just two days, Smith's demise consumed 21 percent of all programming monitored by PEJ on CNN, MSNBC and Fox News Channel for the week - including a mind-boggling 50 percent Thursday (the day she died) and Friday.”²⁰ Arguably more relevant or proportional topics to the public's need like the election or the war in Iraq finished second and third respectively in coverage with these same networks. It is hard to say exactly what infotainment is, but it is easy to argue that stories like the OJ Simpson trial or the death of Anna Nicole Smith are hard news stories that affect a large number of people. Surely one can say that part of the reason that stories such as these receive so much coverage is that they are entertaining. Simpson and Smith have become characters in the play that is and was their lives as media rag dolls.

It is subjective to say what is hard news and what is infotainment. Why all this is happening is hard to say, but one surefire reason for the quality of news going down is the size of news. From mergers and the succeeding downsizing, the news has fewer people and more airtime than ever before. It will take more than one person to change television

²⁰ Philly. Com (25 February 2007) “Survey Confirms it: Cable news went Crazy over Smith” retrieved 25 February 2007 from http://www.philly.com/mld/philly/entertainment/columnists/gail_shister/16692387.htm

news back to what ever it is supposed to be to fulfill the duties of the journalistic profession.