The News

Neil Postman

Neil Postman is a communications theorist, critic, educator, and es sayist vvho vvas born in Nevv York City. He received his doctorate from Columbia University. Postman has taught at Nevv York University for over three decades, vvhere he has served as the chair of Media Ecology and of the Department of Communication, "Arts, and Sciences. This department focuses on hovv symbols are organized to convey meaning, hovv communication affects cultural institutions, and hovv nevv media affects education. He is the author of more than a dozen books, including Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business (1986) and Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century: Ideas from the Pt(st that Can Improve Our Future (1999). What are some of the differences betvveen print, radio, and tel evision nevvs? Do you think that one medium is better suited to re porting on the nevvs than others? Why or vvhy not?

The whole problem with news on television comes down to this: all the words uttered in an hour of news coverage could be printed on one page of a newspaper. And the world cannot be understood in one page. Of course, there is a compensation: television offers pictures, and the pictures move. It is often said that moving pictures are a kind of language in themselves, and there is a good deal of truth in this. But the language of pictures differs radically from oral and written language, and the differ ences are crucial for understanding television news.

To begin with, the grammar of pictures is weak in communicating past-ness and present-ness. When terrorists want to prove to the ":'odd that their kidnap victims are still alive, they photograph them holdmg a copy of a recent newspaper. The dateline on the newspaper provides the proof that the photograph was taken on or after that date. Without the

help of the written word, film and videotape cannot portray temporal di mensions with any precision. Consider a film dip showing an aircraft car rier at sea. One might be able to identify the ship as Soviet or American, but there would be no way of telling where in the world the carrier was, where it was headed, or when the pictures were taken. It is only through language-words spoken over the pictures or reproduced in them-that the image of the aircraft carrier takes on meaning as a portrayal of a spe cific event.

Still, it is possible to enjoy the image of the carrier for its own sake. One might find the hu.geness of the vessel interesting; it signifies military power on the move. There is a certain drama in watching the planes come in at high speeds and skid to a stop on the deck. Suppose the ship were burning: that would'be even more interesting. This leads to a sec ond point about the language of pictures. The grammar of moving pic tures favours images that change. That is why violence and destruction find their way onto television so often. When something is destroyed violently its constitution is altered in a highly visible way: hence the en trancing power of fire. Fire gives visual form to the ideas of consumption, disappearance, death-the thing whic_h is burned is actually taken away by fire. It is at this very basic level that fires make a good subject for tel evision news. Something was here, now it's gone, and the change is recorded on film.

Earthquakes and typhoons have the same power: before the viewer's eyes the world is taken apart. If a television viewer has relatives in

Mexico City and an earthquake occurs there, then she may take an interest in the images of destruction as a report from a specific place and time. That is, she may look to television news for information about an important event. But film of an earthquake can still be interesting if the viewer cares nothing about the event itself Which is only to say that there is an

other way of participating in the news-as a spectator who desires to be entertained. Actually to see buildings topple is exciting, no matter where the buildings are. The world turns to dust before our eyes.

Those who produce television news in America know that their medium favours images that move. That is why they despise "talking

heads," people who simply appear in front of a camera and speak. When talking heads appear on television, there is nothing to record or document, no change in process. In the cinema the situation is somewhat differ ent. On a movie screen, close-ups of a good actor speaking dramatically can sometimes be interesting to watch. When Clint Eastwood narrows his eyes and challenges his rival to shoot first, the spectator sees the cool rage of the Eastwood character take visual form, and the narrowing of the eyes is dramatic. But much of the effect of this small movement de pends on the size of the movie screen and the darkness of the theatre,

which make Eastwood and his every action "larger than life." The television screen is smaller than life. It occupies about 15 per cent of the viewer's visual field (compared to about 70 per cent for the movie

screen). It is not set in i darkened theatre closed off from the world but in the viewer's ordinary living space. This means that visual changes must be more extreme and more dramatic to be interesting on television. A narrowing of the eyes will not do. A car crash, an earth quake, a burning factory are much better.

·with these principles in mind, let us examine more closely the structure of a typical newscast. In America, almost all news shows begin with music, the tone of which suggests important events about to unfold. (Beethoven's Fifth Symphony would be entirely appropriate.) The music is very important, for it equates the news with various forms of drama and ritual-the opera, for example, or a wedding procession-in which mu sical themes underscore the meaning of the event. Music takes us im mediately into the realm of the symbolic, a world that is not to be taken literally. After all, when events unfold in the real world, they do so with out musical accompaniment. More symbolism follows. The sound of teletype machines can be heard in the studio, not because it is impossi ble to screen this noise out, but because the sound is a kind of music in itself It tells us tha·; data are pouring in from all corners of the globe, a sensation reinforced by the world map in the background (or docks not ing the time on different continents).

Already, then, before a single news item is introduced, a great deal has been communicated. We know that we are in the presence of a symbolic event, a form of theatre in which the day's events are to be

dramatized. This theatre takes the entire globe as its subject, although it may look at the world from the perspective of a single nation. A certain tension is present, like the atmosphere in a theatre just before the curtain goes up. The tension is represented by the music, the staccato beat of the teletype machines, and the sight of news-workers scurrying around typ ing reports· and answering phones. As a technical matter, it would be no problem to build a set in which the newsroom staff remained off camera, invisible to the viewer, but an important theatrical effect would be lost. By being busy on camera, the workers help communicate ur gency about the events at hand, which it is suggested are changing so rapidly that constant revision of the news is necessary. The staff in the background also helps signal the importance of the person in the centre, the anchorman (or -woman) "in command" of both the staff and the news.

The anchorman plays the role of host. He welcomes us to the newscast and welcomes us back from the different lo cations we visit during filmed reports. His voice, appearance, and man ner establish the mood of the broadcast. It would be unthinkable for the anchor to be ugly, or a nervous sort who could not complete a sen tence. Viewers must be able to believe in the anchor as a person of au thority and skill, a person who would not panic in a crisis-someone to trust.

This belief is based not on knowledge of the anchorman's charac ter or achievements as a journalist, but on his presentation of self while on the air. Does he look the part of a trusted man? Does he speak firmly and clearly? Does he have a warm smile? Does he project confidence without seeming arrogant? The value the anchor must communicate above all else is control. He must be in control of himself, his voice, his emotions. He must know what is coming next in the broadcast, and he must move smoothly and confidently from segment to segment. Again, it would be unthinkable for the anchor to break down and weep over a story, or laugh uncontrollably on camera, no matter how "human" these responses may be.

Many other features of the newscast help the anchor to establish the impression of control. These are usually equated with professionalism in broadcasting. They include such things as graphics that tell the viewer

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what is being shown, or maps and charts that suddenly appear on the screen and disappear on cue, or the orderly progression from story to story, starting with the most important events first. They also include the absence of gaps or "dead time" during the broadcast, even the simple fact that the news starts and ends at a certain hour. These common fea tures are thought of as purely technical matters, which a professional crew handles as a matter of course: But they are also symbols of a dom inant theme of television news:·'the imposition of an orderly world called "the news"-upon the disorderly flow of events. While the form of a news broadcast emphasizes tidiness and con trol, its content can best be described as chaotic. Because time is so pre cious on television, because the nature of the medium favours dynamic visual images, and because the pressures of a commercial structure require the news to hold its audience above all else, there is rarely any attempt to explain issues in depth or place events in their proper context. The news moves nervously from a warehouse fire to a court decision, from a guer rilla war to a World Cup match, the quality of the film often determin ing the length of the story. Certain stories show up only because they offer dramatic pictures. Bleachers collapse in South America: hundreds of people are crushed-a perfect television news story, for the cameras can record the face of disaster in all its anguish. Back in Washington, a new budget is approved by Congress. Here there is nothing to photograph be cause a budget is not a physical event; it is a document full oflanguage and numbers. So the producers of the news will show a photo of the document itself, focusing on the cover where it says: "Budget of the United States of America." Or sometimes they will send a camera crew to the government printing plant where copies of the budget are pro duced. That evening, while the contents of the budget are summarized by a voice-over, the viewer sees stacks of documents being loaded into boxes at the government printing plant. Then a few of the budget's more important provisions will be flashed on the screen in written form, but this is such a time-consuming process-using television as a printed page-that the producers keep it to a minimum. In short, the budget is not televisable, and for that reason its time on the news must be brief The bleacher collapse will get more minutes that evening.

With priorities of this sort, it is almost impossible for the news to offer an adequate account of important events. Indeed, it is the trivial event that is often best suited for television coverage. This is such a com monplace that no one even bothers to challenge it. Walter Cronkite, a revered figure in

television and anchorman of the CBS Evening News for many years, has acknowledged several times that television cannot be relied on to inform the citizens of a democratic nation. Unless they also read newspapers and magazines, television viewers are helpless to understand their world, Cronkite has said. No one at CBS has ever disagreed with his conclusion, other than to say, "We do the best we can." Of course, it is a tendency of journalism in general to concentrate on the surface of events rather than underlying conditions; this is as true for the newspaper as it is for the newscast. But several features of television undermine whatever efforts journalists may make to give sense to the world. One is that a television broadcast is a series of events that occur in sequence, and the sequence is the same for all viewers. This is not true for a newspaper page, which displays many items simultaneously, allowing readers to choose the order in which they read them. If a newspaper reader wants only a summary *of* the latest tax bill, he can read the headline and the first paragraph of an article, and if he wants more, he can keep reading. In a sense, then, everyone reads a different newspaper, for no two readers will read (or ignore) the same items.

But all television viewers see the same broadcast. They have no choices. A report is either in the broadcast or out, which means that anything which is of narrow interest is unlikely to be included. As NBC News executive Reuven Frank once explained:

> A newspaper, for example, can easily afford to print an item of conceivable interest to only a fraction of its readers. A television news program must be put together with the assumption that each item will be of some interest to every one that watches. Every time a newspaper includes a feature, which will attract a specialized group, it can assume it is adding at least a little bit to its circulation. To the degree a television news program includes an item of this sort ... it must assume that its audience will diminish.

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media on media

The need to "include everyone," an identifying feature of commercial television in all its forms, prevents journalists from offering lengthy or complex explanations, or from tracing the sequence of events leading up to today's headlines. One of the ironies of political life in modern democracies is that many problems which concern the "general welfare" are of interest only to specialized groups. Arms control, for example, is an issue that literally concerns everyone in the world, and yet the language of arms control and the complexity of the subject are so daunting that only a minority of people can actually follow the issue from week to week and month to month. If it wants to act responsibly, a newspaper can at least make available more information about arms control than most people want. But commercial television cannot afford to do so.

This illustrates an important point in the psychology of television's appeal. Many of the items in newspapers and magazines are not, in a strict sense, demanded by a majority of readers. They are there because some readers *might* be interested or because the editors think their readers *should* be interested. On commercial television, "might" and "should" are not the relevant words. The producers attempt to make sure that "each item will be of some interest to everyone that watches," as Reuven Frank put it. What this means is that a newspaper or magazine can challenge its audience in a way that television cannot. Print media have the luxury of suggesting or inviting interest, whereas television must always concern itself with conforming to existing iriterests. In a way, television is more strictly responsive to the demands of its huge audience. But there is one demand it cannot meet: the desire to be challenged, to be told "this is worth attending to," to be surprised by what one thought would not be of interest.

Another severe limitation on television is time. There is simply not enough

of it. The evening news programs at CBS, NBC, and ABC all run for thirty minutes, eight of which are taken up by commercials. No one believes that twenty-two minutes for the day's news is adequate. For

years news executives at ABC, NBC, and CBS have suggested that the news be expanded to one hour. But by tradition the half-hour after the national evening news is given over to the hundreds of local affiliate stations around the country to use as they see fit. They have found it a very profitable time to broadcast game shows or half-hour situation comedies, and they are reluctant to give up the income they derive from these programs.

The evening news produced by the three networks is profitable for both the networks and the local stations. The local stations are paid a fee by the network to broadcast the network news, and they profit from this fee since the news-produced by the network-costs them nothing. It is likely that they would also make money from a one-hour newscast, but not as much, they judge, as they do from the game shows and comedies they now schedule.

The result is that the evening news must try to do what cannot reasonably be done: give a decent account of the day's events in twenty two minutes. What the viewer gets instead is a series of impressions, many of them purely visual, most of them unconnected to each other or to any sense of a history unfolding. Taken together, they suggest a world that is fundamentally ungovernable, where events do not arise out of historical conditions but rather explode from the heavens in a series of disasters that suggest a permanent state of crisis. It is this crisis-highly visual, ahistorical, and unsolvable-which the evening news presents as theatre every evening.

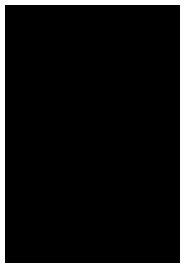
The audience for this theatre is offered a contradictory pair of re sponses. On the one hand, it is reassured by the smooth presentation of the news itself, especially the firm voice and steady gaze of the trusty anchorman. Newscasts frequently end with a "human-interest story," often with a sentimental or comic touch. Example: a little girl in Chicago writes Gorbachev a letter, and he answers her, saying that he and President Reagan are trying to work out their differences. This item reassures view ers that all is well, leaders are in command, we can still communicate with each other, and so on. But-and now we come to the other hand the rest of the broadcast has told a different story. It has shown the au dience a world that is out of control and incomprehensible, full of violence, disaster, and suffering. Whatever authority the anchorman may project through his steady manner is undermined by the terror in spired by the news itself.

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Paradox oe Modero. Communication

This is where television news is at its most radical-not in giving publicity to radical causes, but in producing the impression of an un governable world. And it produces this impression not because the peo ple who work in television are leftists or anarchists. The anarchy in



television news is a direct result of the commercial structure of broad casting, which introduces into news judgments a single-mindedness more powerful than any ideology: the overwhelming need to keep peo ple watching.



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Notes

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony a triumphant instrumental piece of music written by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), often recognized for its sus penseful "da-da-da-dum" opening

teletype machines electromechanical typewriters that transmit and receive messages coded in electrical signals carried by telegraph or telephone wires. These machines have become virtually obsolete since the onset of the use of the Internet and fax machines in the 1980s.

Congress the national legislative body of the United States, composed of the Senate and the House of Representatives

Gorbachev Mikhail Gorbachev, born in 1931, was the general secretary of the USS R's Communist Party (1985-1991) and the Soviet Union's president (1989-1991).

President Reagan Ronald Reagan, born in 1911, was the fortieth president of the United States, serving two terms from 1981 to 1989. leftists believers and supporters of the ideology of the political left, which usually advocates liberal or radical measures to effect egalitarian change anarchists proponents of anarchy, the absence of all forms of government. More generally, anarchy refers to political disorder or the absence of a cohe sive principle.

Learning With·out

Lectures

Ann Rees

Ann Rees vvas born in Cardiff Wales in 1952 She · · d , , . 1mm1grate to Canada vvith her family at the age of five, moving to Cold Lake, Alberta. She has lived in many communities in Saskatchevvan, Alberta, and British Columbia. For over tvvo decades, Rees has been an inves
tigative journalist in Vancouver vvith the Province nevvspaper, vvhere she focuses on special projects and longer, in-depth investigations. Rees has said that, in terms of the journalist's "W5H" (Wh o, Wh at, When, Where, Why, and Hovv), her vvork is most focused on the