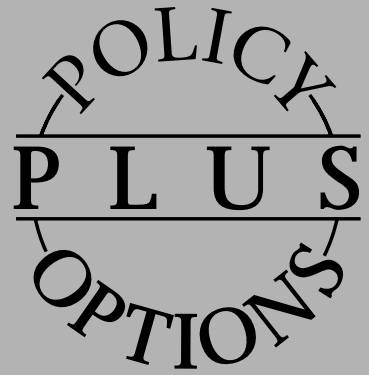


PERFORMING THE NEWS — NOT THE FACTS, BUT THE STORY

Richard Nielsen



The jingoistic television coverage of the Iraq war by American television networks was not only biased, it revealed the inherent flaws of television news, which is presented rather than conveyed to viewers. Television journalists are not reporters so much as performers, in a sense more important than the news they are covering. It isn't news so much as entertainment. When the shock and awe phase of the war ended, and the statue of Saddam Hussein was pulled down in Baghdad, television news crews largely pulled out, even as the US occupation began. Richard Nielsen, a former executive producer of a CBC flagship current affairs program, offers some provocative views on TV news seen through the prism of a televised war.

Le patriotisme exacerbé de la couverture de la guerre en Irak par les chaînes américaines était aussi tendancieux que révélateur des travers propres aux informations télévisées, lesquelles sont présentées et non communiquées aux téléspectateurs. Animateurs plutôt qu'authentiques reporters, les journalistes de télévision se voient en quelque sorte accorder plus d'importance que les événements qu'ils rapportent, l'information glissant alors vers le divertissement. Une fois terminée la phase « choc et stupeur » de la guerre et renversée la statue de Saddam Hussein, la plupart des équipes de reporters ont d'ailleurs plié bagage alors même que s'amorçait l'occupation américaine. Richard Nielsen, qui fut producteur délégué de célèbres émissions d'affaires publiques au réseau CBC, analyse de façon provocante les informations télévisées à travers le prisme d'une guerre télévisuelle.

The media coverage of the Iraq war was so perfectly adapted to television that it often seemed that the war had been turned into a television show, becoming like all television shows, a celebration of itself, and possibly, of war itself. There were differences between the US and Canadian coverage, particularly in the lead up to the war, but once the shooting started those differences became miniscule.

The CBC and BBC did avoid out-and-out partisanship, unlike US news services, which competed with one another in patriotic imagery while maintaining that the coverage they provided was fair and unbiased. Fox broadcast interviews with British and American soldiers with the Battle Hymn of the Republic playing in the background, CNN used the US government's own name for the war, "Operation Iraqi Freedom," while MSNBC used a logo that superimposed an American flag over scenes of Iraq.

The news anchors used the word "we," as in this from NBC anchor Tom Brokaw: "One of the things that we don't want to do is to dismantle the infrastructure of Iraq, because in a few days we are going to own this country."

As journalism, it was appalling, but journalism is not necessarily what television provides, it is simply a cover — what it says it provides. In its fundamentals, almost all TV news is "performance TV" — showbiz rather than "for the record" journalism.

In TV we don't "report" the news, we "present" it, and those who present it are performers, at best "reporter-performers." Peter Jennings makes \$10 million a year. Why? Because that figure is an accurate reflection of the investment ABC has in him. Many read as well as he does and some report better, but since television hasn't invested in them they have no value to television.

Lloyd Robertson and Peter Mansbridge, like Peter Jennings and his fellow news anchors everywhere, last so long in their well-paid jobs because TV has created a "public" for them. They, and the audience that watches and listens to them as a matter of habit, are locked in a permanent embrace.

When we watch TV news we should be aware of the psychology of the reporter/performer and the debt they have

incurred to their employer who has put them on TV, made them rich and will keep them there until they drop.

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Print’s journalistic ideal was a good writer/reporter with no ties to and no fear of the powers that be, except, of course, for his or her editor. In contrast to this, no performer wants to do anything but *please* the viewer. The very word “reporter” implied someone who was opposed to keeping secrets, someone who thought the truth, however embarrassing, might be useful. TV quickly put an end to the free and slightly subversive spirit print had created.

It follows that any reporter/performer on TV is more important than his or her material. The story is transitory, but their face and voice is their fortune and an asset that belongs not only to them but to the company that “made” them.

That does not mean that a TV “presenter” would make up or falsify a news story, that’s not the danger. What’s presented on TV as news is probably more accurate than news in the heyday of print. But accuracy is much less important in news than pursuing the right story. The right story should lead to the truth, and accuracy is only one aspect of that truth and not the most important one.

But for TV and its reporter/performers the right story need not lead to the truth provided it goes where the audience wants it to go, that is, wherever it will be most pleasing. This is the reason TV constantly takes polls, to find out what the audience wants — where it wants the story to go. If the story isn’t taking us in the right direction TV will change it so that it does.

TV doesn’t ask, is this war justified? Such a question calls for a conclusion for which viewers will have to

wait and with which they conceivably might disagree. What TV asks instead is, “is the war popular?” and most

important, “is the number who approve of it growing or declining?” It subtly puts the viewer in the driver’s seat.

What is the effect of making war popular entertainment? What if the truth or falsehood of the story has nothing to do with the story but everything to do with the story we, as viewers, are prepared to “entertain”?

The original concept of news on television was a function of its scarcity — the limited time TV was willing to “give” to news. Now that we have whole channels devoted to nothing but news, we are losing our taste for “the news” as it is currently presented on national TV newscasts. These after all imitate news-

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papers, with a variety of stories reflecting what editors think is important.

TV’s natural tendency is to go for the story that’s “hot” right now, SARS, Mad Cow, or Arnold Schwarzenegger, to the exclusion of all else. Traditional TV newscasts don’t have the airtime to exploit a really good story. They can’t compete successfully against a story that is continuous and sculpted by polls specifically to please us by feeding back whatever it is we find most exciting.

This kind of news derives its importance and its lasting relevance not from its subject but from us, its viewers. It becomes a true mirror of who we are. Since everyone involved in creating TV news will do whatever is needed to keep and hold our attention, it follows that what they create

is an accurate reflection not of the story but of those they are trying to please — us.

Joseph Campbell, the great anthropologist, possessed a marvellous faculty for seeing cultures, even his own, in the light of history.

In the 1920s he expressed his revulsion for “Anglo-Saxon exploitation which mutilates the ‘primitive’ cultures it encounters.” Such a controversial observation might have illuminated the coverage of the Iraq war for British, American, Australian and, indeed, Canadian viewers, but it would not have been popular.

Accurately reported facts will tell future generations a good deal about the world we inhabit but little or nothing about us. For that, they will have to turn to the fantasies we eagerly (if only temporarily) embraced — like the one about democracy spreading throughout the Middle East at the command and under the guidance of an American president whose main pretext for going to war was seizing

weapons of mass destruction that have yet to be found.

Never before have we had so many explanations for a war as for the war in Iraq, but each new reason expanded the airtime devoted to explaining why war was necessary and reduced the airtime of those opposed to the war, or kept them off TV entirely, and that was as true of the BBC and the CBC as any of the others.

Newspapers and magazines are not subject to time restrictions. They can never convincingly use the argument that there “just wasn’t room” — TV’s mantra.

In television, when the pressure is on, “managed” news expands to take all the time there is. For want of a better

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decisions that alienated a significant proportion of voters — most notably the vigorous attempt to scale back the generous social programs of the Trudeau era and the negotiation of the Canada-US free trade agreement. However, respondents generally laud him for improving Canada's role in the world, which was due in part to trade liberalization. He also gets relatively high marks for managing the economy and the federation. The latter is due to his unsuccessful efforts to bring the provinces to agreement on the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords, although readers were as divided as our panel on the value of those two failed constitutional initiatives.

In the only deviation from the rankings of the expert panel, Jean Chrétien (rather than John Diefenbaker) was ranked last by *Policy Options'* Web visitors. He received more last-place votes (19) than any other prime minister and received only one first-place vote. In addition, his average score for the four areas of political management was substantially lower than all others, though high marks were given for management of the economy. Canada enjoyed a long uninterrupted economic expansion during Chrétien's first two mandates, which helped him (via Paul Martin) to eliminate the federal deficit, and

respondents clearly grant him partial credit for these positive developments.

Chrétien's leadership style was widely seen as transactional, which may partly explain his position at the bottom of the list. Voters tend to be impressed with visionary leaders who boldly set out an ambitious agenda and see it through. Jean Chrétien is perceived by survey respondents as an incrementalist who is unwilling to take politically risky decisions.

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word the TV reporter/performer becomes "embedded" in material not of his or her choosing. Since the entertainment angle is also embedded in TV, its "journalists" have to rely on their good looks and their "likeability" — to nudge the ratings upwards and beat the competition.

When the US Army rescued Jessica Lynch, a winsome charmer from the small town of Palestine, West Virginia, so quaint and peaceful it pretty much represented the American dream, coverage of the wider war was suddenly eclipsed by Saving Private Lynch. Not only was there dramatic night vision footage of her being removed from an Iraqi hospital, where she was apparently well treated, but later videotape of her being flown out to Germany, and live coverage of her family being flown in from West Virginia to meet her. This had nothing to do with reporting the war, and everything to do with the arc of the story line. Private Lynch's War. Naturally, NBC is doing the biopic.

There are, of course, distinctions between the BBC and CBC and the main American networks, but that is

because the truly big stories most often feature America. The BBC didn't maintain a lofty neutrality vis-à-vis the Falklands War in 1982, and the CBC night after night compresses Canada into what's happening in Ottawa. These are not mistakes but manifesta-

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tions of the nature of the beast. To paraphrase Tip O'Neill, all news is local.

We have made television an entertainment venue. Malcolm Muggeridge once said that talking about religion on TV was like playing Bach in a whorehouse. That is why the correspondents pull out of Iraq and Afghanistan as soon as the fighting stops. The focus of the stories, which continue to be about Iraq, switch to Washington and London, since that is where the cameras are permanently located.

The postwar story isn't so much about the reconstruction of Iraq; as about the Congressional debate for the funding of the reconstruction. It's not inside Baghdad so much as Inside the Beltway.

I left the CBC some 30 years ago, resigning as executive producer of the corporation's Sunday night public affairs show. My successor was asked how he proposed to change things. "We will concentrate more on what is interesting," he said, "and less on what's important." I thought he'd made a fool of himself, but he hadn't, he represented the future now fully arrived.

Independent filmmaker Richard Nielsen was executive producer of the CBC's flagship current affairs program "Weekend" in the 1970s. He is the producer of three highly acclaimed documentary series on the two world wars and Korea and his company won three Anik awards for best Canadian television show for the years 1978, 1982 and 1987. He is a winner of the Michener Award, the Chetwyn Award, four Gemini Awards and three Genie Awards for the feature film "The Wars."