

The Truthiness Factor

Blurring Boundaries and the Shifting Status of Objectivity and Emotion in Television News

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Publication date:
2009

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Peters, C. (2009). *The Truthiness Factor: Blurring Boundaries and the Shifting Status of Objectivity and Emotion in Television News*. Library and Archives Canada.
<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/thesescanada/vol2/002/NR52069.PDF>

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The Truthiness Factor:
Blurring Boundaries and the Shifting Status of Objectivity and Emotion
in Television News

By

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*A dissertation submitted to the Department of Sociology and Anthropology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of*

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

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Ottawa, Ontario
March, 2009

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the ‘blurring’ of news styles and emergence of new forms within American television journalism over the past 25 years. It considers how the roles of emotion and ‘objectivity’ have been reconfigured in a climate of unprecedented technological and commercial shifts. It is unique as it investigates two innovative forms of broadcast journalism, satirical news and cable magazines, not just in terms of content, but instead drawing on the sociology of emotions to conceptualize and examine how these shows attempt to craft an ‘experience of involvement’.

I perform a textual analysis that considers the presentational style and branding of *The O’Reilly Factor*, *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, *The Daily Show*, and *Colbert Report*. Findings are based on a lengthy observation of each program and an in-depth examination from 2007. These analyses are situated against an examination of the *CBS Evening News* from 1979 and 2007. Secondary material in which key players from these programs explain the rationales behind how they craft the news is also integrated.

This study finds that cable and satirical news differentiate themselves by attempting to craft a more ‘involved’ presentational style than network newscasts, but simultaneously adhere to many conventional journalistic ‘rules of truth’. There are also indications that network news, though maintaining a fairly consistent tone, is beginning to address this issue of involvement.

Emerging news products often adopt a style that satirist Stephen Colbert terms ‘truthiness’, wherein tone and style become more central in attempting to generate certainty, fidelity, and trust. I argue that rather than lament the ‘loss’ of a supposed halcyon age of serious journalism, it is fruitful to take a closer look at how such products engage a progressively fragmented and time-strapped public, who are losing trust in traditional news. In academia, such ‘infotainment’ is regularly ignored, often considered as unworthy of meticulous contemplation despite its reach and influence. This dissertation can be situated instead in an emerging stream of research that stresses the sociological and cultural importance of non-valorized news forms. I locate these emerging forms as part of a broader shift described by others towards conversationalisation, personalisation and informalisation.

Key Words: journalism, objectivity, news of feeling, news of fact, infotainment, informalisation, conversationalisation, personalisation, tabloidization, sociology of emotions, satire, cable news, soft news, broadcast news, television

Acknowledgements

Oscar Wilde writes in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, “we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.” And while no doubt intended as a commentary on morality and behaviour, this sentiment seems apt to describe the feelings one encounters while doing a Ph.D. Isolation, dejection, frustration, and self-doubt – punctuated by instances of brilliant joy and genuine vision. Usually, though not always, someone other than ourselves is to thank for these starry moments.

My supervisor, Aaron Doyle, persuaded me of my worth as a scholar when the environment dictated otherwise and I was determined to quit. His acts of support and voice were strong and resolute, and for convincing me to push on, I go far beyond simple gratitude.

Pat O'Malley, my original supervisor, buggered off to the much sunnier shores of Australia half-way through this process, and really, who could blame him? That being said, without his early guidance and critical questioning, I would have sorely lacked the tools to even contemplate, much less complete, this work.

Josh Greenberg sat on my committee from the beginning and constantly asked the tough but necessary question.

Lois Sweet, Serra Tinic, and Chris Dornan participated in the final stages, offering many productive avenues for future research. And my colleagues, Marcel Broersma, Marc Chavannes, and Sanna Buurke, offered support and encouragement in the midst of a hectic first year lecturing abroad.

Yet professional contacts provide only a few of the enduring moments when we see stars.

From Slovakia to South Africa, Nicaragua to the Netherlands, elements of this dissertation were written and edited, pondered and conceived, in a variety of global locales. Critically, such journeys often made me appreciate what the gutter truly is.

And personal relationships are even more indispensable.

Kirsten Kolstrup, a fierce friend and fellow Ph.D., was a constant source of positive reinforcement or serendipitous distraction – whichever was needed – during the final stages of this process.

And as for my parents, Holwyn and Elizabeth Peters, I noted in my M.A. acknowledgements that I owe them my readiness for a challenge and thirst for adventure. I'm happy to report that nothing has changed.

Somewhere over the Atlantic, March 2009.

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Grateful thanks to The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, The O'Reilly Factor, Lou Dobbs Tonight, and the CBS Evening News for granting permission to use these images.

Introduction

The words stuck in my throat. A sob wanted to replace them. A gulp or two quashed the sob, which metamorphosed into tears forming in the corners of my eyes. I fought back the emotion and regained my professionalism, but it was touch and go there for a few seconds before I could continue...

Walter Cronkite, A Reporter's Life (1996) – reflecting upon announcing the Kennedy assassination, an iconic moment that throws into relief 20th century professional television journalism standards through their threatened momentary breach.

However, it is true that honest anger, when properly aimed at a legitimate target, can be a useful tool in the culture war. ... I have to deal with a massive amount of social injustice and chicanery on a daily basis and it takes a healthy amount of agita to deal with it all efficiently and effectively. Trying to right wrongs in this country will wear you down, but anger can keep you going when everybody else is exhausted. So it's a tough situation for the traditional culture warrior: You need to keep the fires of indignation lighted but avoid the backdrafts.

Bill O'Reilly, Culture Warrior (2006) – explaining his journalistic demeanour and motivation for *The O'Reilly Factor*, the most popular show on U.S. cable news.

We are divided between those who think with their heads, and those who *know* with their *hearts*. ... The 'truthiness' is, anyone can read the news to you, I promise to *feel* the news, *at you*.

Stephen Colbert, The Colbert Report (2005) – conceptualising what he feels is the American zeitgeist in one word, Colbert accentuates the persona he will adopt during his inaugural faux cable newscast.

A maxim of journalism is that nothing adds colour like a good quote. This adage seems equally applicable to definitive moments within the industry, for when one considers the history of 20th century journalism, a number of celebrated expressions spring to mind. The *New York Times*' masthead promises every day, "All the news that's fit to print." Edward R. Murrow brought World War II home to Americans simply declaring, "This is London." And as Walter Cronkite famously announced every evening for 19 years, "And that's the way it is." Such expressions have achieved almost legendary status not just for the prominence of their creators, but for their appropriateness in terms of the cultural expectations surrounding journalism – a sober and accurate summary of the prominent events each day. Yet when one

considers some 21st century equivalents, it seems that a more diverse tone is becoming evident in the broader cultural lexicon of journalism. The most popular host on cable news, Bill O'Reilly, informs his audience every night, "Caution! You are about to enter *the* no spin zone." Jon Stewart, who despite being the host of a satirical newscast has garnered substantial journalistic acclaim, ends each 'fake' newscast by delivering a "Moment of Zen." And when *The Times*, one of Britain's oldest newspapers, underwent a rebranding in 2006 it did so under the slogan, "Join the Debate." Put simply, some of the most successful journalism products of the past 25 years employ a very different style when it comes to how they represent 'reality' and go about 'making news' (see Tuchman 1978). News products that deviate sharply in tone from the sort of 'hard' journalistic style exemplified by the 20th century network newscast are steadily finding success within the broader field of American journalism.

This dissertation explores these tonal developments alongside some evident visible shifts of the past 25 years such as fragmentation, commercialisation and the technological revolution, to assert that the interplay of these emergences and transformations has dramatically altered the field of journalism over the past few decades. This analysis is then further developed by empirically investigating the impact of these changes in television news, arguing that, while many of the traditional elements and techniques of news production and presentation are still evident within American broadcast journalism, including within many emerging products, at the same time the landscape of what 'counts' as 'trusted' news over the past 25 years has broadened substantially, so that diverse styles of journalisms are now increasingly crafted and accepted as valid.¹ In turn, I will argue, conventional analytic

¹ While the emphasis in this dissertation is on television news, many of these transformations impact print and radio outlets as well.

categories such as hard and soft news, or serious and tabloid journalism, seem evermore tenuous and inadequate to capture the diversity of news alternatives.

For instance, the top 10 shows operating on the cable news networks were drawing an average of about 13.5 million viewers per evening by the end of 2006 (PEJ 2007) and undeniably classify themselves as journalistic products. However, many of these shows embody a style that satirist Stephen Colbert has termed “truthiness”, where passion, emotion, and certainty appear more important than information in crafting the news (Charlie Rose 2006). Rather than simply offering news that strives to be accurate, the term ‘truthiness’ implies a presentation that relies heavily on tone to generate a sense of confidence, an overriding mood, in Colbert’s words, that “What I say is right, and nothing anyone else says could possibly be true” (Rabin 2006). Colbert’s point seems to be that whereas facts used to be the basis of argument, perception is now everything, “it’s certainty” (ibid.). While all claims to truth are evidently dependent upon perception for trust, the notion of truthiness speaks to the idea that packaging, style and presentation move to the fore as much as, and at times even more than, facts to generate certainty, fidelity and trust. In terms of journalism, this leads to a style of reportage that is at times a ‘wink’ to the audience, news not simply read but presented in a familiar tone that conveys mutual understanding and deeper appreciation for the significance of stories. In this way, truthiness implies that being seen as informative is no longer enough for many emerging forms of journalism – their focus is on attempting to craft a presentational style that is ‘appealing’ to their audience (Charlie Rose 2006). Journalists are taught from an early point in their apprenticeship or education to ‘write for their audience’ and while professional techniques are certainly part of this training, a critical element is picturing this audience while writing (and in the case of broadcast, reading) the story. Yet, as the quotes from Cronkite and O’Reilly which lead this chapter imply, the past

few decades appear to witness markedly different conceptualisations about what style and persona are demanded to convey a ‘professional’ recounting of the news.

The journalistic mandate to uncover truth as it grapples with falsehood, through distant analysis, is superseded in many emergent news products by a more involved reportage that focuses on the feeling of truth. This parallels the observation in some political science literature, that politics has become a sphere where style now often stands in for substance (see Corner and Pels 2003). However, one has to be careful about over-applying this term. ‘Truthiness’ is employed in the title for this dissertation, and can be viewed more generally as a figurative description of many emerging forms of news, precisely because it implies that truth still matters, though presentation comes to be accentuated more forcefully in its pursuit. This emergence, as this dissertation argues, allows many contemporary programs to be simultaneously ‘newsy’ and purposefully separate from traditional news. Although watching such programs is still very much a recounting of daily events, they go beyond this by attempting to craft an explicit relationship with the audience. In this way, each broadcast acts as another utterance in an ongoing dialogue with the audience replete with unique terminology, self-referencing to previous broadcasts, and personal modes of address (cf. Knox 2007). Thus, the ritualistic daily watching of the news also becomes (ideally for some news outlets) a more intimate relationship (cf. Jermyn 2001).

The response in the industry has often been the sort of negative scrutiny which is part of a more general journalistic tendency to problematise emergent news forms and techniques that challenge the journalistic status quo (Tulloch 2000; Zelizer 2000; Ward 2005).² Television news is looked down upon by print journalists as being infotainment, network news purveyors look down upon cable news for similar reasons, while the journalism

² For instance, the widespread adoption of amateur video footage in newscasts during the 1990s was greeted with great suspicion by many journalists (Doyle 2003).

community as a whole looks down upon internet bloggers (Zelizer 2000). In academia such ‘infotainment’ is often ignored; being seen as less significant than ‘real’ news, it is passed over as unworthy of scholarly attention (Carter *et al.* 1998).

This situation leads me to the following questions: What are the general rules of truth under the traditional ‘objectivity’ regime, not only in terms of ontology (what is truth) but in terms of epistemology (how can journalists know truth) and techniques (how do journalists generate truth); and what relevance does this concept retain in the current journalistic field for discerning what we consider ‘news’? To answer these questions, the first two chapters of this dissertation address the academic observations on objectivity and the interrelation between the tonal shifts in journalism and the more visible commercial and technological shifts witnessed in the industry over the past 25 years. It has been argued that the pre-eminence of 20th century objectivity as the bedrock of Anglo-American ‘hard news’ and ‘serious journalism’ is deeply entrenched in the ideals of the Enlightenment (MacDonald 2001; Ward 2005). Yet there are signs that in practice, personal epistemologies are increasingly accepted as valid within journalism despite the persistence of dualisms such as emotion and rationality, fact and value, and the pejorative connotations that these terms imply (MacDonald 2003).³ What is fairly evident is that the burgeoning appearance of highly-successful, ‘non-traditional’ newscasts over the past 25 years has underscored these tensions, forcing an examination of the performance of objectivity and the boundaries of professional journalism both within academia and within the industry (see Bourdieu 1998; Hackett and Zhao 1998; Gripsrud 2000; Sparks 2000; Tulloch 2000; Zelizer 2000; Altheide 2002; Cunningham 2003; Frank 2003; Ward 2005).

³ The critique of objectivity has a prominent intellectual history outside of media studies, for instance the critical inquiries of the Frankfurt School, postmodern deconstructionists, and feminist theory (see Ward 2005: 12-14 for a succinct summary in relation to journalism).

In order to place these developments in context, the second half of this dissertation addresses itself to some of the most evidently successful, yet clearly innovative, American broadcast news genres to appear during the past few decades. Motivating this is an underlying curiosity to understand how emergent forms of journalism, such as cable news magazines and satirical news, have garnered popular acclaim as trusted sources of news while, on the surface at least, so clearly departing from the established network model of journalism. Do they subscribe to any of the notions that fall under the umbrella of objectivity or do they completely depart from established guidelines of professionalism? If this is the case, how, exactly, do the producers of such programs describe what establishes their legitimacy as ‘news’ with their viewers? And, if they say they believe their success and legitimacy derives from rejecting traditional journalistic tenets, does this mean that more traditional forms of news are also experiencing pressure to change? Are there noticeable shifts in network news over the past 25 years or has it stayed relatively constant? In this sense, this dissertation follows in the common tradition of considering the rationales underlying news production and how these rationales are manifested in the presentation of journalism (see Tuchman 1978; Schlesinger 1987; Fairclough 1995).

These enquiries into the state of objectivity within the academic literature on journalism, and the empirical demonstration of it in the journalistic field, led to the argument I will advance in this project, namely: in numerous ways, the profession of journalism, which often claims to put emotion aside, has *always* had an emotional side. One of the most significant changes over the past 25 years, I argue, is that the manifestations of emotions – which I will shortly describe more systematically as the experience of involvement (Barbalet 1998) – have become more explicit. As the Colbert quote at the beginning of this chapter suggests, emerging forms of American broadcast journalism often try to ‘feel’ the news at

you; pre-digesting facts, advocating the importance of issues explicitly rather than merely signalling this through story placement and length, recognising and interacting with audiences, focusing on personal relevance, and relying upon technological innovations to stylise presentation. This relates to reconfigurations of journalistic ‘rules of truth’ which underlie how the news is crafted. What constitutes an acceptable emotional posture within journalism has changed significantly over the past few decades. It seems that journalistic emotional involvement is often no longer viewed as a hindrance to the perception of reality, a shift from the traditional 20th century preoccupation with journalistic neutrality and detachment (see Schudson 2001; Ward 2005). In fact, some of the news products I investigate in this dissertation flip this notion on its head: as I will show, involvement by the journalist becomes actively embraced as beneficial in the search for ‘truth’.

In essence, my argument builds upon the well-articulated observations made by some researchers that categories rooted in Enlightenment ideals, such as fact/opinion and objectivity/subjectivity are increasingly blurred and difficult to distinguish in the modern journalistic field (see Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999; MacDonald 2000; Zelizer 2004). In conjunction with possibilities created through technological innovations and the fragmentation of media outlets over the past 25 years, ‘acceptable’ presentational styles have broadened, ergo; it is beneficial to modify previous conceptualisations of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news ingrained by Cartesian thinking to understand the rise and success of emergent forms of broadcast news that defy this taxonomy.

This project contributes to the sociology of news production by analysing some of these emergent media products to identify how developments in the industry have created the possibilities for a varied breadth of news styles to appear and to appreciate how these products function with reference to the rules of truth traditionally articulated under the

notion of objectivity. From the advent of 24-hour cable news; to the emergence of the internet; the rise of news/talk radio; the growth of satellite news outlets; the development of different journalistic forms, such as public and ‘reflexive’ journalism; and the proliferation of niche news outlets, the journalism landscape has undergone a period of near unprecedented change over the past few decades. Add to this the observation made by many scholars – that this period has witnessed a slippage of ‘objectivity’, one of the hallmarks of professional journalism throughout the 20th century (Hackett and Zhao 1998; Frank 2003; Ward 2005) – and it seems that the tone of journalism has shifted, corresponding to a broader range in what is considered ‘news’. To understand the impact of these changes, I will argue that it is helpful to conceptualise news in a manner that escapes the sort of binary thinking that categorises journalistic products as either ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ news, which oversimplifies the complexity of the 21st century journalism field. In this respect, this dissertation endeavours to further the assorted academic dialogues, referenced throughout this project, that attempt to understand what alternative and emerging journalisms are doing differently that have seen people turn to them for ‘news’ at a time when audience levels for traditional outlets have plummeted.

While professional journalism is traditionally analysed in terms of its rational tenets, often juxtaposed with the notion of objectivity, talk of emotion is generally subsumed under the rubric of sensationalism and left for describing ‘soft’ or ‘tabloid’ journalism. This reinforces a misleading dichotomy – hard news is rational, soft news emotional – that undermines emotion, relative to rationality, in analyses of how the journalism industry goes about ‘making news’. I will argue here that emotion consists of much more than is captured in the common sense definition of it as entirely subjective bodily ‘feelings’. Rather, as researchers who work in the sociology of emotions note, emotion has a social component

and can be more broadly conceptualised as the “experience of involvement” (Barbalet 1998: 2). As such, we can employ this analytic to aid in our analysis of the diverse fare of journalistic options appearing in the new millennium. This project makes a novel contribution by introducing this important observation found in literature on the sociology of emotions to reconceptualise the relationship between rationality and emotion in the research on journalism and news production.

By examining how these programs seem to attempt to produce this experience of involvement, and thus examining the role of emotion in emerging forms of news, we can augment the sort of tabloid/broadsheet dualisms that hinder our ability to analyse types of journalism that do not conform closely to a prototypical ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ news type. It is quite liberating to come to the realisation that archetypes of ‘hard’ news, such as Walter Cronkite, rather than being simply ‘unemotional’, actually harness a specific type of ‘cool’ emotional posture to present the news (cf. Stearns 1994). For when we come to this understanding it helps us reconceptualise the sort of emergent news products I will examine here, which, while often dismissed as ‘sensational’ or ‘trivial’, nonetheless achieve success and find a place within the broader journalistic field (cf. Zelizer 2000).

Decrying the erosion of news standards seems a somewhat popular pastime among journalists and academics these days, and claims that journalism is widely debasing itself has garnered support from many academics despite an apparent lack of empirical evidence (Sparks 2000; van Zoonen 2005). A summary of the primary thrust of this so-called ‘tabloidization’ thesis, which states that the ‘serious’ standards of yesteryear are seeing widespread disintegration, is offered by Fanklin (1997: 4) who notes:

Entertainment has superseded the provision of information, human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationship of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal

family are judged more ‘newsworthy’ than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; ‘infotainment’ is rampant.

Yet some academics take issue with such sweeping statements. Sparks (2000: 14) notes that a problem with this type of thinking is an oversimplified conceptualisation of the news, which places hard news on one end of a spectrum, soft on the other. He notes that these sorts of ideal types, what he calls the “Journal of Record” and the “True Tabloid”, often neglect the multidimensional nature of journalism. For instance, Sparks constructs a model with two axes, one that positions newspapers between a focus on public life and private life, and another that places them based upon their relative focus on politics, economics, and society or scandal, sports, and entertainment, to illustrate that tabloidization would necessitate a common move across the media towards the bottom right quadrant (private/scandal, sports). Such a movement is hard to demonstrate. When one also considers that contentions of tabloidization can be traced back almost to the beginning of the mass media (Tulloch 2000), what this illustrates is that trying to analyse *entire shifts* in journalism is problematic if for no other reason that defining ‘news’ is more complicated than such oversimplified categorisation suggests.

As a commonplace example illustrates, ‘news’ is difficult to define as it is used in a broad sense to describe everything from the front page of the *New York Times* to idle gossip around the office canteen (‘Did you hear the news?’). In this way news can span texts from press releases to public speeches, exposés to experimental findings. Journalism, of course, is a much more tightly defined field and can be thought of as commentary and reportage on these events and current affairs, generally, though not always, identified by its producers as ‘journalism’. Professional journalism is even more specific, being produced inside mainstream media institutions and networks (Atton and Hamilton 2008). In this sense, the

tabloidization thesis seems to be suggesting that *professional journalism* is widely ‘softening’; office talk is unlikely to be something of great concern to authors like Franklin. Similarly, Jermyn (2001: 352) looks at the increasing “feminisation, sexualisation, and privatization” of media coverage, building on Hartley’s (1998: 62) assertion that contemporary news has witnessed, “a decisive shift from modernist (investigative, critical) towards post-modern (celebratory, emotional) journalism.” But as Sparks helpfully illustrates, such full-scale shifts or transitions are highly problematic to demonstrate empirically because the number of different journalisms, and the number of axes upon which news outlets can be categorised, is never static.

In this sense, this dissertation tries to break away from this sort of thinking to consider news not in terms of its ‘hardness’ or ‘softness’, nor even to construct a model akin to that of Sparks which relies upon (an admittedly multi-dimensional) model that still results in a ‘spectrum’ of journalisms. While I agree with his use of ideal types – and as I discuss shortly I rely upon a similar construction to speak of a ‘news of fact’ and a ‘news of feeling’ – I instead evaluate my empirical examples by looking at how each text relies upon journalistic ‘rules of truth’ and how these rules are manifested through a particular attempt to craft an experience of involvement. Thus when I speak about a greater diversity of tones in what ‘counts’ as news, this requires that the products I analyse explicitly acknowledge their relationship to journalism and explicitly adhere to some of the ‘rules of truth’ developed in the field during the 20th century regime of ‘objective journalism’. In this way, government press releases would not count as news, because although they are also crafted to communicate information to the public, they do not contain the (potentially implicit) claim that they are providing journalistic ‘news’. However, one must keep in mind that this dissertation argues the distinctions between argument, analysis, opinion, punditry,

information, and entertainment are becoming increasingly harder to discern in certain emerging forms of journalism. This is no more evident than in Chapter 6, where the two satirical news programs investigated are widely considered in both popular and academic circles as augmenting journalism despite claims to the contrary that they are only ‘fake news’.

As such, this dissertation can be considered alongside theoretical attempts to analyse the ‘other’ or ‘soft’ news (see Langer 1998; Gripsrud 2000; MacDonald 2000; Sparks 2000; Tulloch 2000). It adds to this literature by utilising a sociological conceptualisation of ‘emotion’ that helps dissolve the rigidities which place media scholars in the awkward position of categorising products as ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ news or as some sort of ‘infotainment’ hybrid. In this way we can better understand why watching Cronkite is like listening to a professor, while watching O’Reilly is akin to listening to a preacher, even when both purport to follow standard journalistic rules of truth in terms of attribution, accuracy, balance, expertise and fact.⁴

This relates to the second notable scholarly contribution achieved through this dissertation. To date, there is a fairly limited literature on two of the more intriguing genres of television news to gain in popularity over the past decade, cable magazines and satirical news.⁵ And regardless of other academics who are beginning to address this paucity of attention, this dissertation takes an original approach to these genres by introducing a sociological conception of emotion to analyse how they craft an experience of involvement. By explicating how these programs configure rationality and emotion, we can begin to understand how they craft a product that, while evidently deviating from traditional

⁴ This is a prime example of how ‘truthiness’ has crept into news production. While many critics of O’Reilly have done the sort of in-depth research and fact-checking necessary to illustrate the neglect of journalistic rigour in his program (see Hart 2003), nonetheless Americans are more apt to identify him as a journalist than Bob Woodward (Lester 2005).

⁵ As this project developed, increasingly, *The Daily Show* became subject to academic analysis. Recently there have also been a number of conference papers on *The Colbert Report*.

journalism, is nonetheless widely considered ‘news’. Some may bristle at this suggestion, for it is fair to say that the journalistic value of programs such as *The O’Reilly Factor*, *Hardball*, or *Lou Dobbs Tonight* has not been widely espoused by academics and journalists.⁶ Yet neglecting the impact of such programs seems misguided when we consider that a 2005 Annenberg poll found that 40 percent of Americans polled identified Bill O’Reilly as a journalist, versus 30 percent for Watergate journalist Bob Woodward (Lester 2005). If academics or journalists claim that viewers who watch such programs, which unequivocally declare themselves to be first-rate news products, are confused or misguided about what news ‘really is’, it seems we are dangerously close to a sort of false consciousness critique which is theoretically tenuous, at best. The question of who ‘we’ are is important; for analysing the assertion made earlier – what counts as news is becoming more diverse – seems quite dependent upon which ‘we’ we are considering. Derided though Bill O’Reilly may be in journalistic circles, and disregarded in its academic equivalents, it is reasonable to assert that *O’Reilly Factor* viewers *feel* he is providing the news. This is a significant analytic point-of-departure for it encourages evaluation of the complexity of such programs, rather than following what seems to me a more frequently trod, though less productive, avenue: pointing out the flaws of these products, or ignoring them altogether, instead of engaging with those elements that provide legitimacy. And, as I will show in Chapter 5, when one views cable magazines with a less-jaundiced eye the reasons for this become less surprising; what they excel at is sharing similarities with traditional journalism in terms of conveying a *truthful appearance* but augmenting this with a more involved and intimate style of reportage. The same could be said for the satirical newscasts which I consider in Chapter 6.

⁶ Ironically, despite openly identifying itself as “fake news”, the opposite could be said for *The Daily Show*.

In this regard, while literatures such as Fairclough (1995) and Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) – detailing how the tone of civic life has shifted towards ‘conversationalisation’ and ‘informalisation’ – are not engaged with exhaustively, this dissertation can be considered an extension of their observations. Fairclough (1995: 8) notes that the two fundamental tensions facing contemporary media are the relationship between information and entertainment and that between public and private. He argues that these tensions result in two tendencies: a move in public affairs media towards conversationalisation (relying on everyday speech and colloquial expressions, employing rhythm and intonation typical of conversation), and marketization (viewing audience as consumers and moving towards ‘entertainment’ values). Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) note that these trends are increasingly evident in political discourse, as the distinction that used to mark political rhetoric as separate from everyday speech breaks down. These observations, and accordingly this dissertation, also share an affinity with works that consider the emergence of discourses of involvement in fields traditionally epitomised by discourses of detachment. For instance, Laster and O’Malley (1996) observe recent changes in the legal system that allow for the ‘reassertion’ of emotion. When one considers ‘sensitive’ legal developments such as victim-impact statements and restorative justice there seems to be a sense that the criminal justice system is becoming less detached, willing to consider actions that fall outside the traditional rationalistic framework of the common law. Meanwhile, du Gay (1994) notes the business world began experiencing a shift away from a bureaucratic organisational model to a culture of managerial enterprise in the 1980s. The new managerialism preached by gurus such as Tom Peters and Robert Waterman attempted to do away with all the ‘bad’ elements associated with bureaucracy – inefficiency, red tape, dispassionate workers, inflexibility and reactionary decision-making – while maintaining the

‘good’ elements such as accountability, impartiality, equality, political neutrality and clarity of procedure. Within journalism, some of these emerging broadcast products appear to be treading a similar path in terms of rejecting some of the rationalised values embraced under the objectivity regime.

In this sense, this dissertation makes no claims to novelty in terms of recognising that ‘something’ is shifting in the craft of journalism in terms of the sustained authority of a style which we have traditionally termed ‘hard news’. Kovach and Rosenstiel (1999) have outlined what they term an emergent “journalism of assertion” in American broadcast journalism that they stress is quickly becoming the norm. Dahlgren (1995), in his study of television and the public sphere, speaks of the ever-increasing “mimetic” qualities of TV news, in that broadcast journalism is increasingly concerned with conveying a unambiguous appearance of reality rather than dealing with the complexity of issues. MacDonald (2003) has investigated the mounting preponderance of “personalisation” within the news; genres of journalism that more actively promote an engagement with audiences. While all these terms are applicable to this study, at the risk of further muddying the waters I have introduced two terms, a ‘news of feeling’ and ‘news of fact’, to speak about the transformations on which I am focussed.

These terms, which to the best of my knowledge are novel constructions in journalism studies, are employed frequently throughout the dissertation.⁷ Rather than refer to ‘hard’ news, I prefer to speak of a ‘news of fact’ to get away from the notion that such broadcasts are *un*emotional. This type of news emphasises information over involvement and lends itself to a cool, detached presentation. Journalism that could be termed a news of fact has a style that dovetails with a ‘masculine’ form of storytelling, containing positivist tendencies in terms of appropriate techniques and the discourse around professionalism (van Zoonen 1998). Journalists who practice a news of fact act as informative masters of ceremonies who marshal facts and experts to get at the ‘truth’. The complement – as opposed to counter – to a news of fact is a ‘news of feeling’, a term preferred to ‘soft’ news. A news of feeling is journalism presented in an involved manner. While facts are still fundamental in terms of the basis of the craft, the emphasis in a news of feeling shifts to involvement. The journalist does not merely read and recount information, she or he attempts to help the audience engage with the material by pre-digesting and ‘feeling’ stories. In this sense, opinions and belief – things that are shunned in a news of fact – come to the fore of presentation and are considered alongside facts and expertise to represent ‘reality’ and

⁷ The thinking which underlies the working argument in this dissertation demands that I clarify a few terms. ‘Rational’ is a shorthand that implies a utilisation of the mind, self-control, impartiality, and a reliance on facts and rules. At the macro level, it is definitive of disciplines such as the natural sciences and math, and professions like law, engineering and medicine. Its normative sense is frequently positive. When utilised at a micro level, the term is associated with day-to-day control. ‘Emotion’ is the term frequently posited as its opposite. It implies capitulation to the body, urges and drives, personal involvement, and a reliance on instincts and belief. At the macro level, emotion is definitive of disciplines in the fine arts, and occupations such as the clergy or philanthropy. Its normative sense is frequently negative. When utilised at a micro level, it is associated with loss of control. As Barbalet (1998) or Katz (1988) note, one needs to be careful when using these shorthands as they can oversimplify analysis. This Cartesian dualism is highly misleading – as an historical epistemology of ‘emotion’ uncovers – the term is a potent discursive invention of late-19th century psychology, which often subsumes the diversity of meanings previously described as feelings, passions, postures, drives, motives, moods, calculations and so forth (Dixon 2003). Put simply, the common interpretation of ‘emotion’ now frequently ignores its social, cultural and cognitive connotations.

get at the ‘truth’. In this respect, it is important to recognise that unlike authors such as Franklin (1997) or Hartley (1998), the intent of this project is not to illustrate that a news of fact has *shifted* to a news of feeling. Journalism has always relied on attempting to induce some sort of experience into its audiences, one example being a dependence on common narratives to portray heroes, villains, and tragedies, something observable across both its history and location (Lule 2001). However, the accepted wisdom of 20th century ‘objective’ journalism demanded that the journalist stay above the fray, displaying restraint, fairness, and detachment. These goals, emblematic of the objectivity regime, retain much of their potency; however, what I argue is that a news of feeling has *emerged* in journalism and that this alternative presentational style has gained credence and acceptance. Chapters 2 and 3 illustrate some of the conditions which have made this possible, while Chapters 5, 6, and 7 trace this impact of this across different research sites.

The reason I have constructed this terminology is to get away from dichotomies that oversimplify how news is presented, which imply divisions I feel are atypical in much contemporary journalism. The linguistic emphasis of placing “news” before a description, as opposed to after (as in hard news, tabloid news, soft news, and so forth), reflects this. Most news products contain elements that are both detached and involved, news of fact and news of feeling, and these are not merely interchanged but hybridised in multiple segments. Additionally, these terms focus on the *style of presentation rather than the importance of the content*, in an attempt to get away from the normative connotations indelibly affixed to the terms ‘hard’ and ‘soft’.

In the 21st century, more-and-more genres of broadcast journalism seem to be ‘trusted’ sources of news and a diverse range of voices and styles are not only influential but oftentimes critically acclaimed. It is important to note that there are vestiges, echoes, and

traces of a news of feeling evident when we examine the history of journalism and this project does not imply otherwise. In television journalism, due to its relatively short history, the dominant style of reportage has been a news of fact, something which is evidently being challenged. However, as Tulloch (2000) notes, ‘emotional’ elements of the news have been recognised and commented upon since the appearance of the mass press dailies in the 19th century and as Lule (2001) instructs, themes such as tragedy and heroism can be seen throughout journalism’s past. Even before the advent of the mass press, the news ballad was an early form of journalism that endeavoured to transmit information in a lively and engaging manner that could communicate and intrigue a widely illiterate audience. Yet what is unique about a news of feeling, and what causes me to deem it an emerging presentational style, is its rise in relation to the objective regime so inextricably linked to the development of professional journalism over the 20th century. And if the wider public take these emergent products as seriously as the ‘serious’ newscasts generally considered in academic studies, it behooves us to investigate why these news alternatives are striking a chord, and how these developments relate to the visible and tonal shifts witnessed in the journalism industry over the past 25 years.

This recognition is reflected in my choice of research categories: magazine shows on cable news, satirical news programs, and traditional network news. The first two categories are obvious examples of emergent news styles that rely heavily on presentation and involvement as part of a successful branding strategy. While some of the specific research sites such as Fox News’ *The O’Reilly Factor*, CNN’s *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report* might not correspond to the traditional image of ‘professional’ journalism, as I will argue, I would not hesitate to call them news. As these programs mimic (though do not usurp) many of the traditional functions of national

broadcast news (interviewing prominent political figures, covering the major national issues of the day, reporting on atypical human interest stories, etcetera) I am not sure whether one would call these programs journalism, in the traditional sense, but the parallels are undeniable. To this end, these programs, which escape the boundaries of traditional professionalism, have been chosen because they clearly depart from a news of fact with its emphasis on detached, rational reportage. Just as the examination of the *CBS Evening News* under Walter Cronkite in Chapter 7 sheds light on a news of fact archetype, selecting those news texts that conform closely to a news of feeling likely produces a more compelling construct. The rationale behind these choices is comparative efficacy. It is far easier to understand the elements associated with a news of feeling when we evaluate some of its more obvious and widely-watched protagonists.

Dobbs and O'Reilly are two of the better-known cable news personalities and frequently fall under scrutiny for their 'controversial' journalistic practices. Despite this, each frequently achieves the highest ratings on their respective networks of CNN and Fox News, in O'Reilly's case, occupying the top position on cable news since 2000. Unpacking the tension between their news success and their journalistic controversies gets to the heart of the debate about the reasons underlying the emergence of a news of feeling. Stewart and Colbert, on the other hand, appear to enjoy the surprising position of widespread critical acclaim despite their claims that they are only 'fake news'. Understanding why journalistic status has seemingly been bestowed upon these entertainment products provides another fascinating site to investigate how attempts to craft a news of feeling seem to find success when traditional networks are experiencing failure. These two analyses are then brought to bear in the final empirical chapter when I consider what, if any, elements from a news of feeling have come to be incorporated into a traditional news of fact, the network newscast.

Chapter 2 starts this exploration by outlining some of the more evident visible shifts that have impacted the journalism industry over the past 25 years such as commercialisation and the technological revolution. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an understanding of how conditions in the industry have changed and how this provides a fertile climate for a news of feeling to emerge. This helps give insight into how journalism, witnessing an increasingly fragmented viewing public and rapid expansion of news outlets and communication alternatives, becomes an über-competitive environment where conventional news outlets encounter declining audiences while niche-oriented and innovative products are granted potential avenues to experiment with traditional forms. Chapter 3 moves on from here to consider the less evident tonal shifts which have occurred during this time frame. Changes in the state of objectivity are certainly more ambiguous than the developments discussed in Chapter 2, yet are equally critical if one wants to understand how the transforming journalistic environment has begotten broadcast alternatives that move away from an emblematic news of fact. Broader communicative trends, such as personalisation and informalisation, witnessed in conventionally ‘rational’ discursive spheres like politics, law or medicine, also seem to be exerting influence in terms of the ethics, goals and techniques that journalists rely upon in crafting the news. As objectivity is reappraised in journalism, presenting the news in diverse tones and changing the customary style of news seems, at times, to be viewed not only as acceptable but as both necessary and beneficial.

Chapter 4 takes a pragmatic approach to craft a workable method in recognition of the widely acknowledged observation that there is a paucity of methodological approaches in communication studies that consider both image and text in harmony. With this in mind, this chapter crafts an analytic toolkit of sorts – techniques, concepts, constructs, and assumptions that can be pulled out and applied as appropriate to consider an emergent news

of feeling – marshalling together ideas from approaches that dovetail with one another to explicate how emerging news forms distinguish themselves from conventional news and how they achieve both acclaim and success.

Chapters 5 through 7 comprise the empirical chapters of this project, taking a closer look at three specific research sites to outline how a news of feeling is constituted and what similarities and divergences this has with a traditional news of fact. The first of these considers the popularisation of the cable magazine genre – the staple of the cable news networks. While cable news was originally envisaged as an ongoing update of the events of the day – a constant breaking and developing news, if you will – the stalwarts of cable news have increasingly become these hour-long magazines. As satirist Stephen Colbert rightly points out, rather than just tell the news to you, such programs often feel the news, at you. The next chapter turns the spotlight back on Colbert and his fellow ‘fake’ newscasters, considering the popularisation of satirical news and the role of humour in offering a critical interpretation of the news and the news media. The purpose of this chapter is to see what, if any, relation satirical broadcasts bear to mainstream conceptualisations of journalism and interrogates why two of its more prominent purveyors, Jon Stewart and the aforementioned Colbert, are increasingly cited not just for their entertainment function but for being ‘trusted’ sources for the news. Within both the chapter on cable magazines and satirical news, these products are compared to network newscasts to illustrate in what respect a news of feeling bears affinity to more established journalism broadcasts. The last section of each chapter takes a closer look at how each program works to craft an experience of involvement, in order for us to gain a greater appreciation of what makes these programs appear, Janus-faced, both new and familiar.

The final empirical chapter acts almost as a constant against which the emergent news of feeling products discussed in the previous two chapters can be compared. While in and of itself the development of the cable magazine and satirical newscasts is interesting, their emergence begs an obvious question: to what extent have broadcasts typically associated with a news of fact taken onboard elements from a news of feeling? Put otherwise, is there a broader trend across the entire spectrum of American broadcast journalism towards a news of feeling, and if so to what extent, or do programs like *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Daily Show* simply augment a journalistic field where a news of fact remains relatively unchanged? In this regard Chapter 7 acts as a sort of bookend to this dissertation by considering many of the developments outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 to interrogate how these changes have impacted a traditional outlet for the news of fact, the *CBS Evening News*, over the past 25 years.

Evidently these analyses implicitly raise the notion of audience. By considering the 'experience of involvement' in journalism, it is possible to misconstrue that this project follows in the tradition of effects-based research, which looks at how individuals receive and engage with mediated forms of communication (see McCombs and Shaw 1972; Levy and Windahl 1985). This would be erroneous. To examine the actual experience of involvement would involve talking to audience members as they watch to analyse the variety of reasons that people choose different news products. While this would no doubt be an interesting project, the purpose within this dissertation is fundamentally different. By examining the texts of emerging news products, and by investigating what producers perceive is the rationale behind their success, this dissertation follows the practice of focussing upon discourses of communication, locating them within the broader social context in which they operate, and interpreting what this implies about their intended audience and social function (cf. Jensen and Rosengren 1990). In this respect, although I assume a different approach, I

employ a similar tactic to Fairclough (1995) in his empirical application of an analytical framework to investigate media discourse. While I consider texts, transformations in the journalism industry, and related sociocultural practices, audiences are only alluded to through the descriptions and presentations of the various programs. Rather than engage directly with an audience, such an approach evaluates meaning through deduction, with discourse acting as an analytic construct (cf. Barthes 1957). In this sense, ‘tone’ is appraised by positioning the rationales underlying news production in the broader context of the journalistic field. In short, while it is important to recognise that each text may be engaged with differently by various individuals, be it embraced, challenged, or dismissed (Radway 1984; Fiske 1987), my focus is on how emerging forms of news are crafted and what has allowed them to appear. I look at how their creators explain their success and what these explanations imply for the state of the news media in terms of what news is, what audiences want, and what news should be. Borrowing from Hartley (1990), my focus is on the “mode of address” for an emerging news of feeling and how this contrasts to a traditional news of fact. The tone of a newscast carries a number of implications about the orientation of journalism vis-à-vis its audience and, as such, one could consider this the first logical step of a potentially much larger project. While this dissertation addresses itself to the question of how and why an emergent news of feeling has come to be, a natural extension would no doubt be some form of ethnographic study of both production and reception (see Bird 2003). Yet in this media age where image consultants, audience surveys, on-line commentary, and focus groups are broadly employed by news outlets, it is important to note that by examining the rationales of the producers of various newscasts, I am no doubt indirectly reflecting the involvement and feedback of the audiences with which they engage.

By presenting journalism with a specific style, a news outlet is more than just an information pipeline. It is an industry that in programmed ways relies on attempting to craft different experiences of involvement to convey the facts of the day. From giving rise to anger, tapping into fear, relying upon humour, begetting shame, or simply staying cool and detached, it is productive to investigate the news not just in terms of what makes it professional, but what makes it pleasurable. Common rules of truth across the profession demand a certain rigour in terms of accuracy and the like but how these rules of truth are made visible to the audience is the place to look to analyse how programs differentiate themselves in attempt to be simultaneously appealing and authoritative. The apparent emergence of a news of feeling begets the question of whether the requirements for ‘truth’, and for ‘news’ have altered, and if so, what challenges this presents for a traditional news of fact. And as the industry experiences an increased diversity in accepted styles of presentation, the question then becomes whether this simultaneously decreases the threshold for what is demanded by professionalism.

Chapter 2: Accelerated Transmutation – The Visible Shifts in Broadcast Journalism

Hypercommercialization, channel fragmentation, shrinking audiences for conventional news formats, and drastic news room cutbacks – trends observable not only in the United States but also in Western European media systems – have changed the practices of journalism substantially.

Fritz Plasser, From Hard to Soft News Standards? (2005) – summarising the transnational concerns of journalists about the quality of reporting, professional autonomy, economic pressures, and the future of the industry.

Much of the vaunted information revolution is not about gathering information but about commenting on it. The basic reason is structural. The rise of the twenty-four-hour news cycle has placed a paradoxical demand on the press to have something to talk about to fill the void. The second reason is economic. The “news hole” of the information revolution has expanded the delivery of information. But the budget for gathering that information has not grown proportionately. In some cases, it has even shrunk.

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media (1999) – outlining how emerging trends in news are not mutually exclusive but rather have a concomitant impact on the journalism landscape.

The journalism industry, like most others, goes through moments of immense change and relative calm. Yet it would probably not overstate the point to assert that the past 25 years have seen the greatest sweeping changes in the history of the industry, possibly rivalled only by a similarly turbulent period in the mid- to late-19th century that witnessed the emergence of the mass press dailies, illustrated papers and wire services. The purpose of this chapter is to outline some of the tangible shifts experienced in the industry over the past few decades, helping appreciate the broader context in which a news of feeling has surfaced. The emergence of a news of feeling is not simply random happenstance but is dependent upon the coalescing of a number of specific developments in the industry.

The most striking development over the past 25 years is undoubtedly the technological revolution, led by the appearance and spread of cable, satellite, digital transmission, cell phones, the internet, and computerized production effects. Closely tied to this is another key development, the fragmentation of the market (PEJ 2007). The most

notable example of this for broadcast journalism is the emergence of cable and satellite news networks. These changes have been accompanied by an escalating commercialisation of news divisions as a whole. It has been argued (see Kimball 1999; Sampson 1999; Hamilton 2004) that the bottom line increasingly dominates all aspects of journalistic decision-making, from broader structural changes like the cutting of foreign bureaus and the increased reliance on stock video footage services, to stylistic reworkings encouraged by a growing industry of media image consultants.⁸ These assertions and observations are fairly uncontroversial and the pressure they place on the practice of journalism and maintenance of professional values is widely acknowledged. Other changes in the industry, equally visible, require a bit more elaboration to appreciate their influence. One such change is the shifting composition of the workforce in terms of gender. The increasing feminisation of the journalistic workforce, up 66 percent since 1971 (Weaver *et al.* 2007: 8), may challenge the dominance of what some researchers assert are the ‘masculine’ values embodied in the objectivity regime (Carter *et al.* 1998).

Trying to pin down how such a diverse breadth of news styles have appeared within American journalism over the past 25 years clearly demands consideration of professional values and ethics, the focus of Chapter 3. While the influence of these sorts of broader social shifts is often vague and contentious, this chapter aims to outline manifest changes within the industry itself, which are more readily observed. In considering the emergence of a news of feeling, the structural and environmental conditions under which journalism operates offers a constructive starting point.

⁸ McChesney (1999) goes further, arguing that the profit motive is now so great that journalism has entered a period of hypercommercialism, with editorial control completely subsumed to market imperatives.

Profitable Publics – Fragmentation and Commercialisation

We will argue that in the new Mixed Media Culture the classic function of journalism to sort out a true and reliable account of the day's events is being undermined. It is being displaced by the continuous news cycle, the growing power of sources over reporters, varying standards of journalism, and a fascination with inexpensive, polarizing argument. The press is also increasingly fixated on finding the “big story” that will temporarily reassemble the now-fragmented mass audience.

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media (1999) – looking to how an ever-increasing commercialisation and fragmentation of the U.S. news industry is ‘hurting’ traditional journalism.

Whether he in fact said it, the enduing cultural reference to Henry Ford is his famed quote upon announcing the Model T that: “any customer can have a car painted any color that he wants – so long as it is black.” The first four decades of American national newscasts were little different, with the three major U.S. networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS, enjoying an oligopoly until the popularisation of cable news in the 1990s. The 24-hour news revolution is not the only form of media proliferation during this timeframe. The introduction of internet news sites and blogs, the expansion of alternative press publications, and the introduction of free commuter papers in most urban markets led the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) to declare in its annual report that “The new paradox of journalism is more outlets covering fewer stories” (PEJ 2006). This trend they identified, one of six dominant tendencies that summarise the “State of the News Media”, was accompanied by a seemingly related tendency, that “At many old-media companies, though not all, the decades-long battle at the top between idealists and accountants is now over.” Not surprisingly, one can guess which side they feel won. This intertwining of industry-wide fragmentation and industry-wide commercialisation is often deemed to threaten the civic function of journalism.

For recently launched groups like the Project for Excellence in Journalism or the Committee of Concerned Journalists, the danger when financial imperatives are brought to

the fore is the relegation of the public interest. An increased emphasis on profit maximization within the news industry, based upon market logic – exemplified by network news divisions being reconfigured as profit centres rather than loss-leaders – is what one refers to when speaking of commercialisation (Dancy 1997; Kurpius 2003). The emergence of image consultants, industry consolidation by publicly traded companies, and the breakdown of the invisible wall that traditionally separated the marketing and news divisions at many journalism outlets are some of the trends spoken of as threatening the educative function of news. When earnings gain importance, this comes, potentially, at informing's expense.

These two trends, fragmentation and commercialisation, are best spoken of together as they place a significantly greater focus on the bottom line. As MacKinnon (2004 – *italics added*), a former CNN International correspondent, now research fellow at Harvard notes,

In truth, it is unrealistic to expect commercially-driven TV news companies to do anything other than to seek profit maximization – while at the same time selling a product that *can still be defined as “news” in some way*. The search for profit maximization means that these companies will shape their news to fit the tastes and values of the majority of their most lucrative potential audience.

The idea of a “lucrative potential audience” speaks to the confluence of fragmentation and commercialisation. In this era of fragmentation, getting the commercial focus wrong can mean the difference between financial success and economic survival. News organisations, increasingly motivated by profit, tend to focus on generating it from a well-defined ‘target’ audience; potentially at the expense of the hypothetical homogeneous ‘citizen’ (cf. Hallin 1992). This is to say that while economic imperatives have always played a role in journalism, neoliberal tendencies appear to increasingly dictate decisions on content and coverage (McChesney 1999). While some editorial employees surely remain relatively uninfluenced in their day-to-day decisions on newsworthiness and substance, nonetheless market-logic seems

to play a more evident role in the industry as audiences are carefully selected and news people are encouraged to do ‘more with less’.

Fragmentation should not be confused with proliferation, although the two are certainly linked. Fragmentation refers to the market in which news is produced and consumed, and can be thought of as the breakdown of a broader category (i.e. broadcast news) into smaller compartmentalised products geared to an explicit audience (i.e. financial news). Recent statistics emphasise the significance of this trend. Between November 1980 and November 2005, the viewership for network broadcasts dropped 48 percent, from 52 million viewers per night to 27 million in 2005 (PEJ 2006). And while broadcast news experiences audience decline, in aggregate, certain sectors are on the upswing. CNN’s ratings have increased steadily since its inception and cumulative viewership for the big three American cable news networks (CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC) has increased almost 150 percent in prime time, to 2.8 million median viewers, since the launch of MSNBC in 1998.⁹ This corresponds to roughly one-third of the decline of network evening news viewership over the same period. This rapid expansion of communication outlets is of critical significance to the emergence of the news of feeling products discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. For instance, the creation of the Comedy Network has helped to create a niche audience that allows programs like *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* to thrive. It seems reasonable to assert that such ‘specialist’ programming would find it much more challenging to survive if it was required to achieve the level of ratings demanded by the national networks. One could also

⁹ Comparison of network and cable broadcast ratings is problematic for a number of reasons. For one, cable news is continuous, which makes it difficult to evaluate the popularity of it against the three half-hour network newscasts. The PEJ data uses median viewers for cable news in prime time (the middle number of viewers) to ‘compartmentalise’ the continuous stream of viewers. The reason for employing the median rather than the mean (average audience) is directly related to the second issue; cable news is prone to spikes in viewership as it will interrupt regularly scheduled programming when ‘big’ stories break (such as Hurricane Katrina for the 2006 data), causing the average to be a misleading figure (PEJ 2006).

argue that the style of such programs might also need to be more ‘generic’. Similarly, the rise of cable news channels established an avenue for more diverse and specialised journalism offerings than would be possible a few decades ago. Such fragmentation has also impacted the network broadcasts such as the *CBS Evening News*, discussed in Chapter 7. Fighting to retain audience, all three nightly newscasts have said they intend to reinvent their branding and style in response to these trends, a shift made easier by the change of the three stalwarts of network news, Tom Brokaw (NBC), Dan Rather (CBS) and Peter Jennings (ABC) in 2005 (Rich 2002; PEJ 2006).

There are parallels between this trend and an apparent decline of trust in the mainstream media by audiences on both the left and right over the past few decades. When one analyses media fragmentation in the social context of declining trust in established institutions (cf. Giddens 1994), what is witnessed is a potentially reinforcing relationship which fundamentally alters the media landscape. As audiences turn away from mainstream media that they apparently trust less-and-less, this corresponds to audiences seeming to increasingly seek out media alternatives that are more in line with their existing views (Jones 2004). One can associate this with the rise of prominent internet media watchdogs such as the left-leaning mediamatters.org, launched in 2004, or the right-leaning newsbusters.org, launched in 2005. As we will see in Chapters 5 and 6, a large part of the *raison d’être* for the *O’Reilly Factor*, *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, *The Daily Show*, and *Colbert Report* is a perceived dissatisfaction with some element of the way media presents itself. These trends – fragmentation of the marketplace and declining trust in established media – parallel one another; the result being not only the upsurge in news alternatives but an increased variety of ‘valid’ news styles and techniques to craft the news (Atton and Hamilton 2008). Network news outlets have attempted to address these concerns (PEJ 2007) and while some of the

corresponding changes are likely precipitated by a dilemma of reputation, they are probably equally encouraged by a disquiet over remuneration.

Commercialisation accordingly parallels fragmentation, in terms of targeting a definable audience which can be sold to advertisers. While commercial appeal and the importance of advertising revenue have of course always been relevant to most journalism, the vast proliferation of media outlets, in conjunction with the resultant fragmentation of the media audience, shifts the nature of the audience a news organisation promises to its advertisers. Rather than claiming to reach a broad swath of the public, a generalised common audience, niche marketing defines target audiences in terms of an assemblage of demographic characteristics, such as income, education, gender, age, political affiliation, and geographic locale (Turow 1997). Critics feel this search for audience, ratings and not just profit but “obscene profit, filthy-rich profit,” is a cancer that is inimical to news and undercuts any attempt at serious journalism (Dancy 1997: 109). As Edward R. Murrow noted in 1958, “If ... news is to be considered only as a commodity, only acceptable when salable, and only when packaged to fit the advertising appropriation of a sponsor, then, I don’t care what you call it. It isn’t news” (quoted in Dancy 1997: 106).

This observation seems to be an updated version of a much earlier critique of the news media that appears in the 19th century when the mass supplanted the partisan press, imbuing journalism with populist notions. ‘Populist’ has three divergent conceptualisations: i) an old ‘radical’ sense; ii) an intermediate combination of general politics and popular reading material of crime, romance and sport; and iii) communication defined in purely market terms. Williams (1978: 47-49) notes that during the 19th century, economic imperatives dictated a journalistic form that integrated the latter two notions. A shift to neutral language, denunciation of political affiliation, uncontroversial topical focus, and the

compartmentalising of newspapers into sections gradually became the status quo (Curran 1978). Consequently, being non-partisan and appealing to the greatest number, two characteristics emblematic of modern objective journalism, may have been predicated on the wants of advertisers, who increasingly supported papers that avoided controversy or partisanship perceived to harm circulation. As Hampton (2001) notes, commercial imperatives steadily transformed the press from a stance of educating, to targeting and representing, the public. As Chapter 3 discusses, the trends of informalisation and conversationalisation (see Fairclough 1995; Delli Carpini and Williams 2001; Macdonald 2003) appear contemporary equivalents of a desire to appeal to a ‘common’ audience. However, the idea that detachment and neutral language are the best means to achieve this seems to have been inverted by the cable news magazines and satirical news programs investigated in Chapters 5 and 6. The dominance of this as the prevailing mode of address also seems to be slipping in network newscasts, as I will show in Chapter 7.

While commercialisation is thus easily observed in the history of journalism, its significance, especially for broadcast news, has increased over the past few decades (Hackett and Zhao 1998; Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999; McChesney 1999). Hiring image consultants has become commonplace in the industry, a process that began in earnest in the 1970s and 80s with the growing acceptance of groups like Frank Magid Associates and The Broadcast Image Group (Seibel 2005). While these businesses originally started off by altering aesthetic elements of newscasts, they have increasingly moved into advice on content. Following the declaration of war in Iraq, McVay Media advised its clients to “Get the following production pieces in the studio NOW: . . . Patriotic music that makes you cry, salute, get cold chills! Go for the emotion.” Magid Associates put it far more succinctly: “Covering war protests may be harmful to a station’s bottom line” (Farhi 2003). This shift in content is also reflected in

coverage of supposedly dry political affairs reporting, which saw U.S. networks decrease their coverage of the primary and presidential election races by 40 percent between 1992 and 1996, a move some argue corresponds to a style of reportage increasingly similar to entertainment (Blumer 1999).¹⁰

Foreign bureaus have been increasingly downsized or closed by news organisations and, progressively, the flow of English-language world news, in terms of text and video footage, is controlled by a relative duopoly in Reuters and the Associated Press (Tunstall 1999). Similarly, Getty Images and Corbis, the world's largest image banks, are increasingly relied upon by news organisations looking for stock footage and dramatic photos (Machin 2004). Other cost-cutting measures have seen the Washington-press corps budgets of network news organisations decrease substantially, replaced by lower-cost alternatives (Kimball 1999). The introduction of the internet also provides a low-cost substitute for media companies, potentially shifting emphasis away from traditional print and broadcast journalism (Ahlers 2006).¹¹ This trend towards cost minimisation, and by association profit maximisation, has become endemic within the news industry, exemplified by the cable news diet of low-cost, high-profit, production-focussed news (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999). Even state-owned broadcasters like the BBC are feeling an increased emphasis on ratings and performance reviews (Bennett and Entman 2001). From the 1990s onwards, the fiscal structure of journalism changed conspicuously throughout the Western world, in terms of media conglomeration (see Bagdikian 2004), convergence (see van Cuilenburg and McQuail 2003; Jenkins 2004), and deregulation (see Wasburn 1995; Golding and Murdoch 1999).

¹⁰ It should be noted that this decrease may also be attributable to the fact the presidential election featured Clinton as an incumbent, making the Democratic primaries largely irrelevant.

¹¹ The rise of alternative forms of journalism over the past 15 years would likely not have been possible without the declining cost of technology such as video cameras and the pervasiveness of the internet as a delivery vehicle (Atton and Hamilton 2008).

These developments bear affinity to some of the transformations discussed under the rubric of neoliberalism, a logic dictating that societies are at their most efficient when they follow free market principles. Some of transformations in journalism that can be viewed as evidence of a neoliberal logic include: the closing of foreign bureaus, pooling of photos, increased reliance on wire services, staff cutbacks, layoffs, and an adversarial approach to bargaining from management towards journalist unions.¹² According to its critics, neoliberalism stretches beyond the economic realm to become both a political and cultural ethos (McChesney 1999). Public debate and the notion of citizenship are displaced by profit-maximisation and the embrace of consumerism (Chomsky 2003). Industries, including journalism, are seen to operate best when they are deregulated, resulting in the rise of media conglomerates (Bagdikian 1996). This focus on efficiency is posited to lead to a journalism where market logic comes to determine how journalism is practiced (McChesney 1999).

In terms of this dissertation, this market-based impetus seems most relevant in terms of how journalism outlets go about attempting to craft an experience of involvement. As we will see in Chapter 5, O'Reilly views the success of his *Factor* largely to the fact that it addresses an audience he perceives was not being spoken to directly beforehand, conservative Americans. In a recent interview on his program, Ted Turner, who found CNN, noted that "I knew that that was our most vulnerable spot before I even went on the air with CNN, that a right-wing network would pose a threat because not only was CNN pretty much in the middle but so were CBS, NBC and ABC. ... the far right did not have a voice" (Factor 2008). Similarly, as we will see in Chapter 7, the re-branding of the *CBS Evening News* under Katie Couric was conscious about crafting news that would appeal to a

¹² One could perhaps make the argument that neoliberalism has also impacted the treatment, by journalists, of policies associated with it such as deregulation, trade liberalization, and world economic policy.

younger demographic of viewer. When market-logic comes to the fore, declining audience ratings become seen as journalistic failures, improved ratings as successes. ‘Good’ journalism thus becomes increasingly defined by profitability rather than professional values.¹³

A prominent trend emphasised in these critiques is the emergence of media conglomerates, an ever decreasing number of publicly traded corporations owning an ever increasing percentage of the journalism market. There is also a trend towards partial ownership and transnational news alliances, which are on the increase around the globe (Friedland 1996). A decade ago, Bagdikian (1996) identified ten media conglomerates that held dominant power over American television, print, and radio news; his basic argument being that media power is political power and, as such, these ten corporations wield an inordinate degree of control over the content and presentation of the news. He recounts a number of horror stories (reporters being fired for refusing to toe the company line, the influence of the marketing arm over the editorial arm in papers), which seem to imply a corporate American journalism that walks lock-in-step with the wishes of advertisers. After revisiting his thesis in the new millennium, Bagdikian (2004) noted the continuation of the trend: with the big ten now becoming a ‘dominant five’. The creation of this media cartel is the potential ‘catastrophic success’ of media concentration, where profitability shines in the face of serious journalism. The rise of alternative forms of news such as citizen journalism are often argued to be a response to a dissatisfaction with corporatized media (Atton and Hamilton 2008).

Bagdikian’s observations are similar to the broader, and somewhat instrumental account, proffered by Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) propaganda model in *Manufacturing*

¹³ Prestige, in the form of journalistic awards, still plays a role in terms of what is defined as a success. However, studies of the process to select award winners seem to indicate that aesthetic appeal often prevails over strength of content (Gladney 1997).

Consent. They famously state that objective journalism must be held accountable for the perpetuation of a hegemonic discourse that reflects the status quo. They assert that the image of media as the defenders of free speech, engaging in attacks of government and corporations, is illusory; a veil that obscures the fact that the media serve the ends of the corporate-government elite,¹⁴ which filter the news through ownership, advertising revenue, and official sources in a market system. Herman and Chomsky (1988: 2) assert journalism becomes an unwitting agent of hegemony and that this occurs, “so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news ‘objectively’ and on the basis of professional news values.” When it comes to media coverage, common topics are thus focussed upon – the state of the economy, budgetary priorities, major conflicts – while potentially complex and controversial issues – covert military operations, systemic poverty and the like – are not discussed (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Dancy 1997). The result is a press that does not serve its public but anaesthetizes it.

What these accounts hold in common is that they report an increasing concentration of control over the media, despite the apparent proliferation of outlets. This concentration, or formation of media conglomerates, is intertwined with the trend towards media convergence. While conglomeration refers to the ownership structure of media, convergence is first and foremost a technological shift, specifically the meshing of different media. Recent advancements have seen the boundary between information technologies and communication networks blurring; computers become used like televisions, internet connectivity spreads to cell phones, and the result is that formerly separated networks begin

¹⁴ This is similar to the notion of the military-industrial complex, in terms of being an indissoluble intermingling of corporate and government interests that serve ends not necessarily in the best interest of a broader public.

to render similar services (van Cuilenburg and McQuail 2003). Yet convergence goes beyond the mere alteration of technological infrastructure – it refers to the amalgamation of previously distinct genres, audiences, communities, and markets and industries, all facilitated by technology (Jenkins 2004). And while media proliferation is heralded by many as having emancipatory potential for journalism (see Rosen 2005), unfettering news from corporate control, the media behemoths that dominate the flow of information have countered by converging, both vertically and horizontally, when they witness potentially profitable new media channels.¹⁵

Such fundamental shifts often paint a dour picture that makes professional journalism seem unable to avoid a precipitous decline to mere corporate lapdog. At best, it seems that mainstream media in such an environment is beholden to the ideological whims of its owners. While many authors are careful to avoid economic determinism and instrumental reasoning that equates ownership of media to democratic control, it is easy for critical theory to slip into such reasoning. Borrowing from Hall, Golding and Murdoch (1999), a potentially more sophisticated view of financial dynamics and forces demands re-conceptualising the economic in the first, rather than last instance; setting the environment of communicative activity rather than explaining it. In this sense, while instrumental criticisms tend to focus on who controls the media, less instrumental reasoning focuses instead upon discursive trends. For instance, as we will see in the empirical chapters of this project, one aspect of an emergent news of feeling is a focus on stories that enable self-regulation. The modern news consumer is frequently informed about the risks they (and often by association their society) face and the actions they need to take as ‘responsible’ citizens (see O’Malley 2004).

¹⁵ Rosen is particularly optimistic about the potential for news blogs – participatory journalism – which he sees potentially challenging the sovereignty of the journalism industry. And while much of the blogosphere remains free of corporate influence, mainstream journalism has countered by setting up many of its own, better funded and better produced weblogs.

Therefore, while a neoliberal logic is still at play, it is presented in a way that seems aligned with journalism and the civic enterprise. Thus, as opposed to dictating terms to the public, it might be more accurate to say that neoliberal thinking may influence journalism through a creeping embrace of market logic.

The danger with this, as some commentators have noticed, is that the delineation of the mass audience into smaller target communities by advertisers may widen the information gap by producing ‘trash’ news aimed at lower-income groups and sophisticated accounts aimed at well-educated, wealthy news consumers. Such a niche-based production strategy can easily ensure that specific communities of interest do not encounter viewpoints or presentational styles that challenge their previously held beliefs (Turow 1997; Webster 2005).¹⁶ This could be considered a 21st century incarnation of the danger spoken of by J.S. Mill (1978: 76) in *On Liberty* where he notes,

But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.

This is not to say that fragmentation prevents a plurality of views or the equal treatment of views within a single news source. Rather it is indicative of a *potential* polarisation brought about by an increased need to tailor presentation – compartmentalising style and content – in

¹⁶ Of course, this depends on the viewpoint as to the purpose of journalism. If it is to inform the citizen, then access to the fair representation of multiple perspectives, offered with as little prejudice as possible, seems necessary to ensure a healthy democracy. A slant that only represents one side of the issue, or only treats as reasonable that which respects the prevailing discourse or dominant ideology, is more likely to reinforce beliefs rather than challenge them. In practical terms, this is starkly apparent if one contrasts the treatment of the Iraq War by Fox News versus Al-Jazeera (Aday *et al.* 2005). While in essence covering the same conflict, if one were to view only one of these channels at the exclusion of all others, the consistency of discourse would seemingly negate or dismiss a large portion of the broader debate. This also suggests the importance of nation-states or regions in how the news is framed (Joseph 2005).

an urge to appeal to a specific group in a manner assumed to be pleasing. The ‘speeding up’ of social life (cf. Virilio 1999) exacerbates this tendency as news editors strive to maintain an audience comprised of fickle and easily-distractible news consumers.¹⁷

Fragmentation corresponds to the rapid increase, both in terms of speed and number, of information delivery systems. As recently as 2004, there were 339 cable channels in the U.S. that claimed to have national reach (Webster 2005). The result is a greater diversity of options. But one needs to keep in mind that this diversity is only apparent when one looks at the aggregate – while there is a greater heterogeneity in programming than there was 25 years ago, the channels themselves have a tendency to narrowcast their content as the average channel audience becomes smaller and more homogeneous (ibid.). Broadcast journalism is not immune to such trends and one criticism of both satirical news and cable news magazines, as we will see in Chapters 5 and 6, is that they are poor at covering issues which might repel their core viewers.

The key to a successful branding strategy in this fragmented marketplace is to differentiate one’s product in a manner that appeals to one’s target audience. And relying upon trying to craft an emotive connection – an experience of involvement – is one technique promoted to foster this relationship. This is evidenced in the strategic thinking of Frank Magid Associates (2007) when they note:

Without a strong brand and consistent brand strategy and identity, you risk becoming just another shade of gray in the consumer consciousness. As competition intensifies, it becomes more difficult to stand out in a crowd. But to thrive in an increasingly competitive environment, a brand needs to be nurtured. Magid will help grow, shape, and strengthen your brand to create the emotional connection with consumers that is essential in building a loyalty that transcends the generic.

¹⁷ Virilio notes that we now live in a ‘real time’ culture. The significance of this is that expectations adjust about the instantaneity and flow of communication. The passage of time, while still important, becomes less definitive than the emphasis on the acceleration of social life. Applying this to journalism, the value of a message often becomes conflated with the speed of its delivery.

This is the second decisive element of the technological revolution: in the face of proliferation and fragmentation there has been a simultaneous rise in computerisation and digitisation of graphics, video and sound. This enables sophisticated presentational styles tailored to each news product. Alongside the personalities that host each show, style, in terms of a clear mission, tone, perspective, and presentation, is the primary technique through which a brand now becomes definitive.

From Satellites to Soundscapes – The Technological Revolution

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.

Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media (1964) – forming the oft-misinterpreted equation which demands we consider the mediated grounds of social and cultural change.

Breaking News! The alert flashes across the television promising crucial events soon to unfold before our eyes. Whether we end up actually seeing something worldly – the sudden death of a notable leader, the onset of a revolution – or something slightly more pedestrian – the live and continuous coverage of O.J. Simpson’s infamous car-chase comes to mind – the point is it is live. It is happening. Right now. And the news is here to document it.¹⁸ Yet lost in the focus on what is ‘breaking’ is the nature of the technology that makes such immediacy possible. To understand the impact of the technological revolution in news over the past few decades, we need to look beyond the stories themselves to the often unnoticed

¹⁸ Increasingly, with print news outlets going online to operate 24-hour web sites, ‘live’ and ‘breaking’ is no longer just the dominion of television news.

and non-obvious changes that technology effects (Federman 2004). The potency of any new medium shapes the nature of the message we receive. As such, it can be said that technology imports a shift in both style and content.

For instance, while ‘going live’ has been a part of broadcast news for quite some time, the evolution of cable news guarantees that each day the news has an immediacy that was only reserved for truly momentous moments in previous decades. Anyone who has watched CNN or Fox News for any period of time will notice near hourly ‘Alerts’ – conveying a sense of urgency not witnessed by networks who rarely interrupt regularly scheduled programming – implying a reduced threshold for what is newsworthy in the now. When Anna Nicole Smith’s death is treated with the same urgency, and given a similar amount of coverage, as Martin Luther King Jr. or JFK’s assassination previous, one wonders if the 24-hour revolution has come at the expense of proportionality. This is one obvious side of technological advancement; the proliferation of outlets all offering immediate up-to-the-second coverage of (primarily national) events. Yet this expanded coverage may have a numbing rather than an edifying impact. Stories on cable news are not only so similar, but so consistently oversaturated and overhyped that events become less significant than brands and personalities (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999). O’Reilly and Dobbs, the focus of Chapter 5, are clear examples of this.

As was mentioned in the previous section, media proliferation has extended the reach and diversity of broadcast news services, having a significant impact on the industry, especially in terms of fragmentation and commercialisation. Yet this proliferation comes on the heels of less evident, yet equally critical, technological developments that are related to the emergence, popularisation and acceptance of a news of feeling. This is apparent if we consider the technological development that makes the ‘two-way’ – an in-studio anchor

chatting with an on-scene reporter – increasingly popular. By replicating a spontaneous conversation, such segments are,

less formal in tone and style than the preceding parts of the item. It is essentially an informalising or conversationalising device for presenting news stories: instead of being on the receiving end of an impersonal, mass public announcement, viewers or listeners are repositioned as eavesdroppers on an apparently ‘natural’ exchange between two specific individuals – somewhat the same position they occupy when watching soap operas, dramas and sitcoms. This is intended to increase their involvement in, and decrease their distance from, the news (Cameron 2004: 125).

Cameron asserts that such casualness lowers the degree of commitment to truth within these segments, evidenced by the frequency of modalising devices, such as hedging, or the use of auxiliary verbs like “could” and “might”, that appear with greater regularity in two-way speech than in scripted reports. This is one example of how technology can shift how broadcasts attempt to craft the experience of involvement in watching news, a change evident in Chapter 7 when we consider how the *CBS Evening News* has changed between the time of Walter Cronkite and Katie Couric.¹⁹ More broadly, the technological revolution stands out in terms of increasing the sophistication of news presentations and increasing the instantaneity of news information.²⁰

The first of these transformations, the complexity of presentation and production, is largely a result of the computer revolution which digitises the production process of news. The visual makeover experienced within broadcast journalism has happened in a smooth yet rapid fashion and it is only when viewing broadcasts from different eras that the dramatic

¹⁹ In a similar vein, one could consider the introduction of rapidly shifting graphics in the 1980s, which gave television news the capability to create action in otherwise static news stories, or information modules in the 1990s, which provided continual on-screen motion designed to sustain viewers’ interest (Cooke 2005).

²⁰ While the components that bring about these transformations are intriguing, my focus is on the social and cultural impacts of technology. The actual technical specifications are of minor consequence to this project.

extent of the change becomes markedly apparent.²¹ The disquiet many adults have probably experienced from viewing a classic piece of science fiction – be it *Star Wars* or *Alien* – that has been updated or remade in recent years is analogous to the perceptible shifts in news presentation. From the intricacy of the graphics themselves, to the image-quality, ambient sounds and overall presentation, technology has shifted the production complexity of the news (Cooke 2005). It has been asserted that technological stylising at times verges on the excess (see Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999), something observed by Stephen Colbert and parodied throughout his faux cable magazine program, as I discuss in Chapter 6. And while this may seem insignificant, such televisual advancement makes the style of news ever-more similar to entertainment programming (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001).²²

The increasing complexity of news styles, especially on cable news – a *mélange* of image, graphics, writing (in the form of headlines and the ever-present ticker), speech, background sounds in the stories, mood music (i.e. militaristic music introducing segments on war), and signalling sounds (for example, the fast paced ‘whoosh’ that signifies breaking news) – dovetails with an observation prominent in medium theory, namely that while print media emphasize ideas, electronic media emphasize feeling and mood. As Meyrowitz (1994: 58) observes, electronic media cause “a retreat from distant analysis and a dive into emotional and sensory involvement. The major questions are no longer ‘Is it true?’ ‘Is it false?’ Instead we more often ask, ‘How does it look?’ ‘How does it feel?’” In such a presentational sphere, not only must content ‘feel’ right; increasingly news organisations have to be aware of the overall image of the program. In a marketing text quite bereft of theory, Lindstrom (2005:

²¹ The 2005 film, *Good Night and Good Luck*, offers a good comparative reference. Oftentimes retrospective journalism utilises the (admittedly grainier) video footage of significant events but does not display the broadcast itself, making it difficult to grasp the magnitude of presentational shifts.

²² Blumer (1999: 242) notes that even within the United Kingdom, “the birthplace of missionary public broadcasting,” anchors have become promoted and paid like celebrities while news is cosmetically revamped.

186) argues that to be successful, modern brands need to have “sensory appeal,” to be aware of the synthesis of emotive and sensory responses to communicative stimuli.²³ As such, image goes beyond the mere look of the program, as is evident in the language of media consultants. Image is based on consistency and harmony, and the computer revolution has made the amalgamation of graphics, sound and music more seamless, malleable and sophisticated.

Recurring segments often have a theme song, and frequently have a distinct graphical package.²⁴ Live interviews often carry a banner across the bottom of the screen that cycles important quotes and talking points from the interview as it takes place. All the while, on cable news at least, the news ticker runs below advising viewers on headlines and upcoming programming. Such on-screen clutter would probably come across as overwhelming to the 1970’s news viewer. However, fitting with Simmel’s (1971) observation on the mental synthesis and selective attention to stimuli that develops in the increasingly crowded metropolis, the modern news consumer is able to take in this onslaught of information. The ‘scannable’ design of modern broadcast is dependent upon gradual shifts in structure (the on-screen layout of information) and graphics (the pictorial representation of information) (Cooke 2005). This is aided, in no small part, by the production sophistication and capabilities rendered by computerisation. The development of the technology ensures that the components of a broadcast are generally in harmony and the capacity to transfer from one story to another is, if anything, aided by the accompanying graphics and music which help to set the scene.

²³ While the relevance of taste, smell and touch are irrelevant for this project, the relation between the visual and aural in both encompassing and generating a sense of involvement is a crucial observation.

²⁴ Rutherford (2004) notes in his recent study of the presentation of the Iraq war that sound and visual cues were essential elements for ‘branding’ coverage.

In journalism, as in a good movie, the feeling often anticipates the content. The opening graphic, headline and sound are cues provided by newscasts to set the scene for a story and to facilitate flow between segments. As we will see in Chapter 7, when the *CBS Evening News* remade its theme music for the debut of Katie Couric, the composer created multiple openings to ‘fit’ the mood of the lead stories in the broadcast. This is just one example of how 21st-century television news employs more options to alter its look and feel.²⁵ These options increase the presentational sophistication of news, yet more components now need to be in harmony for a smooth and consistent style. Inappropriate music can set the wrong tone as mood is frequently linked to the auditory experience of sounds (cf. Bull 2001). Similarly, misapplied graphics or video footage that does not match the underlying dialogue has a jarring effect on the viewer – stripping bare the produced nature of the story. A favourite pastime of *The Daily Show* is illustrating moments from newscasts when technical excess occurs or playing with generic conventions of reportage, the effect being to demonstrate the constructed nature of news production. It is quick to highlight the unintentional moments of black humour when the constantly running ticker has a headline anathema to the story being told (i.e. the announcement of obesity rates in the U.S. while a story about African famine runs above). However, when the components of a broadcast are in sync, the result can be more in line than ever before with the experience of entertainment programming, with movie-level production values in terms of style and polish. In terms of analysing a news of feeling, this line of reasoning implies the need to be resolute in considering the use of technology alongside the crafting of involvement.

²⁵ In this respect, one must distinguish between print and broadcast news as the technological revolution has had a greater impact on the *style* of broadcast than print journalism because of the inclusion of video, sound, the ticker, overlaying graphics and so forth. Yet print has also experienced dramatic presentational shifts.

The obvious point is that shifts in presentational style interact with shifts in the predominant media technologies through which news is communicated. Another way to think of this is that different mediums have a tendency to foster different styles of communicative action. For instance, Jamieson (1988) remarks that while oratory used to provoke, with the advent of television, politics became dominated by visual communication. Matheson (2004) notes that the hyperlink in weblogs shift journalism from a product-oriented form of knowledge to a process-oriented form where the reader is guided through an exploration of information. Bull *et al.* (2006: 6) observe that there is an increasing “aestheticization of everyday life,” at the same time that we are witnessing the “technologization of perception.” In this respect, novel forms of journalistic presentation stretch experience by playing with formats of sensorial communication. Recent technological shifts thus call attention to the commoditisation of the visual and aural via trademarks and branding.²⁶

The need for a distinct presentational style highly dependent upon computerisation is somewhat predicated on another technological shift, namely the speed of information transfer brought about by the digitisation of communication in the form of satellite, cell phones, SMS messaging, and so forth. The broader reach of satellite and digital technology has made communication even more immediate, information more transportable, and reconfigured the news industry in a way likely only paralleled by the emergence of electronic telegraphy – wire services – in the 19th century. As technology advanced over the 20th century, going live became the hallmark of television news coverage (Schlesinger 1987; Hjarvard 1992). Reporting live is now the norm for cable news, as there is a sense in news

²⁶ Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) and Elliot (2005) consider how the legal battles over colour trademarks by companies reflect a belief that colour is something that can elicit an impact via the senses. Put otherwise, colour may signify a host of meanings quickly and efficiently, which is why companies zealously attempt to protect their colour brands from being associated with competitors.

that the more immediate the coverage is, the more pure the product (Seib 2001). The common academic critique of this stance is that going live does not equate to going unmediated. The more traditional of these critiques (see Aronson *et al.* 1996) perceives that the trend towards immediacy oftentimes compromises traditional journalistic standards. Time constraints are posited to be no ‘friend to judgment’ (Seib 2001). When covered indirectly in academic investigations of the news, this is also the standard consideration of the impact of temporality. For instance, time is discussed in ethnographies exploring how the constraints of the news hole are alleviated by production planning and the maintenance of ‘beats’ (see Tuchman 1978; Golding and Elliot 1979; Fishman 1980); time becomes relevant in the consideration of journalistic reliance on pseudo-events and media episodes (see Boorstin 1961; Dayn and Katz 1992); and time is considered with respect to sourcing and how the ‘event orientation’ structure of the news cycle prevents a diversity of voices and longer-term social issues from being covered (see Ericson *et al.* 1987).²⁷ Put simply, it is the time that binds.

Increased immediacy through technology has not alleviated these temporal concerns. While still facing constraints based upon what events can be covered (an episodic view) increased immediacy also introduces a forward-looking temporality (a ‘what’s next’ perspective). Cable news represents a never-ending news cycle that is more focussed on updates and developments than on sober reflection of the totality of an event.²⁸ News now arrives in incomplete chunks, piecemeal bits of information as a story breaks. The intermediary moments in between each new factoid are often filled with speculation, innuendo and prognostication – rather than contextualization, verification and restraint. The

²⁷ This strand of argument is also touched upon in the literature on ‘Moral Panics’. See Stuart Hall *et al.*’s (1978) *Policing the Crisis*.

²⁸ Network news is still the leading selection for those who only watch news once a day, likely because it does a better job than cable of summarising the day’s events (*New York Times* 2005; PEJ 2006).

significant and insignificant blend seamlessly, the result of this increase in the speed of information, ironically, is that news is less complete, giving “the reporting a more chaotic, unsettled and even numbing quality” (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999: 6). The evolution of the news, from a monthly, to weekly, daily, hourly, and instantaneous information conduit has shifted how stories are told. This is easily observed in both print and broadcast. As magazines are to the daily newspaper, cable magazines are to the ongoing cable newscasts. As I explore in Chapter 5, by developing ‘pet issues’, such as illegal immigration on *Lou Dobbs Tonight* or laws against sexual predators on *The O’Reilly Factor*, such ‘brands’ are credited by the producers of these programs as helping to drive coverage by adding a sense of continuity and stability.

Increasingly, not only broadcast but also print journalism attempts to approximate real-time or live coverage (Dessauer 2004). With the advent of the internet, print outlets are able to release stories in a format that rivals around-the-clock cable news coverage (Ferguson 1990). This desire to go live is akin to an addiction in journalism, with news consultants urging local newscasts that live and late-breaking are the keys to successful ratings. Reporters are often positioned ‘live on the scene’ even if the event ended many hours before the newscast. As Seib (2001: xii) notes, “it may be silly, but it’s live.” Yet while being live is still commonplace, immediacy is becoming a more tenuous grounds upon which to base one’s brand.²⁹

More channels has meant more choice and while at first cable news outlets branded primarily on first-to-the-scene coverage, increasingly the technological revolution has rendered information flow to be near instantaneous. The exclusive is far less commonplace

²⁹ This seems move evident on a national level – CNN calls itself ‘the most trusted name in news’, Fox News tells its viewers ‘we report, you decide’ – as opposed to the local stations which are more likely to still brand themselves as ‘being first on the scene’ although ‘on your side’ or some variant also seems quite popular.

in today's media sphere when it comes to breaking news. As such, being the first to break a story is becoming a less definitive foundation for branding in a 'warp speed' journalistic culture (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999). Similarly, the advent of YouTube and similar internet sites, as well as the remediation of broadcast segments on news websites, now provides easy access to previously aired segments or reports with popular buzz.³⁰ In other words, technological advances radically alter the temporality of news, not only in terms of dramatically increasing the speed at which news can be produced but in terms of the ease with which it can be re-watched.

If we take McLuhan (1964: 9) seriously, such rapid development of media technologies leads to new possibilities for "the scale and form of human association and action."³¹ This is not to say that technology is deterministic, merely it points to the fact that technologies encourage or foster certain forms of communication while discouraging others (Meyrowitz 1994). For instance, the introduction of journalistic weblogs facilitates direct contact with the audience, allowing participants to be news producers as well as consumers (Wall 2005). The result is a genre more intimate and casual than traditional print and broadcast news, which potentially forces traditional outlets to attempt to re-connect with their audience. As I discuss in Chapter 7, one of the things emphasised by CBS during its re-branding of the *Evening News* with Katie Couric was developing a blog, "Couric and Co.", for expressly this reason. Similar initiatives have been implemented by many news organisations, encouraging audiences to send in videos or photographs because, as the BBC notes on its website, "News can happen anywhere at any time and we want you to be our eyes." In 2008,

³⁰ Remediation is the process whereby "new media refashion prior media forms" (Bolter and Grusin 2000: 273).

³¹ While McLuhan's overt dismissal of content shows his technologically deterministic tendencies, and his bio-psychological association of media and the central nervous system seems tenuously developed, his demand that we take the media form (at least) as seriously as the message is one always worthy of consideration.

CNN launched its iReport website, a citizen journalism initiative complete with an “iReport Toolkit” that gives instructions on “The Ingredients of a Good Story”, how to “Shoot Better Video”, and how to “Record the Sound of Your Story” (CNN 2009). It has also begun broadcasting these user-generated stories under the same name while CNN International airs a weekly program, *iReport for CNN*. Ironically, this ability to re-connect, allowing the public to ‘become’ the reporters, is a development predicated on other technological developments – cell phones with video capability, digital cameras and SMS messaging. In terms of the influence of technology on journalism, this means that we must look beyond proliferation, to the technological shifts in mediation, speed, and presentation of communication to gauge the (often unintended) effects.

To discuss the shifts and changes in any industry based largely on communication is to discuss the media themselves. And while technology has seemingly provided the fodder for a news of feeling it is unclear whether it provokes these shifts or simply allows for them. This is similar to another notable development over the past 25 years, the shifting gender balance of the workforce. Regardless of the causal relations involved, an increase in the number of female journalists has certainly coincided with a more ‘personal’ form of news.

‘Feeling’ Facts – The Feminisation of the Workforce

The new market-driven values of journalism accord better with mainstream conceptions of femininity than the objective and rational standards of traditional news journalism.

Leisbet van Zoonen, One of the Girls?: The Changing Gender of Journalism (1998) – arguing that changing perceptions in the mass media have increased the demand for female journalists.

The first half-century of broadcast journalism news proved fairly consistent in term of the types of faces we saw onscreen. Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite and the ‘big three’

anchors of the 1980s and 90s were emblematic of a more general trend that witnessed white, male journalists as the prime practitioners of serious news. Yet the traditional hue and hair length of broadcast journalists has changed conspicuously in recent years, part of an overall increase in the rates of female and ethnic minority participation in the journalism labour force over the past few decades (Weaver *et al* 2007). At the same time, there seems to be widespread agreement that the news is increasingly ‘personal’. This assertion, linked to the observation that we are witnessing a dissolution or blurring between hard and soft news, is often associated with this increasing ‘feminisation’ of the workforce (MacDonald 2000). And while there may be a degree of interplay between the composition of the workforce and the changing state of objectivity, the precise nature of this relationship is far from explicit.

Generally, transformations such as personalisation, conversationalisation and the like are perceived to be, at least partially, responses to pressures vis-à-vis audience demands.³² One contention is that the urge to draw in a female audience, traditionally an underrepresented demographic, has accounted for an increased emphasis on human interest within journalism.³³ News programs alter content and presentation and new forms of news appear to address this void (van Zoonen 2003). Often the corollary to this perspective is the perception that female journalists are better equipped to fulfil this role.³⁴ As Moore (1997) observes, “There is a move right across the media towards making the news more fun, more sexy, more entertaining, as though there is an implicit understanding that news on its own is just too straight, too dull and too boring to attract those peculiar minorities, women and young people.” A more academic appraisal of this line of thought posits that that shifting

³² The coverage of Princess Diana’s death is one example of an incident that relaxed the demands of objectivity, especially with respect to its ‘dispassionate’, ‘detached’ stance (Hartley 1998; Bishop 1999; 2001; Jermyn 2001).

³³ The ancillary argument is that this often comes at the expense of ‘serious’ news.

³⁴ More broadly, the argument is made that there is a ‘sphere of invisibility’ in journalism when it comes to various minority groups (Sonwalkar 2005).

gender participation in the workplace has elevated ‘the feminine’, the result being a decline in the dominance of positivist, objective reportage.

Whether or not this is the case, multiple authors (see Carter *et al.* 1998)³⁵ have explored the tension between this apparent shift and the measurable concomitant increase in female participation in the workforce. In admittedly oversimplified form, one argument asserts that the introduction of journalists with a ‘woman’s perspective’ may aid in a blurring of traditional boundaries, emphasising post-positivist, ‘feminised’ epistemologies in the industry. This train of thought asserts that an increasing number of female journalists can challenge the masculine orthodoxy of the industry. The types of questions posed by Ross (2005: 287) – “Why do men dominate the news: men’s thoughts, men’s actions, men’s toys? ... Why [do] we get the news *they* want to give us rather than the news *we* want to hear, read and see?” – are emblematic of this position. Patriarchal values, closely tied to positivist thought, come to be questioned as female journalists ‘legitimise’ more personal and informal reportage. The pejorative stance towards not only soft news but a personal and involved technique is mitigated by female reporters who engender a broader understanding of what can be professional in journalism (see MacDonald 2003).

Others are sceptical of this claim, both in terms of the assumption that such a thing as a ‘woman’s perspective’ exists and in terms of the inconclusiveness of any empirical demonstration that illustrates a causal relationship between increased female participation and increasingly ‘feminised’ news (Carter *et al.* 1998). In similarly oversimplified form, the counter to this analysis assumes that women are uniquely positioned to interpret soft news. Playing to cultural narratives, more women are welcomed into the profession not to change it but to address a perceived audience demand for traditionally ‘sensitive’ or soft subjects. This

³⁵ Carter *et al.* (1998) provide a nice summary of the dominant thrusts in feminist analyses of the news industry in the opening chapter to *News, Gender and Power*.

changing emphasis within journalism opens the door to female participation (van Zoonen 1998).

Both perspectives have in common an epistemological stance that posits that women enjoy a privileged position towards a specific form of story-telling. The difference is that while the former position asserts that women within the industry cause the acceptance of a feminist epistemology, the latter perspective flips this assumption on its head to assert that epistemological shifts demand the industry address the gender imbalance of its workforce.³⁶ At its core, the debate is about the source of change. And as with many debates about directional force, the likely answer is that influence is bi-directional, mutually reinforcing, and not localised but exercised through web-like relations (cf. Foucault 1980). Put otherwise, there is an obvious feedback loop in terms of ‘the feminine’ and its relationship to female participation in the workforce. A rise in female participation makes ‘the feminine’ more visible, which in turn raises the demand for female journalists, and so on. Finding out which is the catalyzing force seems less important than recognizing this symbiotic relationship exists (van Zoonen 1998).³⁷

The outlook on what female journalists bring to the profession can sometimes aggrandize Hamlet’s lament that “frailty, thy name is woman,” and belittle women as serious reporters. This is reflected in academic treatments with essentialist overtones (see Ross

³⁶ Of course female participation is only one element of a shifting workforce demographic. Another such shift is the increasing participation of ethnic minorities, though the percentage is far less substantial. Minorities (including Jewish-Americans) comprised 11.4 percent of the workforce in 1971, 9.7 percent in 1982-83 and 14.6 percent in 2002 (Weaver *et al.* 2007: 12). While the significance of this is separate from the arguments on the effect of female participation, the thrust of the observations is the same. Minorities (can) bring a different viewpoint or sensibility to the workforce that was previously absent. Or, alternatively, they can find themselves increasingly welcomed into a profession that wants to reach out to a previously neglected group for which a minority voice is uniquely suited. The extension, as with feminist literature on media, is that some ‘truths’ generated by the objective method are rejected by those who occupy a minority position in society as buttresses of a hegemonic, in this case white, viewpoint.

³⁷ While this may carry overtly essentialist tones, this is a reflection of the commonsense notions that pervade the industry as opposed to its theoretical veracity.

2005): no matter how much they may try to elevate feminine epistemologies as equally valid; they perpetuate a belief that inevitably places men in positions of power within an industry that reveres rational investigation. Such a conceptualisation rests on a set of relations that equates masculine to rational and public, and feminine to emotive and private. In trying to assuage chauvinism against female journalists, essentialist arguments, unwittingly one assumes, can often reproduce it.

Less instrumental thinking clearly distinguishes between association (as in objectivity with masculinity), and inherence (objectivity is masculine). A majority of feminist literature, it appears, is more in line with the former, noting that gendered conceptualisations surrounding ‘the feminine’ and ‘the masculine’ shape change. Those authors writing from an ontological perspective generally do not insist women ‘are’ more emotional, more personal, and more sensitive. Rather they are sympathetic to the gendered biases that relegate that which is perceived as feminine. This sort of argument asserts that objective journalism embodies assumptions that correspond to ‘masculine’ notions of a monologic truth, dependent on verifiable and quantifiable fact, rather than feminine notions of dialogic truth. For instance, “hard news, with its starkly counterpoised truth-claims,” is still accorded the greatest prestige within journalism’s interpretive community (Allan 1998: 133).

Fleshing out these positions allows us to elaborate on what is meant by the feminine when we speak of journalism. With broadcast news, some observers link the feminine to an involved, sympathetic style of reporting, emblematic of soft news. The stress is on presentation, rather than content. “The ‘feminine’ remain[s] linked to the visual, which seem[s] more easily accessible and less susceptible to rational thought than the verbal” (Holland 1998: 22). This view is not only evident within journalism but within the academic treatment of it. The neglect of academics to consider non-traditional, soft news forms,

reflects a critique that dismissal of talk shows, breakfast television, documentaries, and the like is a pejorative stance by male researchers that equates these forms to “infotainment” rather than ‘proper news’, and hence unworthy of scholarly attention” (Carter *et al.* 1998: 7). This neglect ignores the interplay between fact and fantasy, information and entertainment. Hard news is often dependent on soft presentational elements and as the industry pushes the entertainment quotient to a greater extent, the values and definition of ‘news’ constantly change. (Holland 1998). The urge to separate informational content out from style when considering the news neglects how content is shaped by entertainment values, in terms of attempting to generate a sense of involvement (Curran and Sparks 1991). Entertaining is intertwined with informing – you cannot do one without accomplishing some degree of the other.

This thinking is more in line with the rationale that underlies the view that the journalism industry looks to women to fill a void. Rather than facilitate a shift towards soft news, female journalists are welcomed as a news of feeling gains acceptance within the industry. This thinking reflects research on professional practices which finds that, in terms of performance, female journalists are indistinguishable from their male colleagues (van Zoonen 1998). Put otherwise, a classification system of journalism, which drew its categories based around reporting techniques, would not be able to separate female and male reporters with any consistency. This leads us to consider common cultural narratives as we ponder the impact of increasing female participation. When it comes to the concerns of female journalists, they frequently state that journalism fetishises facts over causality and impacts, and indicate that their male colleagues feel the need to hide, “behind the idea of objectivity to exclude all compassion and humanity that one should bring to journalism” (van Zoonen

1998: 35). This would indicate that objectivity is at least linked to assumptions about the ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’.

While debates over the impact of female participation may be ambiguous, one thing that is clear is that the composition of the workforce has changed. Weaver *et al.* (2007: 8) illustrate a 66 percent increase in female journalists as a total proportion of the workforce since 1971. In 1971, 20.3 percent of American journalists were women, a number that increased to 33.8 percent in 2007. While this is an increase, the total percentage of female journalists has remained relatively fixed since 1982, a fact largely attributable to generational demographics. While the bulk of the American workforce is from the baby-boomer generation, the proportion of baby-boomer journalists is higher than in other professions (Weaver *et al.* 2007). When one takes into account layoffs across the industry, and the high number of baby-boomer journalists who have not yet retired, one begins to understand why overall female participation has remained stagnant for the past couple of decades. However, in terms of recent employees (less than 4 years experience) females comprise 54.2 percent of total hires. As more of the baby-boomers retire, one imagines the percentage of female journalists will increase, assuming current hiring practices continue.

The ambiguity surrounding the impact of workplace demographics means that any correlation may indeed be tangential to the increasing stylistic breadth of journalistic fare to appear in recent years. For one can also observe that the workforce has not only changed along gender, but along ethnic, religious, and educational lines and trying to make a coherent link between these characteristics and the presentation of the news is complex. In conjunction with the technological and commercial shifts discussed previously in this chapter, it seems the most secure assertion one can make is that changing workplace

demographics are one of many tangible developments seen in journalism over the past 25 years that may have helped facilitate the emergence of a news of feeling.

Conclusion

Columnist H.L. Mencken once noted that “No-one ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the American public” (Sampson 1999: 202). This sort of analysis seems to reflect the denigration that often accompanies many of the developments discussed in this chapter. Broadcast news has evidently become more commercial, more fragmented, more beholden to technology, more impacted by temporality, and more ‘feminine’ over the past few decades. And for many, journalism is the worse for it. But I believe the significance of these developments is far more ambiguous. Do all these shifts work together to result in a broader ‘tabloidization’ of the news, as authors like Franklin (1997) assert, or is its impact more complex? Despite the oft-echoed critique that the news media is turning to tabloid methods, debasing itself as it capitulates to commercial interests, the irony is, as a workforce, the industry is increasingly demanding that journalists have post-secondary education in order to be admitted into its ranks (Weaver *et al.* 2007). My contention is that these sort of evident tensions demand that we take a closer look at the gradation involved in the emergence of such a varied breadth of broadcast news alternatives, rather than dealing in black-and-white binaries.

Like many other professions that have been historically governed by various modes of apprenticeship, the journalism industry increasingly looks to hire university graduates. Indeed, the number of American colleges and universities offering degrees in journalism and mass communication has increased 52 percent over the past two decades, from 304 programs with 91,016 students enrolled in 1982 to 463 programs and 194,500 students in 2002 (Weaver

et al. 2007: 33). While some of these programs do little more than institutionalise the apprenticeship function, providing a basic skill set to aspiring journalists, others provide grounding in communications theory.³⁸ Aspiring journalists are now frequently exposed to various strands of critical, interpretive, post-modern and post-structuralist thought that challenge the dominance of ‘Objectivity’ and ‘Truth’, something that seems to parallel the blurring of definitive styles of news within the industry.³⁹ If we are to ‘take journalism seriously’ (Zelizer 2004), we should consider these sorts of tangible shifts alongside the more ambiguous tonal shifts which are the focus of the following chapter.

As we have seen in this chapter, while certain developments may be tangible, debate over their impact is often uncertain. For instance, while the only explicit case of feminisation which I am considering in this dissertation is the ascension of Katie Couric to the anchor’s desk, more broadly it seems possible that feminisation of the work force may have created some of the conditions of possibility for the rise of a news of feeling. Similarly, while fragmentation and the parallel decline of trust in mainstream media may not have guaranteed the rise of cable magazine stalwarts like Bill O’Reilly and Lou Dobbs, it is hard to imagine their success, or that of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, in a universe of three dominant networks. Yet drawing any explicit causal links between these developments and the emergence of a news of feeling is formidable. This is even more apparent in Chapter 3, which looks at the tone of journalism in terms of the diminishing relevance of objectivity, the blurring of traditional boundaries, and the emergence of a journalism of journalism. Yet

³⁸ Differences in pedagogical focus are quite evident in Canada. While college programs focus primarily on skill development, university degrees additionally demand a familiarity with communications theory.

³⁹ Perhaps some of the innovations seen in the industry relate to this increasing contact with academic theory, which enables journalists to develop a critical lens (Deuze 2006). This understanding, borrowed from Bauman (2000: 123), is that “the way learning is structured determines how individuals learn to think.”

what is achieved by examining these developments, and drawing out the various parallels that exist, is that we come to establish a clearer picture as to why a news of feeling has materialized, and why now. The point is not that the changes discussed in this chapter were *necessary* for a diversity of news styles to appear. Rather, these technological, commercial and workforce shifts have all played some role in terms of altering the conditions in the journalistic field under which it is *possible* for a news of feeling to emerge.

Chapter 3: Accelerated Modulation – The Tonal Shifts in Broadcast Journalism

There is widespread disquiet in the United States among journalists and industry watchers over the state of the media. It is generally felt that the moral and practical bases of American journalism are slipping away. The high standards of yesterday are being undermined by sensationalism, prurience, triviality, malice, and plain, simple credulity.

Colin Sparks, The Panic Over Tabloid News (2000) – outlining the prevailing reaction to shifting practices amongst media outlets.

It is the ‘mode of address’, the ‘tone’ of a newspaper or broadcast, that distinguishes it from its competitors and provides much of its appeal to us as viewers and readers

John Hartley, Understanding News (1982) – explaining how news executives go about branding news.

It is of course a prominent notion that underlies Western democracies that, as one of its foundational pillars, the press must be free. Free from government influence and free to inform the citizenry; free to pursue and publish factual accounts; and free to air controversial or countervailing viewpoints. A free press is the vehicle for free speech, free speech the foundational ground of unfettered political debate. Relying upon health-related metaphors, a free press is supposed to ensure a ‘healthy’, ‘vibrant’ and ‘growing’ democracy. And in the history of the Anglophone media, frequently the term ‘objectivity’ has been marshalled to explain how this should be acted out in practice. In this sense, objectivity, whether being deployed as a rhetorical ideal or methodological imperative, can be seen as a manifestation of the free speech doctrine in the press.

Within the journalism industry, it is possible to identify a loose set of strategies, acceptable practices, rituals, techniques and ethics said to constitute ‘good’ journalism. To put it another way, codes of ethics, professional organisations, dedicated schools, institutionalised practices, and academic investigation all do work in creating a type of subject, the *professional journalist*, which can both act and be acted upon (cf. Hacking 1986; cf. Desrosières 1991). The rise of the professional journalist produces certain expectations of

conduct, and provides a field of reference for academics who wish to study the industry. In its crudest form, this code of conduct has historically been summed up using a simple two-word dictum: be objective. Otherwise, it is said, journalism becomes tabloid. Professionalism becomes sensationalism. Informing becomes entertaining. Investigating is reduced to muckraking.

In recent years the dominance of objectivity as a fundamental paradigm in Anglophone journalism has increasingly been called into question, not only by academics but within the industry itself. Indeed, the term ‘objectivity’, long the hallmark of codes of ethics within the industry, has been removed from these codes by the Society of Professional Journalists in the United States and the Canadian Press in Canada over the past decade. It is important to note that ‘objectivity’ was not removed from these industry publications because its tenets of fairness, balance or factuality became undesirable. Many of these terms now stand-in for objectivity, and maintain the rational posture of the profession. However, the detached method associated with objectivity, and particularly with a news of fact, is increasingly problematised within the industry.

This development may be intimately linked with a tendency in which many of the traditional dichotomies associated with journalism, such as hard/soft, fact/opinion, information/entertainment, or objective/subjective, are progressively blurred (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001). This blurring is the focus of this chapter. While the previous chapter considered some of the visible, manifest transformations that have impacted journalism over the past 25 years, this chapter considers some less-obvious tonal shifts that I argue have occurred within the industry. The first part of the chapter considers the development of objectivity as a foundational element of the 20th century move to professionalize journalism. From here, the chapter moves on to evaluate challenges to objectivity within the industry and

outlines some of the theoretical difficulties academics face by conceptualising rationality and emotion as a dualism. To accomplish this, I introduce an analytic found in the literature on the sociology of emotions – emotion as the experience of involvement – to try and alleviate oppositional categorisations which fail to capture the complexity of different journalistic forms. The final part of the chapter looks at the rise of reflexive journalism, which builds on the understandings developed earlier in the chapter to contextualise how challenges to the dominance of objectivity are manifested. An appreciation of these changes, which I am calling tonal shifts, provides context for later chapters when we consider how specific examples of a news of feeling have emerged in journalism.

The fundamental recognition the reader needs to bear in mind when reading this chapter is that each of the emerging trends discussed throughout the previous chapter are not wholly distinct from each other, nor from the broader tonal shifts being discussed here. For instance, to treat the influence of the technological revolution as separate from the broader state of play of objectivity in the news industry is to ignore synergies that go far beyond enhanced technological training for aspiring journalists in the new millennium. For instance, as we saw in the last chapter, and as we will see in the various empirical ones that follow, technology now allows for slick presentations in newscasts, a transformation that increasingly make news ‘feel’ like entertainment programming (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001). Market fragmentation provides a number of welcoming homes for diverse genres of news, as evidenced by the rise of cable magazines and satirical news. Commercialisation coincides with a ‘blurring’ of the news as profitable alternatives to the traditional network style find success. In all likelihood, these influences act together, back and forth, often in harmony. And while certain developments seem more foretelling and significant for the emergence of a

news of feeling, it is important to bear in mind that such shifts are not full-scale changes but matters of degree.

The interplay of tangible and tonal shifts does not stop there. The ratio of journalists to content has decreased markedly with the expansion of the industry over the past few decades (Kurpius 2003). In conjunction with the rise of multiple local broadcasts and 24-hour coverage, the economic imperatives of hard news make wide-ranging coverage astronomically expensive – consider the number of foreign bureaus, fact checkers, and the sheer journalist, production and editorial workforce needed to produce a comprehensive 24-hour newscast – a daunting task that makes such thoroughness cost-prohibitive. Chat, opinion and information ‘facilitation’ are cheap fillers for the newly created news hole.⁴⁰ Technology makes it possible to compile vast amounts of information, in a highly stylised form, which makes endlessly entertaining, information-related chatter, speculation, and updates the norm in much of the industry (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999). Traditional hard news reports sometimes appear to become the exception. In such a ‘newsscape’, traditional journalistic boundaries are blurred, at times beyond recognition. Objectivity is questioned.

There has always been a certain muddying of entertainment, polemic, and truth in journalism, and one finds gossip and propaganda amidst its roots (Sampson 1999). However, the 19th century introduction of the mass press dailies (Curran 1978) and the 20th century professionalization of the craft (Schudson 1990) helped clarify what constituted ‘good’ journalism. Yet the stability of professional values seems to have been thrown into question over the past few decades. Among the critical changes experienced over the last 25 years – the blurring of traditional news dichotomies; the fragmentation and commercialisation of the

⁴⁰ One gets a sense from those who lament the 24-hour news revolution that the need to keep ‘feeding the beast’ goes far beyond just creating a news hole, but is akin to a black hole for journalistic seriousness, verification and perspective.

marketplace; the technological revolution; and the shifting nature of the workforce – what one can identify is a general trend towards more diverse manifestations of what ‘counts’ as news, especially within broadcast journalism (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001). Rather than just comment on public affairs, journalism increasingly covers stories that capture the cultural zeitgeist (Jurkowitz 2000). And as these products succeed, the inclination of news organisations to produce thoroughly researched accounts of the day seems augmented by a journalism that also solicits to feel the news, at you.

Blurred Boundaries – Emotions, Reflexivity and the ‘Decline’ of Objectivity

Formulaic objectivity is faux objectivity.

Stephen Ward, The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond (2005) – commenting on the diverse historical manifestations of objectivity.

Just as there are lies, damn lies, and statistics there are paparazzi, muckrakers, and journalists. Central to maintaining the distinction between rag and report, professional and paparazzi, are the grand tenets of journalism such as fairness, balance, accuracy and integrity. In the context of the 20th century popular press, news texts signal this through their ‘rational’ style of presentation, which eschews political affiliations, decries bias and assumes neutrality (Schudson 2001). This posture of the Anglo-American journalistic profession is frequently summarised by the shorthand ‘objectivity’ (Schudson 1990; 1995).⁴¹ Historical strands of ontological objectivity (the relation between appearance and

⁴¹ Many accounts start from a position that the common-sense notion of objectivity, as a sort of detached, aperspectival rendering of ‘reality’ is, in fact, a journalistic myth (Schudson 1990, 2001; Ward 2005). An idealised notion of objectivity has rarely, if ever, enjoyed some sort of all-encompassing, unquestioned status within the industry. Ward (2005) notes that this sense of objectivity reached its zenith in the 1940s and 50s in America, and was only really dominant for these post-World War II decades. Schudson (2001) agrees, though selects a different World War, placing the emergence of American objectivity as beginning in the 1920s. What is significant is that they make the claim that objectivity comes in varying *degrees*, and is not a stable concept.

reality); epistemic objectivity (the relation between well-supported and not well-supported beliefs); and procedural objectivity (the relation between the public and decisions made in its name by government) have mingled to form a 20th-century hybrid – a ‘rhetorical strategy’ of objectivity – that protects journalism from critique. In ideal form, objectivity is defined by six components: factuality, fairness, non-bias, independence, non-interpretation, neutrality and detachment, which act as industry-wide technical and discursive standards (Ward 2005: Chapters 1 and 2).⁴²

In the first quarter of the 20th century, Walter Lippmann (1922) and others started to advocate for this ideal of objectivity as the definitive method of professional journalism, with the intention of demarcating journalism from less ‘truthful’ professions such as public relations.⁴³ Extrapolating from this, one can assert that 20th century journalism has been somewhat beholden to this transpositional logic, in that a journalism product that does not claim to be objective contradicts an essential rhetorical claim used to establish ‘news’. News is traditionally subject to this necessary condition: it (must appear) objective or it is not news. In short, to be considered a journalistic commodity, there must be some component that distinguishes news from competing forms of communication. Objectivity has historically performed this function in a number of ways.

Within the academic literature on journalism, objectivity is discussed as, alternatively, a set of strategic rituals (Tuchman 1978); a regime (Hackett and Zhao 1998); ideal (Schudson 2001); paradigm (Berkowitz 2000); or ethic (Ward 2005). The uses to which it has been put

⁴² I utilise ‘objectivity’ as shorthand to capture the historical development of the modernist ideals of journalism – truth, factuality, balance and reality. However, it is crucial to realize that this shorthand is more than merely a generalization; it is akin to Weber’s analytical construct of ideal types, being articulated for the purpose of conjecture and contrast. Ericson *et al* (1987: 105) express this when they note, “The notions of objectivity, balance, and fairness embody the assumption that journalists are neutral and non-partisan agents who base decisions on uniform technical criteria.”

⁴³ It is worth noting that Lippmann did not assume that ‘true’ objectivity could be achieved in reporting (Schudson 1990).

also vary considerably. Objectivity can be used to construct epistemologies or genealogies of the development of contemporary journalism (see Ward 2005), or to investigate the emergence of journalism as a profession (see Schudson 1990; 1995). Alternatively, objectivity can be used to investigate the practices of journalism itself, being employed as the foil to illustrate the disjuncture between what journalism claims to do and how this ethos is actually borne out in practice. The ethnographies of the 1970s, and 80s (see Tuchman 1978; Fishman 1980; Schlesinger 1987; Ericson *et al* 1987; 1989) utilise objectivity in such a manner. Objectivity can also be employed in critical accounts that look at the failings of journalism. Herman and Chomsky's (1988) description of the propaganda model, which accents how the media is co-opted by elites, or Altheide's (2002) consideration of the use of fear in the media, are examples.

Despite this myriad of possible nuances, subtleties, and differences one can generally say that academic studies of journalism utilise this ideal of objectivity to explore how the rise of the professional journalist produces certain rational expectations of conduct, or 'rules of truth'. For instance, Tuchman (1978) considers techniques that form the 'web of facticity' that give validity and the appearance of truth to the news. In a similar vein, Schlesinger (1987) looks at editorial control and institutional ideology at the BBC to see how they 'put reality together'. Fishman (1980: 14) notes that, "News is a determinant form of knowledge not because the world out there already comes in determinant forms but because people employ specific methods which strive to organize that world into something coherent." Ericson *et al.* (1987: 101; 1989) focus upon how the "mirror of reality view," still dominates journalistic ideology, and correspondingly, journalistic practice. Berkowitz (2000) makes the claim that objectivity is the paradigm of journalism; defence of the paradigm ensures the industry maintains its claim to be the unbiased conveyers of information in society. Clayman

(2002) speaks about what he calls the “Tribune-of-the-People” stance and how, by legitimizing aggressive questioning, it allows the journalist to maintain an image of neutrality. Cameron (2004) looks at the emergence of a ‘two-way’ genre of exchange between anchor and reporter on newscasts that ‘conversationalises’ reporting and lowers the degree of commitment to truth. Ward (2005) takes an historic approach to address the practices that allow objectivity to hold sway as a rhetorical strategy that defends the ethical norms and practices of journalism.

On top of this, objectivity has a common-sense appeal, frequently being utilised as the benchmark against which critiques of the media are based (Hackett and Zhao 1998).⁴⁴ Indeed the media watchdog groups mentioned in the previous chapter still define themselves by claiming to document a liberal or conservative bias, and, as we will see in Chapter 5, both O’Reilly and Dobbs frequently assert their journalistic superiority over traditional outlets by trumpeting their cherished independence and objective reportage. This refusal to abandon the discourse of uncovering bias, in the search for truth, reflects the populist appeal of objective idealism.⁴⁵ Despite the decline in trust in mainstream media noted in the previous chapter, it seems that objectivity still has a persuasive allure – many are apt to use it as a marker of why their chosen news source is superior to others, which are often dismissed as ‘biased’. In as much as there is academic and professional recognition that journalism cannot be objective, in terms of a perfect mirror of ‘reality’, there is still much talk of being fair, accurate, balanced and impartial (Frank 2003). The popular view persists that professional

⁴⁴ This is widely evidenced in the rhetoric employed by media pundits, generally politically-oriented media lobbyists, who decry partisan bias. When the frequent charge of journalistic bias is levied, this serves to reinforce the positivist notion that journalism *can* reflect and reproduce reality.

⁴⁵ Within academic analyses, the notion of framing is increasingly supplanting that of bias (Joseph 2005).

journalism is ‘above politics’ or at least aims to be (Hallin 1992). As Hackett and Zhao (1998: 15) note, it appears news objectivity is the “god who won’t die”.⁴⁶

Yet Ericson *et al.* (1987: 101-104) advance a view that journalists simultaneously strive for objectivity while being aware of their role in its creation; they are aware that they are ‘in’ the story, they ‘are’ the content. Facts are thus not self-evident, but news-evident, involving “organisational resources and occupational routines of the craft to make news.” (Ericson *et al.* 1987: 19) This builds on the use of the conceptualization of objectivity advanced by Tuchman (1978), positing that journalists are subject to, and create, a news frame that allows them to visualise objectivity. In this sense, journalists internalise the norms of the profession which helps blot out political leanings (Hallin 1992). This process of news creation allows an appearance of objective reality to be made visible for the journalist and the news consumer. Traditionally, this means that eschewing objectivity subverts journalism, leading to tabloid practices.

Yet claiming to strive for objectivity is far from a guarantee that journalistic products come close to conforming to the ideal. Journalism in wartime has often struggled with maintaining an objective posture, despite the recurrence of this problem throughout its history (McChesney 2002, Aday *et al.* 2005).⁴⁷ The notion of objectivity as a ritual that situates the journalist outside of political reality, reflecting debate while eschewing independent judgement and claims-making, is thus met with a great deal of scepticism. Hackett and Zhao (1998: 130) marshal this understanding to claim objectivity is not served by this ritual, and that, in interests of *Sustaining Democracy*, journalism needs to alter this

⁴⁶ The academic debunking of objectivity, even in spheres such as natural science where it seems inexorably entrenched (see Latour and Woolgar 1986), has not necessarily led to an embrace of subjectivity within these ‘rationalised’ industries.

⁴⁷ According to Aday *et al.*, Fox News went a step further with the recent war in Iraq, consciously rejecting the objective tenet that first-person pronouns should be avoided (e.g. “our troops”, “we are winning”).

understanding to distinguish between “‘truer’ and ‘falsier’ depictions of reality – in the sense of identifying between more or less coherent and comprehensive accounts”.⁴⁸ On the surface, their account is compelling, and the use to which they put objectivity highlights the media’s potential as an active democratic agent and institution. However, this form of assertion seems to imply that objective reality can be discovered if journalists just ‘critically’ strive to discover it, ever-sceptical of officialdom. While arguing for such industry-wide methodological rigour is laudable, this seems somewhat naïve when one considers the current state of the notion of objectivity within an increasingly fragmented media; seemingly ever more comfortable distinguishing amongst a plurality of truths.⁴⁹ This seems indicative of the slipping utility of objectivity.

There are further indications that the rationalised discourse of objectivity is increasingly called into question. As it relates to the practice of journalism, the core tenet of objectivity is that the professional journalist should report in a fair, balanced and impartial manner, separating fact from value. Traditionally, this has been associated with a second proposition, namely that to accomplish objective reporting, journalists must remain ‘outside’ the story they cover (Schudson 1990; 2001). The objectivity regime calls for the erasure of the journalist, which involves two considerations. The first is that journalists are to observe and not include themselves in their stories. Hard facts are desirable, while opinions are not. The second, and related consideration, is that reporters are to be emotionally cool and

⁴⁸ Their critical understanding calls for a more rigorous form of objectivity, one that does not ‘amplify’ official discourse but subjects it to disciplined scepticism, research and independence

⁴⁹ Many cable news magazines make the precise truer/falsier distinction called for by Hackett and Zhao, yet it is unlikely these sorts of programs are how they imagine journalism should be ‘sustaining democracy’. What we can say is that the *appearance* of being coherent and comprehensive, addressing the failures of traditional journalism by weighing claims and then judging ‘truthfulness’, can certainly engage an apathetic news public.

detached from their subject matter (Aday *et al.* 2005). As such, the professional journalist remains distant.

While this account of what makes good reporting, typical of the 20th century Anglophone (especially American) media, is not hotly contested (Sparks 2000), it appears that non-rational considerations are challenging these considerations, both explicitly within journalistic codes of conduct as well as in professional regimes of practice. The public or civic journalism movement which took root in parts of the American media in the 1990s advocated for a form of journalism that interacted with and served the community, rather than just reporting on it (Rosen 1999; Kurpius 2003). Recent years have also seen a notable shift in professional codes of conduct, concentrating on a more compassionate media (Overholser 2000; Bishop 2001). For instance, in 1996 the Society of Professional Journalists in the United States removed the tenet of objectivity from their code of ethics, replacing it with the principles of “minimising harm” and “being accountable” (Frank 2003). The *Canadian Press Stylebook* (1999: 19) now has a section on “sensitive subjects” noting that, “Potential for offence lurks in every news story.” Another development worth mentioning is the emerging practice of reflexive journalism, the practice of journalists turning the camera (or pen) on themselves, thus including themselves in the story. The few authors dealing with reflexive journalism, such as Becker (1996), Zelizer (1997), Bishop (1999; 2001), Berkowitz (2000), Matheson (2003) and Frank (2003), put forward the position that the news media is increasingly making itself an element of its reports. Coverage of hard news stories, previously concerned with ‘just the facts’, appears to now include media itself as a part of the news it covers. And while the journalism community has historically been quick to look down upon ‘tabloid practices’, fearing they will further erode already tenuous journalistic standards, there appears to be an increasing acceptance within the academic community of

the polarising notion that such practices may in fact help ‘save’ journalism by reinvigorating interest in the news and enriching civic engagement (Sparks 2000; Zelizer 2000; van Zoonen 2005). These authors look to the pleasurable elements that draw audiences to what has traditionally been referred to as soft news (or infotainment) and note its expansion in the broader journalistic field at a time when apathy for established media seems rife. As occurred with photos and banner headlines on the front pages in the early-20th century, some ‘tabloid’ or ‘alternative’ techniques have been duplicated by traditional outlets in recent decades.

The result is a blurring of traditional journalistic styles that makes the boundary between hard and soft, news and entertainment, increasingly tenuous. Of course, drawing a theoretically coherent distinction between these seemingly natural categories is near impossible as “The opposite of *news* is not *entertainment*, as the news is often diversionary or amusing (the definition of entertainment) and what is called ‘entertainment’ is often neither” (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001: 162). What seems more appropriate to note is that the boundaries (artificial or not) that sustained this division are eroding, in increasingly visible ways, as genres blend, technologies converge, and financial imperatives drive news to resemble entertainment.

This trend is easy enough to observe. Sampson (1999) notes that the frontier between the broadsheet and tabloid press in Britain began to virtually disappear in the 1980s.⁵⁰ While this alleviates some of the stuffiness that resulted from these writers attempting to craft the ‘first draft of history’, it also causes a retreat from the serious world. Across the pond, this is part of a broader trend towards ‘informalisation’ or

⁵⁰ It would be misleading to paint all English-speaking countries with the same brush. As Sampson notes, the British writing style has traditionally been more ‘lively’ than its American journalistic counterpart. As such, the blurring of boundaries takes different forms in the two nations. The commonality is a breaking of the traditional binaries that distinguished hard from soft, quality from populist, or broadsheet from tabloid journalism.

‘conversationalisation’ in that, “most forms of public discourse now work hard to avoid the formality and distance that were once important markers of its identity as ‘public’” (Cameron 2004: 124; see also Fairclough 1995).

Within North America, this transformation is evidenced in cable news, where its most prominent journalists such as Bill O’Reilly and Lou Dobbs, who are considered in Chapter 5, are seemingly both professional and pundit, reporter and commentator. A related trend is anchors, the “archetypical ‘pillar[s] of wisdom and independence,’” becoming stars in their own right, entering the world of popular culture (Brants 1998: 323).⁵¹ What we seem to be witnessing, “is a newly diversified mass media in which the cultures of entertainment, infotainment, argument, analysis, tabloid, and mainstream press not only work side by side but intermingle and merge” (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999: 4). This aspect of a news of feeling, seemingly inimical to the cool detached reportage that characterizes the objectivity regime, often employs a rhetorical style that is a sort of populist professionalism. This reflects Boorstin’s (1961) prophetic observation in *The Image*, that reporting ‘truth’ was becoming increasingly less important than being able to convey the appearance of truth. While the techniques and presentational form of objective journalism were the dominant manner to achieve this in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s,⁵² the late 1990s witnessed a more active embrace of personal involvement on behalf of the journalist, seemingly clashing with the custom of curbing one’s expression. The emergence of Jon Stewart’s humorous *Daily Show*, or O’Reilly’s belief-driven *Factor* at the start of the new millennium point to the potential success of this innovative trend.

⁵¹ Brants’ focus is on U.K. journalism, where he notes two prominent BBC anchors also host a quiz and reality television program.

⁵² A common thread amongst the ethnographies of the 1970s and 80s is explicating the performance of objectivity to unpack the processes whereby journalists create an appearance of truth.

This indicates that the balance between informing and engaging is tenuous. Not to say this is the death rattle of objectivity, indeed, considering how to repackage objectivity, yet maintain the rationalistic goals of truth and factuality, is still a primary focus within the industry (Hackett and Zhao 1998; Ward 2005). As noted in *Canadian Press Style Guide* (1999: 147),

No longer is the role of the news writer merely to inform. Readers (call them news consumers, if you will) are bombarded with information. ... Newspapers are fighting to attract new readers and hold the ones they have. Some of the forecasts are chilling and the fight seems far from over. To help, reporters and editors must present news stories that are uniformly appealing.

This logic witnesses a 21st century Anglo-American journalism that is progressively stylised as a form of non-fictional story telling (cf. Benjamin 1968). The orthodox ‘rules of truth’ are more evidently ‘emotive’ in recent journalism, especially amongst contemporary broadcasts, which reflects ongoing shifts in the conceptualisation of news (Holland 1998). Journalism, in this sense, should not be regarded as a zero-sum game, where good news is *unemotional*, bad news, *irrational*. This sort of conceptualisation vastly under-theorises the complexity of news texts and leads to limiting dualities.

Ratcheting up the Rhetoric – Emotion, Sensationalism, and Tabloidization

While the forms, techniques and products of journalism vary tremendously, for the bulk of the 20th century being and becoming a type of person, the ‘professional journalist’, demanded emotional control (cf. Stearns 1994). This means that journalists traditionally attempt to manage their emotions; indeed emotion management could be considered one of the crucial foundations of the job (cf. Hochschild 1983). Journalists cannot, or perhaps more accurately could not, ‘lose it’ with frustrating sources, ‘break down’ in the face of tragedy, or ‘explode’ at the first whiff of corruption and injustice. Embodied in codes of ethics and professional

standards formed throughout the 20th century this ‘cool’ style came to dominate journalistic presentation. Put simply, to tell a story ‘like it is’, reporters adopted a posture of being subjectively restrained and objectively detached.

This narrative of 20th century journalism is one where ‘good’ journalism, often referred to as hard news, is treated as impartial, objective, rational, and truthful. ‘Bad’ journalism, or soft news, is spoken of as partisan, biased, emotional and inaccurate. To appear to participate in making the news is accordingly problematic to many within the industry and is traditionally indicative of bad journalism (Rosen 1999). As such, apparent shifts away from the objective techniques of ‘good’ journalism towards emotional, partisan, personal, or biased reportage – styles which professional journalists have historically prided themselves on not crafting – often raise concerns.

Yet, current concerns about the path of journalism are not as novel as may appear at first blush; in fact debates over tabloidization are over a century old (Tulloch 2000). The observation that ‘new’ threats – old worries wrapped in new packages – continually emerge reflects the suggestion that objectivity is ever-shifting. Thus, emergent news forms that challenge the journalistic status quo are invariably problematised (Tulloch 2000; Zelizer 2000; Ward 2005). Television news is looked down upon by print as being infotainment, network news looks down upon cable news for similar reasons, while the journalism community as a whole looks down upon internet bloggers (Zelizer 2000). The common sentiment underlying these critiques is despair over journalism progressively eschewing its modernist, fourth-estate, purpose.

This idea of slipping standards is inextricably linked to the idea that an increased focus on economic imperatives drives a debasing of journalism as it panders to the lowest common denominator in an effort to increase sales (see Boorstin 1961; Bourdieu 1996;

Hallin 2000; Altheide 2002). Typically, such critiques, covered under the rubric of sensationalism, tabloidization, personalisation or propaganda, consider four ‘problematic’ areas: i) the subject matter or content of news; ii) the proportions of coverage and space given to various issues; iii) the forms of media presentation; and iv) journalistic ethics and techniques (Gripsrud 2000).

These sorts of critiques explicitly or implicitly rely on objective notions as the basis of much of their criticism, either employing the concept as shorthand for sound journalistic methods that are corrupted by a creeping emotionality; or as the root of the problem, an apolitical approach to news that results in the propagation of the status quo. There is a distinction which warrants mention, as it further distinguishes authors in both these camps. What I refer to is the tying of objectivity to rationality, and the rejection or tacit embrace of this relationship. For some authors it is not the goals of the objective method which are problematic, but its implementation (see Herman and Chomsky 1988⁵³; Hackett and Zhao 1998; Altheide 2002). While Hackett and Zhao (1998: 130) employ a critical realist perspective that recognises “all knowledge is constructed” they still employ a distinction between “‘truer’ and ‘falsar’” depictions of reality. This is a less polemical approach than Herman and Chomsky (1998) or Altheide (2002), who do not appear to dispute the possibility of a knowable truth but simply feel the media either actively or innocently manipulates its methods, allowing ideology or emotion, respectively, to corrupt the purity of

⁵³ Objectivity, with its emphasis on journalistic independence, is consequently used by some authors to illustrate how detachment can result in passivity. Herman and Chomsky (1988: 2) assert in *Manufacturing Consent* that the objective regime must be held accountable for the perpetuation of a hegemonic discourse that filters out anything that does not reflect the status quo. They assert that this filtering occurs, “so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news “objectively” and on the basis of professional news values.” Thus, it is only a certain element of the objective regime with which they take issue. It is not the rational pursuit of reflecting reality which they question, but the techniques they perceive cause a faux reality to be reflected.

its pursuit. The result is a press that does not serve its public but anaesthetises it. Lichtenberg (1991: 226) points out that such critiques are not upset with the ideal of objectivity but are more generally dissatisfied with some element of its method, such as neutrality or impartiality, which often gets conflated. She feels this easily slips into games of truth, noting “where we have not only conflicting or insufficient evidence but also competing frameworks within which to situate ambiguous information and no clear way of choosing among them, it often makes little sense to speak of ‘the’ truth about the matter.” Typically, such games of truth are played by media watchdog organisations that decry a right or left-leaning political bias in the press, anti-populists who decry the debasing nature of media, or accounts which assert that journalism is an agent of hegemony. For such commentators, it is not so much the tenets of an objective regime that are problematic but its implementation.

A news of fact in such accounts is generally considered in terms of how closely it lives up to its rational or positivistic goals while talk of emotion is either outright ignored or falls under the rubric of sensationalism and is mostly left for describing soft news and tabloid journalism. This can be contrasted to accounts such as the aforementioned public journalism movement (Rosen 1999), and academic re-evaluation of tabloid practices (MacDonald 2000; Zelizer 2000; van Zoonen 2005), which link emotion to greater civic involvement. Yet, even those who challenge the pejorative dismissal of emotion in the news often preserve the misleading construction which views it as rationality’s opposite. When we consider a more social, less physiological conception of emotion – the experience of involvement – we begin to see that emotion is always present.

MacDonald (2000: 260, 251) uses the idea of objectivity to argue against a journalistic paradigm that “accentuates dispassionate analysis, rationality, and abstraction.”

Adopting a position similar to some feminist critiques of the media, she notes the,

recurring assumption [of sensationalist critiques] is that a shift toward personalisation or a growing reliance on human interest automatically substitutes emotion for analysis and impedes the insights into social and political agency that form the prerequisite for democratic intervention. This articulation rests on binary oppositions, originating at the time of the Enlightenment and sustained by Habermasian thinking, which elevate principles of abstraction and rationality over instantiation and affectivity, without full consideration of how these might translate into communicative success within differing media.

In similar opposition to the idea that rationally objective methods are the answer to journalism's ills, van Zoonen (2005) considers why it is necessary to *Entertain the Citizen*. Rather than focussing on the lack of assessment offered by 'tabloid' news, she focuses on the narrative elements of storytelling that potentially engage a busy, hectic and apathetic public. This critique of objectivity is really a critique of detachment, hypothesised on the premise that a passive news of fact strips journalism of engagement, and by implication, public interest (MacDonald 2000; van Zoonen 2005).

Yet while these accounts attempt to get away from what Langer (1998) terms the lament of infotainment, all seem to persist with the rational/emotional divide. Langer's study of tabloid television, accounts of human interest stories, fires, floods and other natural disasters, argues that to ignore the importance of these stories negates a third of the news. While arguing for the equal importance of covering drama and tragedy, Langer employs a distinction between the 'hard' and what he terms 'other' news that recognizes one as more closely respecting the tenets of objectivity. This in itself replicates the journalistic distinction between hard and soft news. Graber (1994: 486) classifies the treatment of routine stories by news directors as subject to four approaches, one of which is coded as "populist/sensational", which are stories "obviously structured to arouse emotions and empathy." Another style is "elitist/factual, so that stories are confined to an unemotional recounting of verifiable information told to an intellectually mature audience. This is the

style that seems most in accord with the canons of democratic theory which require knowledgeable, interested citizens who want enough factual and interpretive information so that they can make rational assessments of complex political situations.” Even theoretically sophisticated analyses such as that offered by MacDonald (2000: 251) slip into this dualism when she notes that, “we need a new evaluative vocabulary to take us out of the rut of assuming that every hint of the personal is a capitulation to trivialization and emotional indulgence.” These authors, who investigate the complexity of the supposed ‘tabloidization’ of the press, seem to tacitly equate objectivity to rationality. Objectivity is thus either employed to advocate for a return to a rationalised, responsible press (a position effectively argued by Bourdieu and Hackett and Zhao) or is illustrated as the problem with an elite-oriented press that disengages its public (well-articulated by MacDonald and van Zoonen).

Yet hard, objective, ‘just the facts’ journalism is not *un*emotional, as these authors seem to indicate, just as soft, tabloid news is not *irr*ational. Rather, objective journalism crafts a very specific experience of involvement, corresponding to what Stearns (1994) dubs “American Cool”.⁵⁴ To be ‘cool’ is not to be emotionless, nor is it to be unfeeling. Rather, as Stearns outlines, being cool means finding the right balance of disengagement and nonchalance to create a good impression. This 20th century, ‘American Cool’, style arose in response to the increasing scientific management of emotions and the resultant rise of ‘emotive control’ in multiple spheres. For instance, the 1920s saw the emergence of industrial psychologists focussed on promoting a corporate culture whose tone was ‘pleasant’. This is similar to Weber’s (1946a: 216) observation that official business increasingly eliminated “love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional

⁵⁴ Schudson (2001) notes that the dominant objectivity regime practised by the U.S. media, which assumes an emotionally detached posture, is different than various European styles of journalism. In France, the initial response to the objectivity regime was to criticize a journalism that emphasised facts over ideas (Allan 2004).

elements which escape calculation” in a bureaucracy. If we extend this observation to journalism, this means that as the craft developed over the 19th and 20th centuries, intense displays, under even the most shocking circumstance, became antithetical to the craft. In this regard, the Cronkite quote that opens this dissertation is exemplary of the ‘cool’ journalist; fearing deviation from his professionalised detachment. Similarly, Fulford (1999) notes that over the course of the 20th century, newspaper articles became increasingly calcified and uniform.

Yet, appearing to be disinterested is also an indicator that one is ‘unprofessional’ (cf. du Gay 1994, cf. Stearns 1994). Thus much of the production and presentation of journalism is about maintaining this precarious presentational balance. As such, it is a fallacy to suggest that the 20th century brand of ‘just the facts’ journalism was *un*emotional. Such an assumption rests on a troublesome distinction between emotion and rationality that equates passivity to the absence of emotion rather than as an identifiable emotional posture (Barbalet 1998).

Accordingly, it is intrinsically misleading to speak of a full-scale ‘shift’ towards emotive news, as news has always attempted to construct an experience of involvement – whether in terms of the cool professional journalist of the 20th century, the muckraking of the yellow press, or the demagoguery practiced by the 19th century partisan press. Dismantling this dualism demands eschewing the commonsense notion of emotion as an entirely subjective ‘feeling’; to instead consider the various assumptions about what the desired experience of involvement is imagined to be when journalists compose news texts, something which can be delineated in specific, observable ways (cf. Barbalet 1998; cf. Dixon 2003). What then matters is the moment of contact between an audience and a news text and what work and assumptions go into crafting news that is assumed to spur some sense of

involvement. Emotion thus becomes viewed as an inducement (Katz 1988; Lyng 1990), with limitless configurations and strengths, rather than as one pole on a rationality/emotion spectrum. As Barbalet (2002: 1) explains:

A person may be negatively or positively involved with something, profoundly involved or only slightly involved, but however or to what degree they are involved with an event, condition, or person it necessarily matters to them, proportionately. That it matters, that a person cares about something, registers in their physical and dispositional being. *It is this experience that is emotion, not the subject's thoughts about the experience, or the language of self-explanation arising from the experience, but that immediate contact with the world the self has through involvement* (Barbalet 2002: 1 – emphasis added).

Building on this, conceptualising emotion socially allows us to potentially make inferences and also explore the disincentives we may have to engage with certain news products. For instance, even though Al-Jazeera follows most of the standard rules of truth of traditional Western journalism,⁵⁵ the disquiet many Americans felt watching clips of its coverage of the Iraq War can be understood by this negative involvement. The symbols, visuals and elements of presentation relied upon by Al-Jazeera in its coverage are not crafted with an American audience in mind and thus the experience of involvement for many American viewers is understandably ‘foreign’. The point of this is that such tones are not accidental – they are crafted with a certain experience of involvement in mind that is designed for a specific audience. Whether we are part of that intended audience (as I likely am when I watch *The Daily Show*) or deviate from the imagined audience (something I feel frequently when I watch *The O'Reilly Factor*) the calculations behind presentational style are not accidental, nor is this separate from how one cognitively interacts with each text.

The broader point is that much is lost when we think of emotion “in terms of quantity or substance as opposed to *patterns of relationship*” (Burkitt 2002: 151). As such,

⁵⁵ The 2004 documentary, *Control Room*, looks at precisely this relationship. What is striking is that although the techniques and feel of the channel is similar to American media, the way they conceptualise their audience’s involvement accounts for vastly different choices in terms of coverage.

emotion only has context and meaning when we place it in relation to things like humans, materials, ideas, or structures.⁵⁶ For instance, one study of television news directors found that dramatic visuals are frequently chosen not because of desired ‘shock value’, but to generate resonance with an intended audience. The rationale stated was that stories become more credible when dramatic visuals are used; such images are judged to be effective at placing the audience in the position of seeing events as they actually happened (Graber 1994). A standard discourse of sensationalism fails to adequately capture this relationship. Unless we establish these sorts of relations that newsmakers envision with their audience, as I attempt to do in the following empirical chapters, it is difficult to go beyond analysing news as a product that, almost like a recipe, occasionally pours in ‘emotion’ to improve its flavour. Just as ‘objectivity’ has been unpacked by academics who wish to understand how rules of truth are formed and enacted within professional journalism, reconfiguring ‘emotion’ allows a more complete picture of the relationship between news production and presentation to emerge. In essence, ‘emotion’ helps fill the gap between the structure of news production and the assumptions about audience reception (cf. Barbalet 2002).

As Ward (2005) instructively notes, formulaic objectivity is a myth within journalism, as the manner and manifestations of objectivity vary tremendously over time and place. Two logical derivatives can be generated from this observation vis-à-vis the current state of journalism. One is to assert that the regime of objectivity, with archetypes like Walter Cronkite, is dead, or at best, in decline. This seems tied to a well-established, yet binary form of logic that equates objectivity with fully rationalised reporting, and as such, is unsatisfactory. More appealing is to assert that emergent forms of news are once again

⁵⁶ For instance, the recent collapse of many banks is associated with a lack of *trust* in the financial sector. *Anger* is meaningless unless one relates it to a person or object at which it is directed. *Shame* only manifests itself when we acknowledge social expectations of conduct.

reconfiguring objectivity.⁵⁷ Indeed, objectivity is not a universal but rather a good shorthand that encompasses a host of techniques, presentational styles and industry-wide goals. And while journalists have traditionally shied away from recognising their involvement, there are signs that this, much like other traditional boundaries, is beginning to blur. This is yet further indication that while the broad canvas of journalism may remain relatively stable, different painters renew, update and alter its presentational style in dramatic fashion.

Re-configuring Objectivity – The Involved Standpoint of Reflexive Journalism

In 1841 Carlyle spoke of a new hero, a ‘Man of Letters’, who was of utmost importance for the healthy functioning of a democracy. Borrowing from Burke, Carlyle (1841) dubbed this group the fourth estate, and placing them within Parliament’s reporters’ gallery, noted that their role was that of conduit between the other estates of government, namely the church, nobility, and commoners.⁵⁸ Yet while the press watched the other estates, who was to watch the press? As Overholser (2000) notes, the news industry has historically been one of its own worst covered beats. News organisations have tried to protect themselves from their harshest critics by adhering to the grand tenet of professional journalism – objectivity – aiming to be impartial, fair and balanced. The dated mid-20th century image of a reporter with ‘scoop’ on his hat, repeating the mantra-esque tagline ‘just the facts’, may be a caricature but it does a good job conveying the detached, aperspectival rendering of reality and fact persona which represents how a proper journalist was supposed to act.

⁵⁷ These shifts are easy to observe even between journalists thought of as practicing similar styles. For instance, Edward R. Murrow sometimes spoke in the first person, a stance in conflict with the detached experience of involvement practiced by Cronkite (Hallin 1992).

⁵⁸ In modern political usage, the executive, legislature and judiciary often stand in for these somewhat antiquated estates. This places a somewhat greater emphasis on the fourth-estate to function as a safeguard against abuses of power as opposed to furnishing the press with an educative responsibility that demands it act as an informative force to sustain democracy.

So, what happens when a journalist is judged to have comported herself improperly? While the press strives to mirror the ‘truth’, it has always offered avenues for complaint and redress in an effort to manage public perception of its failures. From letters to the editor, corrections, and ombudsmen; critique originating from academia; and governmental forms of remedy such as libel suits and regulatory review, avenues for criticism are certainly well-established. Some of these practices are relatively new to journalism, while others are not. Letters to the editor have invited comment, critique or correction from the readers of newspapers for centuries (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001). Libel has been a legal recourse against the press for false comment even previous to the rise of the industrial press in the 19th century (Peters 2004). Mass communication rose as an academic discipline in the 20th century as a field largely concerned with critiquing the press (Schudson 1995). What these practices hold in common is that the criticism originates from an external source. Though response to the critique may play out within the media, all of these mechanisms involve externally-generated critique. Internal recognition of fallibility has not occupied a pre-eminent role across the spectrum of media critique.

This dovetails with the observation that the day-to-day craft of journalism rarely warrants publication as a news story in-and-of itself (Frank 2003). Yet there is a growing literature that asserts this tendency is changing, looking to the rise of a sort of ‘reflexive journalism’. And while this buzzword, reflexivity, may not have swept across journalism as it has in academia, there appears little doubt that it is now being practiced, albeit in impoverished form, by many within the industry.

Put simply, reflexive journalism is the journalism of journalism.⁵⁹ It is the practice of journalists turning the camera (or pen) on themselves. According to authors studying this, reflexive journalism is an emerging practice. Whether it serves as a boundary-maintenance exercise (Bishop 1999), an image-maintenance practice (Frank 2003), or a form of paradigm repair (Berkowitz 2000), there is little debate about its novelty.

When these authors speak about a rise in reflexive journalism, it seems unlikely they are referring to the practice of self-correction and self-instruction that is the hallmark of journalism schools, professional organisations and trade publications. Nor is it likely that these authors are referring to the long-standing practice of apologising for errors in public or being prosecuted in the courts for serious lapses. So what is so scintillating about reflexive journalism? What makes this practice appear noteworthy?⁶⁰ The few authors dealing with reflexive journalism, such as Becker (1996), Zelizer (1997), Bishop (1999; 2001), Berkowitz (2000), Matheson (2003) and Frank (2003), seem to indicate that the critique of media, by media, in media (and possibly for media) seems to be relatively novel.

However, if we take a historical perspective, the respectable press castigated ‘grub street’ in the 18th century and separated itself from the ‘yellow press’ in the early 20th century. In recent history, ‘heavyweight’ journalists have publicly sacrificed the tabloids on many occasions. So this is not new. Perhaps what we are witnessing is rather more precise – that certain journalists and certain programs are becoming self-reflective. Or perhaps what is

⁵⁹ This work on the journalism of journalism, as I prefer to call it, is generally spoken of in academia in terms of reflexive journalism, journalism self-critique and self-referential journalism. To put it generously, one could call this an emerging area of study. If we follow the line of thought commonly advanced, this is because the practice of, and belief in, a journalism of journalism is in its infancy within the industry.

⁶⁰ In trying to gain better purchase on what form a reflexive journalism takes, this is a central question with which to grapple. As much of the journalism of journalism is commentary from one news outlet on the performance of others in the profession (rather than commentary on itself), one can fairly ask: is this ‘reflexive’? If we view journalism as a profession, with reflexivity encompassing an introspective look at the practice of all its members, then perhaps we are witnessing the wobbly first steps an industry-based reflexive movement.

intriguing is that the mainstream, ‘respectable’ press has begun to criticise its fellow members and occasionally itself.⁶¹ What makes this ‘reflexive’ is that this form of professional self-critique originates within the media itself. It is not just a knee-jerk defensive stance spurred on by an external critique of the public or government.

In the articles featuring original research, the results seem to highlight this trend. One element that is noted is a growing tendency towards the writing of journalism on journalism, especially professional self-critique (Becker 1996). There appears to be a growing willingness in the mass media to critique other mass media outlets based upon adherence to the guidelines and standards of professionalism (Bishop 1999; 2001; Berkowitz 2000). Some shows on cable news, *The O’Reilly Factor* being a prime example as we will see in Chapter 5, avow to hold other journalists to account for poor reporting habits or the lack of coverage on a given issue. Studies of this phenomenon often speak of this self-critique as being a boundary-maintenance exercise, separating professional journalism out from less reputable tabloid methods and distinguishing the practices of individual reporters out from the habits of the pack (Bishop 1999; Frank 2003). Writers such as Bishop (1999); Berkowitz (2000); Matheson (2003); and Frank (2003) note that this journalism of journalism most often appears when a journalistic presentation evidently transcends the boundaries of professional practice. This is particularly evident in moments of media frenzy (Frank 2003), or, as Tuchman (1978) somewhat clumsily deems it, “what-a-stories”.

Frank (2003), along with a few other authors (see Becker 1996), also speaks to the emergence of the journalist within journalism coverage. Generally, this takes the form of journalists commenting upon themselves or the presence of their colleagues in setting the scene for a story, often related to so-called media circuses. An analogous development

⁶¹ Discerning between mainstream and alternative, what is respectable versus what is tabloid, is increasingly difficult as traditional dualisms are blurred in the broader news industry.

beginning in the mid-90s saw photojournalism increasingly place journalists within the frame. Previous to this, press photographers used to frame images exclusively on the ‘outside’ world or event (Becker 1996). Media presence is thus often no longer a sidebar to the story but part of the story itself. This trend within media organisations, many of which comprise the illustrious members of the journalism industry, impacts perceptions on the legitimacy of more involved reportage throughout the broader journalism field.

It also helps to demystify the practices of journalism and serves to ‘humanise’ the journalist. An excellent example of this is the BBC News “Editors’ Blog” launched in 2006. The purpose of this blog was to have various editors from the BBC “explain the editorial decisions and dilemmas faced by the teams running the BBC’s news service” (BBC 2006). Editors not only write entries about their decisions but interact online with the public in a much more informal and open forum than was possible with traditional ‘letters to the editors’. A slightly different editors’ blog was started by *The Guardian* in 2006, an official “blog of an inside observer, who will from time to time call on the editor and other editors of different sections of the paper to help explain to you how it works, how decisions are taken, who takes them” (Armstrong 2006). An effect of these actions is the embrace of a more active sense of involvement, perhaps not changing the rules of truth for how stories are told, but being more upfront in the role and opinions of journalists in crafting the news. This has an affinity with the posture of the cable magazine pundits to be discussed in Chapter 5, who claim to follow rules of truth in making news, but are often open about their involvement.

Yet it is difficult to delineate a ‘reflexive’ development. Exposés of unprofessional practices have appeared in trade magazines since the emergence of many of them in the 1960s – corresponding to a sharp increase in the rise of journalism students and schools (Schudson 1995). And journalism has long been its own interpretive community (Zelizer

1993). Berkowitz (2000) notes that media critique has also appeared, to a limited extent, in newspapers for the past few decades. Local broadcast news has placed the reporter in the middle of many a story since the 1980s (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999). One could also look to the emergence of news broadcasts dedicated to media critique, such as *Reliable Sources* on CNN, *Fox News Watch* on Fox News, *Inside Media* on CBC Newsworld in Canada, or recurring segments such as “Media Watch” on PBS’s *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, as recent additions to this reflexive movement.⁶² Yet sceptics such as Matheson (2003) assert that much of this is no more than a mundane reflexive exercise that serves to reaffirm the noble pursuit of objectivity as the professional ideal. The relative lack of ratings achieved by these programs seems to indicate that they are either ineffective at critique or present it in an unappealing manner. Another potential explanation would be that such critique is not something which generates a great deal of public interest, however, an interesting contrast to this is discussed in Chapter 6, as some of the success of *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* appears tied to a steady criticism of the journalism industry.

So while the reflexive movement may promote discussion of journalism within its pages and on its screens, it is unclear whether this substantively alters aspirations in line with the positivist rules of truth. In as much as there is some move away from the rhetoric of objectivity, in terms of a perfect ‘mirror of reality’, there is still much talk of being fair, accurate, balanced and impartial, highly rationalised goals that reflect the fourth-estate imperatives of the industry. The *Canadian Press Style Guide* (2002: 14) still states among its most important practices, to

Be impartial when handling any news affecting parties or matters in controversy. Give fair representation to all sides at issue. Stick to the facts

⁶² Interestingly, *Inside Media* has not broadcast since the 2004/05 season and the last segment of Media Watch aired May 2, 2006, leading one to suspect that while intriguing to media junkies, such shows are not necessarily popular with the general public.

without editorial opinion or comment. Reporters' opinions are not wanted in CP copy. Their observations are.

However, decisions based on opinion are of course made on an ongoing basis in the craft, which is unavoidable as 'true objectivity' is impossible. At the level of the journalist, interviews are edited down, quotes are selected, elements are paraphrased, and sources are screened. At the level of the editor, copy or entire stories are cut, certain stories are given preferential or lead status, and headlines, photos, graphics, and sounds are chosen to accent certain angles of the story.

This makes one question to what extent this self-referential journalism promotes the recognition, by journalists, of the inevitability (or influence) of their own subjectivity. Instead, it may simply shore up the professional appearance of journalism by positioning it as a respectable profession not only capable, but willing, to police itself. Just as doctors, lawyers and accountants must ensure that a certain standard is upheld, so too will journalists.⁶³ Yet while this may not be a full embrace of subjectivity – and accordingly a rejection of the claim to be objective guardians of public truth – what is innovative about a journalism of journalism is that it forces journalistic self-recognition of its presence in the construction of a story (a subjective process) while judging this presence against the loose set of norms, ethics and guidelines that constitute professional journalism (an objective concept). This reciprocal interplay, the inseparability of object and subject, is what is alluded to under the moniker of reflexive journalism.

In sum, the rise of reflexive journalism is an example of how the shifting conceptualisations of objectivity provide opportunities for new styles of reportage to appear. Previously concerned with 'just the facts', many eminent journalistic organisations now

⁶³ The differences between the type of professionalism practiced by doctors and lawyers, versus the quasi-professionalism of journalism, is covered in Abbott's (1988) *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*.

include the broader journalism landscape, and oftentimes their own products and journalists, within the stories they tell.⁶⁴ It is this emergence of news media within its coverage that seems to separate reflexive journalism out from previous journalism regimes (Frank 2003). According to Bishop (1999: 93), this narrative of reflection is becoming a routine. “Journalists may be trying to win back the trust of viewers and readers by showing their fallibility and ensuring readers that they are working diligently to improve their craft.” Journalism, framed in terms of a discourse about itself, has spread from academia and media organisations into the press itself (Becker 1996).

Conclusion

Concern and critique about the craft of journalism is nothing new, and industry-wide reflection upon its practices and procedures, its ethics and objectives, provide some of its most memorable and well-researched moments. However, what stands out about the past 25 years is the waning of certain objective ‘techniques’, and discourses surrounding both its possibility and desirability, within the industry. While the benevolent aims of objectivity may never have achieved industry-wide success (indeed, this is easy enough to observe historically), its rationalistic tenets have been the standard-bearer in journalism for much of the 20th century. Yet the dualisms that accompany objectivity – hard/soft, information/entertainment – are being blurred, not only in terms of actual practice but also in term of professional standards. Reflexivity and the increasing acceptance of a news of feeling alter how professional journalism is conceptualised, both for audience(s) and for the

⁶⁴ One of the earliest accounts I have found analysing this, in relation to the news, is Loshitzky’s (1991) look at media “self-reflexivity” in the Middle East. Loshitzky examines how a town hall meeting, conducted by ABC news as part of its week-long *Nightline in the Holy Land* special in 1988, expressly included the presence of the network itself as part of the story.

industry. Correspondingly, the rules for truth can be seen to alter somewhat, in that standard techniques to ‘achieve’ reality, such as being detached from both story and audience are being reconfigured within certain news organisations. The news, which has traditionally slalomed between educative and representative functions, increasingly seems to be news designed for you, which is not the same thing as designed to inform you (cf. Jurkowitz 2000). Such diversity finds its place with an increasing fragmentation of the marketplace, and an increasing emphasis on profitable news. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, journalistic integrity seems to be a somewhat malleable concept and trusted newscasts have a diverse number of presentational styles.

This chapter has sketched out a view of the journalistic field, noting some of the fundamental shifts over the past 25 years that have facilitated the possibility for a mainstream news of feeling to emerge. Whether such ‘popularisation’ or ‘personalisation’ (related transformations are referred to under a variety of monikers) of the news is beneficial or deleterious is contentious and different commentators have done a good job articulating both the positive aspects (see Sparks 2000; MacDonald 2000; Zelizer 2000, van Zoonen 2005) and the negative implications (see Bourdieu 1996; Hackett and Zhao 1998; Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999) of these developments. However, further ground can be made by re-theorising the foundation of these dichotomies, the misleading binary – hard news is rational, soft news emotional – that undermines emotion, relative to rationality, in analyses of how the journalism industry goes about ‘making news’. Another way to put this is that a broader understanding of journalism can be gleaned when we take a step away from the unstable categorical dualisms that are often attached to the normative ideals of objectivity (Joseph 2005). Thus incorporating a helpful analytic – the experience of involvement – utilised in the sociology of emotions provides much traction for this project, advancing the ability to

understand how a news of feeling attempts to find success. This process continues in the following chapter, which considers additional analytical tools and methodological guidelines that endow us with steadier footing as we go about exploring a news of feeling.

Chapter 4: Seeing Things Invisible – A Method to Vision

One of the great problems faced by sociologists is how to avoid falling into one or the other of two symmetrical illusions. On the one hand, there is the sense of something that has never been seen before. (There are sociologists who love this business, and it's very much the thing, especially on television, to announce the appearance of incredible phenomena or revolutions.) And, on the other hand (mostly from conservative sociologists), there's the opposite, "the way it always has been," "there's nothing new under the sun," "there'll always be people on top and people on the bottom," "the poor are always with us; and the rich too . . ." The already-great risk of falling into such traps is all the greater because historical comparison is extremely difficult.

Pierre Bourdieu, On Television (1998) – a methodological caveat about studying fluid cultural forms.

One eye sees, the other feels.⁶⁵

Paul Klee, Diaries (1914) – an elegant, if unscientific, sensorial observation.

The volume of words associated with sight is evidence enough that seeing is more than just light, coming through the cornea, imaged onto the retina, and carried up the optic nerve. Indeed, while this may be how the world becomes visible, this is not what is normally meant when we speak of vision. Nor does it encompass why we gaze fondly, glance suspiciously, leer suggestively, or watch intently. Similarly, how we hear is more than just sound waves, striking the eardrum, vibrated through the cochlea, and carried up the auditory nerve. How we sense and perceive goes beyond these complex neurological-cognitive processes to be interwoven with our social and cultural perceptions. To paraphrase Jonathan Swift, the art of vision is seeing what may be invisible.

This is why style, design, and aesthetic sensibilities are a concern of any audio-visual medium. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Madison Avenue culture, which brands products around metonymic images that suggest values like strength and patriotism, or

⁶⁵ In the original German, Klee notes "ein Auge, welches sieht, das andere, welches fühlt," the English translation of which appears in *The Diaries of Paul Klee (1964)* (Verdi 1974).

moods like romance and adventure, rather than a product's function or uses (Machin 2004). Similarly, broadcast journalism is not a collection of haphazard representations; the composition of typography, graphics, video, images, animations, sounds, and musical accompaniment is selected to help craft the 'reality' that appears on the screen. In this sense, the presentation of the news draws upon naturalised images and sounds – and the associations these bring forth – to form a coherent discourse that evokes meanings for the audience (cf. Barthes 1957; 1977). As Erikson (2000: 144) notes, the strategic use of visuals, “cue spectators’ emotive impulses, unspoken agreements, and cultural recollections.” However, within studies on the history of journalism, for both print and broadcast, such design considerations generally warrant only a passing mention (Cooke 2005).⁶⁶ Hence, this chapter looks at possible ways to rectify this, borrowing from approaches that go beyond the surface content of a text to hypothesise about the meanings, themes, associations, and rationales marshalled within.⁶⁷ In this sense, this chapter considers approaches that allow abductive inferences to be made about the emergence of a news of feeling, something which “requires a creative reasoning process that allows the researcher to discern relations and connections not evident or obvious – to formulate new ideas about the interconnection of phenomena” (Danermark and Ekstrom 2002: 93).

News is typically assessed in terms of its content and how this content is produced. Indeed the more established methodologies in journalism studies reflect this focus. For instance, ethnographic research investigates the inner workings of newsrooms (see Tuchman

⁶⁶ This is unsurprising when one considers that debate in fields with a more active theoretical bent, such as semiotics or linguistics, have lagged in assessing such fundamental elements of communication as typology (i.e. the association of certain scripts with notions of technicality, romance, etcetera), another example of the “inseparable unity” of visual communication, writing, and discourse (van Leeuwen 2005: 138).

⁶⁷ A dominant practice in media and communication studies is to subsume visual, aural, and written material under the composite term: texts. A text can be generally defined as “materially durable products of linguistic actions.” (Wodak 2001b: 66).

1978, Ericson *et al.* 1987); the propaganda model is a critical analytic that attempts to unmask how the media is manipulated by elites (see Herman and Chomsky 1988); and critical discourse analysis (CDA) focuses on uncovering the systematic links between (mostly-written) texts, discursive practices, and socio-cultural influences (see Fairclough 2003; van Dijk 2001). These approaches go beyond taking content at face value to look at the techniques, ideologies, and norms of journalism.

Yet these methods are more thoroughly developed for print rather than broadcast news and do not bestow a leading role to presentational style. Unfortunately, while techniques to investigate the process of compilation – making the news – are long established, the same cannot be said for techniques – let us call it styling the news – to investigate the impact of presentation (cf. Corner and Pels 2003). This is emblematic of a broader methodological concern for, as Tolson (1996), Wodak (2001a), and Helmers and Hill (2004) note, there is a paucity of approaches in communication studies that consider both image and text in harmony. Some have attempted to address this difficulty through ‘composite’ accounts that analyse the visual component of newscasts separate from the narrative – generally with a different analytic – and then attempt to merge these analyses (see Fairclough 2003; Tolson 1996). However, there have been “few systematic, large-scale, or cumulative studies of the specificity of visual media,” and this is a challenge faced by researchers with regards to the increasing breadth of media alternatives (Schroder 2002: 115). When dealing with current broadcast news texts, there exists a montage of image, video, narration, text (the ticker and banners) and the (often ignored) background and ambient sounds which researchers should consider in harmony. Many of these elements are also kinetic; motion adding a further element of complexity to the presentation (Hillner 2005). In

this media environment it is often insufficient to rely on a single method or analytic (van Dijk 2001).

Taking this under consideration, some academics (see van Dijk 2001; Jensen 2002b; Fairclough 2003) advocate blending perspectives to craft a workable methodology. By forming a sort of ‘analytic toolkit’ – techniques, concepts, and constructs that can be pulled out and applied as appropriate – what one does is marshal together ideas from approaches that dovetail with one another in terms of explicating how texts become organised and effective descriptions. This sort of ‘buffet’ approach offers great flexibility and coherence for the analysis of emerging media styles.⁶⁸ Instead of relying upon a cumbersome adaptation of an established analytic such as frame or content analysis, or utilising a ‘two-course meal’ tactic – i.e. CDA for the written material and semiotics for the visual component (see Fairclough 2003; Tolson 1996) – such an approach attempts a broader textual reading. This tactic endeavours to capture a sense of the textual ‘whole’, the *feeling* or *mood* of a broadcast as the analytic point-of-departure, rather than relying on exemplars to generalise outwards from momentary segments.

Born somewhat out of necessity, I propose to evaluate the empirical chapters of this dissertation by means of an eclectic textual analysis, rather than attempt a systematic and exhaustive classification (cf. Martinec and Salway 2005). As I shortly discuss, the word ‘method’ or ‘methodology’ often conjures up notions of a highly structured framework that one uses to analyse data. Frame and content analysis, for instance, do a fairly evident job of

⁶⁸ Flexibility can be thought of as the ease with which one can analyse different presentational forms (i.e. newspapers, television, blogs), genres (i.e. news magazines, current affairs, op-ed, hard news), styles (investigative journalism, voice of the people, window on government) and the blends and *mélanges* of form, genre and style. Coherence is the ability to analyse, concurrently, the interrelation between various textual elements including emotional posture, words, images, sounds, forms of expression, and so forth.

‘sorting things out’ (see Bowker and Star 1996), creating a classification system which facilitates comparison and analysis. While my approach lacks such ‘countability’, much like Barthes’ (1957) methodological epilogue in *Mythologies* or Dahlgren’s (1995) discussion of media in *Television and The Public Sphere*, this chapter crafts the lens and structure – an intellectual scaffolding – through which the following chapters are analysed. To do this, I borrow from semiotics, narrativity, frame analysis, visual rhetoric, sensorial communication, and the sociology of emotions. While I articulate different elements from each throughout the empirical chapters, it would be not be reflexive to claim that each of these is applied directly to my analysis but instead combine in a more malleable, though no less robust, theoretical and methodological lens. Instead of adopting an academically bellicose manner which in effect announces ‘this is narrativity’ or ‘this is semiotics’ every time I employ an insight directly from one these traditions, citations are offered but the reader is encouraged to interact with the text in a more seamless fashion. Although I am more workmanlike than Barthes (1957), I find his approach of explaining methodology in a separate section which then breathes (rather than announcing itself) throughout its empirical application to be appealing. I probably reproduce this approach somewhat, though in a much more formal manner. Yet in what amounts to a somewhat generic simplification, I will explain here that observations from semiotics, narrativity and frame analysis prove useful in terms of explicating how programs marshal established and atypical meanings, discourses, appearances, and themes to form a coherent brand. Visual rhetoric and sensorial communication build upon semiotics to help provide insight into the communicative impact that visuals and sounds convey within specific texts. And the sociology of emotions, as I have previously discussed, lends a fundamental re-conceptualisation – emotion as the

experience of involvement – which facilitates measured analysis of the rationales behind the crafting of these emerging forms of news and its stylistic embodiment within presentation.

If this seems confusing, it is likely because some of these traditions are often considered theoretical perspectives while others are deemed methodological approaches. This relates to a broader debate about the idea of methods or methodology as a concept (Jensen 2002b). In academic work there is difficulty in distinguishing between methodology – epistemological concerns about how we generate knowledge and the corresponding theoretical framework that acts as a lens of interpretation – and techniques – the specific procedures by which researchers generate, measure, and assess – and the implications of this division. At its most practical level, ‘method’ can be considered in terms of the basic techniques utilised to gather data, from interviews, to sampling, questionnaires, archival research, ethnographic research, and focus groups. Building upon this are various concepts that are marshalled to ‘make sense’ of this data. In this regard, such notions as typologies, coding, genres, meanings, assumptions, metaphors, themes and practices are frequently invoked when studying the media. Expanded analytical constructs, such as discourse, ideology, signs, and narratives function to contextualise both data gathering techniques and the concepts that marshal data; broadening the discussion outward from the specificity of the study. It is at this stage that one can begin to speak of a comprehensive methodology – consisting of the techniques, strategies, and concepts used to gather data and ‘sort’ it, and the theoretical leanings, constructs and assumptions influencing how one goes about ‘doing’ this – the totality of designing, gathering, sorting, subsequent analysis and conclusions.

A simple definition that embraces these ideas is that methodology can be thought of as “a theoretically informed plan of action in relation to an empirical field.” (Jensen 2002c: 258) This builds on the notion that data only becomes information through theory, analysis

and interpretation (Jensen 2002b). Many recent studies have shied away from methodological rigidity, if not openly embraced creativity, combination, and appropriation (cf. Fairclough 2003; cf. van Dijk 2001). Postmodern thought has broken down many grand narratives and rigid methodological structures (Jensen 2002a). Helmers and Hill (2004) note that poststructuralist tendencies focus on amalgamating techniques; the fusion of methodological cuisines is embraced and often lends to more flexible interpretations and compelling accounts. The purpose of this chapter is thus to outline the theoretical and methodological lens which I have crafted to help facilitate the explication of presentation that occurs within a news of feeling.

Floating to the Surface – The Deeper Meaning(s) of Texts

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. . . . [Myth] organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.

Roland Barthes, Mythologies (1957) – a consideration of the taken-for-granted status of everyday meaning.

At the entrance to Copenhagen's harbour sits The Little Mermaid, arguably the Danish capital's most iconic image. Yet it is her benefactor's factory, the Carlsberg brewery, which serves as the primary destination for many a young tourist in Copenhagen. The tour itself would be a relatively nondescript precursor to the quaffable (and more importantly free) ale at tour's end were it not for a quartet of five-metre tall granite elephants in full armoured regalia that stand guard at the entrance to the factory. The elephant gate – one for each of the founder's four children – is memorable not so much for its size as for what adorns the

sides of each elephant. For in this tolerant Danish capital, it is certainly jarring to find a swastika etched into the sides of all four sculptures.

As the tour guide explains, the swastika is an ancient symbol that carries connotations of good luck and was prominently employed at the turn of the 20th century in many Western societies. Indeed, along with the elephant, the swastika was one of the earliest logos for Carlsberg beer. However, the usurpation of the swastika by Nazi Germany and the associations this brings forth largely shifted this positive and popular embrace of the symbol. The point is that this cross with arms at right angles has taken on a variety of meanings that go beyond its purely visual representation. And it is these types of contestable, mutable, and shifting meanings, associations, and significations those who perform textual analysis attempt to unpack, elucidate, and explain.

Whether it be a colour (the American greenback), song (Mendelssohn's *Wedding March*), shape (the Absolut vodka bottle), or symbol (the swastika) such sounds, images, graphics, symbols, songs, icons, and texts conjure up a variety of meanings based upon the context in which they are employed. For instance, while the colour white evokes notions of purity in Western European cultures, in China it is the colour of mourning. So if the significance of something as universal as colour is insecure, it indicates that we need to be careful in assessing what characteristics of communication we share in common and who can recognise when communicative regularities are contravened (Kress and van Leeuwen 2002).⁶⁹ This sort of approach applied to journalism helps one explicate why the flowery script from a Valentine's Day card would never be employed by networks as part of war reportage, or why country music would never be used to introduce a report on poverty in American ghettos.

⁶⁹ One of the more evident examples of this is the degree to which one can appreciate visual irony – juxtaposition, reversal, and hyperbole rendering meaning incongruous to the image – as in the 1973 image *Mowing the Lawn, Northern Ireland* where a soldier, poised for action, gun at the ready, is backgrounded by a woman in an apron mowing her lawn (Scott 2004).

Of course, as we see in Chapter 6, the exception to this is satirical news, which bends and manipulates these understandings to both entertain and critique.

The challenge with textual analysis is thus to pull apart a representation to explicate the host of meanings that are naturalised in its presentation (Barthes 1957). For television news this means paying attention to structure, “The layout of information on the page/screen – including: grids, white space, and modular design – that form a visual framework,” and graphics, “The pictorial representation of information, including: photographs, charts, maps, illustrations, information graphics, composite graphics, and animated sequences” (Cooke 2005: 29). One needs to consider these visual elements in conjunction with the various discursive devices – generally descriptive, narrated, or expository – that take these representations and draw them together into a coherent news story. Accordingly, while the method advanced in this dissertation is unabashedly eclectic, it would be fair to say that semiotics and narrativity form the bedrock of the empirical interpretations in subsequent chapters.

Semiotics takes visual cues as a primary point of analytical departure, with a corresponding set of concepts to read visual imagery, a critical component of news style and presentation. Indeed, it has been argued that the ease of capturing dramatic visuals, including the availability of catalogue and stringer footage, often separates the newsworthy from the mundane (Jacobs 1996). The increasing pervasiveness of computer graphics and doctored or photoshopped photos within journalism is further indication of the necessity of an analytic geared to the visual for this project. Narrative analysis, while typically associated with non-visual forms of communication, is nonetheless beneficial for this project as it focuses upon the themes of texts and how these themes are created and sustained. An understanding of

narratives, consequently, facilitates an exploration of how the news is held together (cf. Desrosières 1991; Somers 1994).

Hence, we can view semiotics and narrativity as approaches that emphasise how moods are created and sustained by textual representations, be they novel, comic book, film, or, as in our case, broadcast news. As Hartley (1982) notes, it is this overriding tone or feeling that helps distinguish and brand journalistic products. And while the creators of such programs aim for consistency and clarity of brand, it is important to note at the outset that this crafted tone or feeling is not fixed but rather has ‘meaning potential’. The frame of reference for each individual varies, based upon a number of cultural and social factors, from political outlook, to personal experience, education, geographic location, nationality, and so forth. Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that the image banks relied upon by many journalism outlets categorise their holdings with a range of possible search terms, rather than a specific caption that anchors each image’s meaning (Machin 2004). As such, texts have a host of possible meanings which are context-dependent and audiences may resist the intended communicative purpose of a segment or experience disharmony with the overall posture and style of a news product.

In this sense, the focus of this chapter is not to develop a methodology that focuses upon the reception and contemplation of the audience, which is highly varied and contestable. Instead, I am interested in developing an approach that facilitates the exploration of something far more stable – how the news is crafted, following certain rules of truth, with a specific experience of involvement in mind – to understand how a news of feeling challenges the prevailing wisdom about how journalists should make the news. Accordingly, the lens generated in this chapter, in combination with the observations about changes in the industry outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, provides the foundation to describe the

composition of a news of feeling and how this differs from a news of fact (i.e. greater empathy and personalisation, presence of ‘non-cool’ emotions like anger, and so on.) It also affords the analytic tools to analyse how specific elements of each text create this distinction (i.e. frequent interruptions of interviewees, debate being utilised rather than questions, conversationalising and informalising tendencies, greater apparent involvement on behalf of the journalist, a welcoming of involvement on behalf of the audience, and so forth) but maintain an overall sense of being ‘news’. As such, it is important to recognise what is both new and familiar within these emerging styles of journalism and focus on how they alter the craft (cf. Williams and Delli Carpini 2000). Successfully delimiting these elements is thus less about exactitude as intersubjective clarity. Without this clarity over what emergence is being analysed, semiotics and narrativity fall prey to being little more than ‘matters of opinion’ as opposed to debates over ‘matters of degree’.

Meanings and Myths – Semiotic Understandings of the News

One aim of this chapter is to provide the methodological footing that gives insight into how one goes beyond a simple recounting of the content of a broadcast text to understand what helps underlie the success of the format. This sort of analysis helps to draw out how a news product distinguishes itself in a competitive market; going beyond the idea of news angles or biases to explain how certain presentational styles appeal to different audiences – how they shepherd understandings that speak a common language and thus go beyond being a mere conduit of information to become a form of textual exchange.

In other words it is one thing to say *The O'Reilly Factor* appeals to an older, conservative, Republican demographic because it is a right-leaning broadcast.⁷⁰ But this leaves us lacking a more thorough insight into how it conveys this while crafting the necessary façade required to imbue a sense of truth. This, in Colbert's zeitgeist capturing term, is the *truthiness* of such newscasts. Rather than simply tell the news to its audience, a news of feeling relies upon a host of naturalised images, symbols, inside jokes and expressions to construct a less formalised rendering of the accounts of the day. And each broadcast is an utterance in an ongoing dialogue (Knox 2007). While this sort of analysis avoids claiming there is a universal truth, it helps illustrate how games of truth are performed, illustrating how preferred readings arise based around the interrelation between compositional elements of the news form (what is selected), the intended audience (where and for whom is it presented), and is presentational style (how is it presented) (cf. Tolson 1996). Put differently, the presentation of journalism is rarely arbitrary or accidental; the producer of a text has a hand in 'overcoding' particular paths of interpretation while 'undercoding' others (Jacobs 1996).

For broadcast news, a single newscast can contain thousands of referents. The task then, is to marshal these observations to give a broader sense of the feel of a program. Rather than exhaustively catalogue and enumerate all relevant elements, a daunting and thankless undertaking, the job of the researcher becomes to explicate their solidarity (Barthes 1957; 1977). Of course, such meanings are protean, malleable and shifting; as a researcher attempting to pin-down meaning is akin to shooting at a moving target (Dahlgren 1988; Morris 1998). Yet such an approach is more nuanced than rudimentary analyses that merely

⁷⁰ This sort of analysis could be performed by considering the type of guests which frequent the program, considering this alongside the mode of questioning and critically analysing the discourse of the host, while incorporating statistical measurements of audience demographics.

describe news as having a certain political leaning, or a certain entertaining tendency, and then go about collecting examples to reinforce these assertions.

This sort of textual analysis, typical of much cultural studies, finds its roots in semiotics. Semiotics is originally a linguistic development, specifically Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's investigation into what he termed semiology in the late 19th century.⁷¹ His concern was with the way that signs⁷² are integrated into social life. Roland Barthes' (1957: 11) *Mythologies*, strayed from this strict linguistic focus to consider the ideological functions of signs, what he termed the "decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*." Barthes considered the linguistic (language-object) relationship to be significant only to the extent that myth got hold of language to create its own metalanguage, or mythology. Diagrammatically,⁷³ he represented the relationship like this:

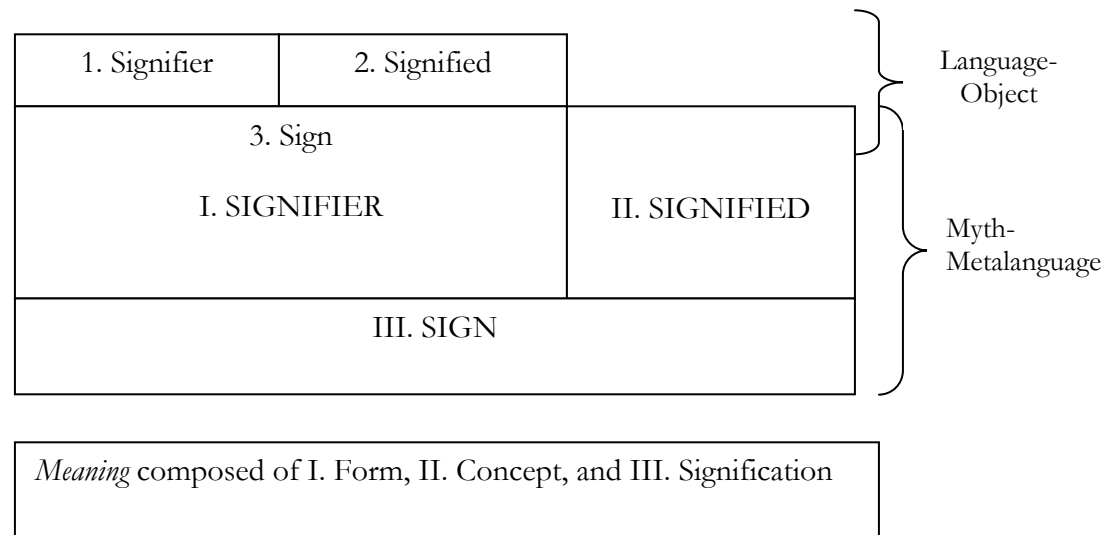


Figure 4.1. Barthes' Framework to Analyse Myth.

⁷¹ Working at a similar time, American Charles Sanders Pierce was primarily concerned with what he termed semiosis, the formal logic of sign systems (Chandler 1994).

⁷² As a general explanation, signs are composed of two elements, the signifier and signified. The signifier is the form of the sign, the signified the concept to which it refers. So in an example often cited, the signifying word T-R-E-E signifies the concept of wooded objects with leaves. The greater point is that T-R-E-E is not inherently a word with meaning; it could just as easily be A-R-B-R-E (its French equivalent). It is only through the sign, the signification of tree that comes from the association of the signified and signifier, that we can make sense of things.

⁷³ Adapted from Barthes (1957) diagram and subsequent discussions, pp. 111-115.

Barthes' treatment of Saussure's work was to move on to a second-order derivative, the sign of signs, more commonly referred to by him as the system of metalanguage, and commonly appropriated by authors since under the notion of myth or discourse.⁷⁴ Barthes (1957: 115) justified this shift away from a focus on language,⁷⁵ noting,

When he reflects on a metalanguage, the semiologist no longer needs to ask himself questions about the composition of the language-object, he no longer has to take into account the details of the linguistic schema; he will only need to know its total term, or global sign, and only inasmuch as this term lends itself to myth.

The technique, when viewing say, an advertising image, thus becomes to “skim off” the different messages the image contains by considering the “floating chain” of signifieds that underlie the signifiers (Barthes 1977: 33, 38). Making this observation relevant to broadcast news involves introducing three more terms employed by Barthes (1977): anchorage, illustration, and relay. The verbal and written communicative action in a broadcast text serves to either anchor the floating chain of signifieds (think of the caption under a graphic), relay to-and-fro (think of animated charts and graphs), or illustrate a dialogue (think of the images of Baghdad to elucidate ‘shock and awe’) in an exchange between the visual and the linguistic.⁷⁶

Barthes appears to place greater emphasis on language superseding (anchoring) the visual, something which has been criticised on the grounds that it ignores the multimodal nature of texts (see Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). Yet the more general point, which bears repeating, is that the various elements of a broadcast are more than just their constituent

⁷⁴ In later works, Barthes utilises the term discourse somewhat interchangeably with myth.

⁷⁵ This shift from language to myth proves liberating. By freeing himself from accounting for the technical detail of the linguistic schema, Barthes used the idea of myth to delve into subjects as diverse as wrestling, steak and chips, washing powder, and political rhetoric. His purpose was to show how meaning crept into everyday life and even the most commonplace objects (Barthes 1957).

⁷⁶ Martinec and Salway (2005) note that Barthes felt relay was rare in fixed image-text relations and was more prevalent when dealing with moving images.

elements, be they imagery, sound, or text. The elements are dynamic and different elements enjoy moments and patterns of relative dominance over the others. As Chandler (1994) notes:

The codes involved in such textual systems clearly cannot be considered in isolation: the dynamic patterns of dominance between them contribute to the generation of meaning. Nor need they be assumed to be always in complete accord with each other – indeed, the interplay of codes may be particularly revealing of incoherencies, ambiguities, contradictions and omissions which may offer the interpreter scope for deconstructing the text.

A coherent textual analysis thus requires drawing upon the set of naturalised images, sounds, graphics, captions, etcetera that are composed in a text, the associations that are brought forth by the forms, the concepts that are signified, and any inconsistencies or ambiguities in the presentation.

Since Barthes' *Mythologies*, numerous academics have adapted his semiotic system of analysis, especially within the field of cultural studies (Chandler 1994). In communication studies, there are generally two senses or understandings of the term 'mythology' (Tolson 1996). The first is the idea that mythologies allow individuals to read connotations into texts. This borrows on a common distinction made by Barthes when discussing image, namely the connotative and denotative aspects of a text. Put simply, the denotative element of a sign corresponds to what is made direct and obvious, it relates to the form or signifier. The connotative element of a sign is what is inferred or associated from the denotative image; this relates to the concept or signified (Larsen 2002). This interpretation often reads mythologies as the "common stores of meaning which can be raided by advertisers and consumers alike" (Tolson 1996: 7). We can think of the ability of many people across diverse cultures to recognise certain corporate graphics (the Nike swoosh, the McDonald's 'M'), and law and order symbols (red typically indicating prohibition, as with no-smoking signs or 'do not enter' warnings on public transit systems) as potentially symptomatic of an increasing global visual

literacy or vocabulary (Siber 2005). Lule (2001: 19) utilises this sense of myth to argue that “the daily news is the primary vehicle for myth in our time.”⁷⁷

The second sense frequently marshalled in communication studies is the idea that media texts do not only rely upon meaning systems but cause meaning systems to become taken-for-granted common sense. The implication of this is that when one needs only the generic to convey meaning, a lot is left out. Such representations of reality devolve into scenes of the ‘typical’, leaving us with a set of stylised, iconic depictions of far more complex processes (Machin and Jaworski 2006). As these meanings become ‘natural’, the purpose of media studies is to ‘de-naturalise’ the familiar. In terms of visual media, a recent movement that follows this second sense of mythology is visual rhetoric. The visual rhetorics perspective is similar to semiotics with one notable difference: while semiotics concerns itself with the meaning of material objects, visual rhetorics is concerned with an object’s persuasive character. Visual rhetoric analyses “photographs, drawings, graphs and tables, and motion pictures,” allowing scholars to explore, “the many ways in which visual elements are used to influence people’s attitudes, opinions, and beliefs.” (Helmets and Hill 2004: 2) The idea behind this is that the response to visual artefacts is based on common experience and general knowledge, rather than technical education.⁷⁸ One of the more obvious examples of this in journalism is the prominent use of visual metaphors in political cartoons (El Refaie 2003). This is the ‘invisible’ nature of visual arguments, similar to Barthes’ notion of the taken-for-granted.

⁷⁷ While noting that not all stories are mythical, many being straight news stories based on professional conventions and formula, Lule identifies seven ‘master’ news myths: the victim (news as tragedy), the scapegoat (news as investigator), the hero (celebratory journalism), the good mother (human interest), the trickster (subjects of mockery and contempt), the other world (international news), and the flood (disasters).

⁷⁸ Foss (2004) notes that a lay-audience, those without training in areas like design, art history, aesthetics, and marketing, is generally assumed in visual rhetorics; I employ a similar assumption in Chapters 5-7.

Insight into how visual ‘invisibilities’ are structured is a task undertaken by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996; 2002) in their consideration of visual grammar. This analytic, adapted by authors such as Holsanova *et al.* (2006) to interpret the (culturally-specific) semiotic layout and reading paths of newspapers, observes that Western readers prefer general information to be at the top of the page, important information to be centred rather than on the periphery; paratexts (such as sections, headlines, and captions) to guide their reading entry-points, with framing devices (like lines and arrows) to guide their reading; and that they scan the semiotic space before entertaining a more detailed reading of the text. Even something as overlooked as typography can have a weak grammatical effect in terms of guiding the eye and structuring visual space and order (Stöckl 2005). The broader point is that news readers not only rely upon a set of culturally-determined symbols, icons, images and so forth but on learned expectations of the visual grammar of communication.

Extending this logic, we can assume that modern broadcast journalism relies not only on meaning creation but on sensorial communication; the sensory expectations, metaphors, and experience of consuming news texts (cf. Howes 2006). This nuanced conceptualisation understands the aesthetics of news texts not merely in terms of personal taste but as a disposition to sense acutely (cf. Bull *et al.* 2006). Admittedly, the use of the senses may not be as evident for watching news as it is for activities like clubbing, culinary experiences in foreign countries, or strolling through a botanical garden. Yet rumination on the senses helps shed light on a rather crude and pejorative interpretation of media sensationalism –

news content that capitulates to the trivial or emotional – to broaden our appreciation of the perceptual experience that comes from watching news.⁷⁹

Themes and Storytelling – Narratives and the News

One could call journalism an industry of narratives.⁸⁰ In fact, how the news takes raw materials and transfers them into stories is largely based on narrative structures and conventions. It has been argued that journalists actually come to see the world through narratives, a sort of ontological narrativity (Jacobs 1996). They frequently refer to their articles and pieces as stories and many of the common industry terms – lead, background, angle, developing and breaking news – refer to the idea of sorting events and characters into some sort of narrative arc with a beginning, middle, and end. One of the more cynical maxims of the profession is “never let the facts get in the way of a good story.” (Fulford 1999: 18) Chouliaraki (2006: 269) describes the typical narrative categories used in televisual news, noting,

Whereas *description* is the ‘this-is-what-we-see’ narrative type that uses language referentially to put words onto and illustrate visual action, *narration* introduces elements of story-telling proper, such as opening and closing conventions of the ‘once-upon-a time’ type; finally, *exposition* carries the evaluative element of the voiceover, implicitly articulating a moral stance vis-à-vis the visual text, such as ‘isn’t-this-horrific, extraordinary or sad?

As such, an awareness of narrative techniques is critical if one want to understand how journalists go about making the news.

⁷⁹ Sensorial communication has roots in cultural anthropology, which frequently employs an ethnographic method (Howes 2006). Despite adopting a different approach, raising this literature is important for, as we will see in Chapters 5-7, an awareness of sensorial impact is often discussed by news producers.

⁸⁰ While all journalism can be viewed in terms of its narrative structure this should not be confused with Narrative or Literary Journalism, which is a form of news blending fact with fictional devices (Aucoin 2001).

Narratives have the effect of making the unique or unusual appear familiar, to give order and flow to otherwise disparate events (Tolson 1996). For instance, Wells' (2007) analysis of the use of photos of children in wartime notes that these visuals are a powerful rhetorical component of the common narratives of war, such as liberation or suffering. Fulford (1999: 6) notes, "a story is always charged with meaning, otherwise it is not a story, merely a sequence of events."⁸¹ Building on this perspective, the 'style' of a news product is like the smooth public face that hides the work and disagreements that underlie production. In this respect, one can think of stylistic schemas as the presentational veneer of a narration. And while semiotics gives insight into how the visual elements of news presentation bring about meaning, narrativity looks at how the narrative structure contributes to the coherence of the overall text. The accompanying performative style of the talent, in terms of the facial and vocal cues that accompany each segment, is largely tied to this overriding narrative archetype (Jacobs 1996).

Narratives are often associated with another sense-making analytic for television news, namely the notion of frames. Put simply, the contention of frame analysis is that news can either direct or deflect attention, towards or away from, elements of a story (Pan and Kosicki 1993). As Knight (2001) notes, frames generate more or less standardised news scripts, which enable the communication of specific themes. The order and length of stories on a typical evening newscast is one of the most evident framing devices, which quite unabashedly indicates the newsworthiness, and by association, importance, of various

⁸¹ The format of journalism greatly determines the degree of storytelling possible. While magazines can slowly weave a news narrative, the reports from wire services such as Reuters and AP generally reproduce an 'inverted pyramid' narrative of facts-first journalism.

issues.⁸² However, some argue that the emphasis of frame analysis on preferred readings (see Entman 1992) affords a discourse dependent view of frames that detracts more malleable communicative forms. Cottle and Rai (2006), for instance, utilise the notion of communicative frames to draw out the global commonalities of television news – the stylistic structures of communicative action that are common across cultures (see figure 4.2).



Figure 4.2. *An Example of News Frames* (Appears in Cottle and Rai 2006: 171).

While the specifics of each frame are less relevant to this project, the insight that there is a stock of common news forms underlies the observation that emergent forms of journalism may not be entirely ‘new’. Rather, if we accept this premise, it is more judicious to assert an emergent news of feeling re-shifts the forms of communicative action in terms of what basic formats are drawn upon to structure the stories they tell. The presentational style of the broadcast is thus the contemporary veneer on a pre-existing frame. What emerges is not so much ‘new’ journalism but a re-configuration of the communicative frames (i.e. a potentially

⁸² For newspapers or online news, the visual ‘ambiance’ that frames importance is largely achieved by font size, position on the page or screen, and use of colour (Knox 2007). Since broadcast news has a discrete story progression, as opposed to an assemblage of stories, temporality, in terms of position in the line-up and length of segment, is one of the more evident grammatical techniques to indicate salience and value.

greater reliance on an aesthetic/expressive architecture rather than an informational architecture) used to tackle various subject matters. When an emergent style of news takes hold, this is what allows it to appear, Janus-faced, both new and familiar; simultaneously forward-looking while true to tradition.

A Cautionary Note about the Experience of Involvement

Cultural texts, such as television programs, film, advertising images, and newscasts are “frozen moments in a continuous stream of social interactions, which embody the values and meanings in play within public culture in a particularly clear and compact way” (Deacon *et al.* 1999: 7-8). Yet such texts are not a closed system; they are polysemic texts with an array of possible readings (Dahgren 1988). For example, a report on gay marriage on *The O'Reilly Factor* on Fox News may seem like ‘committed’, ‘righteous’, and ‘passionate’ journalism to many evangelical republicans whereas the exact same text could feel ‘bombastic’, ‘vitriolic’ and ‘hateful’ to a gay rights democrat. This text, with the same exact images, and same exact content, has completely different meanings (and it could be argued is thus a completely different report) based on the different experiences of involvement being evoked in the audience.

It is thus important to distinguish experience of involvement as an individual feeling versus experience of involvement as a compositional part of presentation. To put it in Barthes’ terms, the emotional *style* of the report is the one of the signifiers – it composes the form of the report along with the modes of expression, visual cues, sounds and so forth. However, the emotional *response* of the audience is part of what is signified – it is the concepts that are evoked upon based upon the ‘tags’ of the form. This can obviously vary substantially based on the personal history and socio-cultural location of each viewer. The key in

incorporating the experience of involvement into a semiotic analysis is to demarcate, clearly, the styles of the form while acknowledging that the response to the text can vary greatly. Thus one gets away from a phenomenological attempt to read feelings into a text, focussing instead upon the more manageable task of delineating the assumptions and rationales that go into crafting the news. The overall *tone* of a program is based on the signification of the text in terms of broader cultural expectations and its location in the journalism field. By considering secondary sources such as interviews with journalists, producers, and noted media analysts, one can get a sense of what the intended experience of involvement is for a specific product or genre of news – what is assumed about an audience and its intended connection to the news – and then consider how this assumption influences the experience of involvement that is marshalled in the presentation. This perspective becomes quite relevant when we evaluate how the seemingly endless possibilities of signs and significations come together into a coherent assemblage every broadcast.

Demarcating the Boundaries – Sampling a News of Feeling

In the fall of 2001 I entered a Master of Journalism program, my second class, coincidentally, falling on September 11th. Part of becoming a journalist, I quickly learned, was not just producing news but consuming it; for invariably the question one was asked when introducing oneself as a journalist took the form of: ‘What do you think of (news story X)?’ Being unaware of an even relatively minor story was an embarrassing gaffe that one soon learned to avoid. In this sense, journalism is the quintessential jack-of-all trades profession; the knowledge base one is expected to possess being quite broad and expansive. The basic morning ritual of reading (at least) one national paper (back to front), and skimming a prominent international website (BBC being my personal preference) was quickly ingrained.

One professor, who was a strong proponent of that which was local, held twice-weekly news quizzes on the *Ottawa Citizen*, to reinforce the importance of staying generally informed and to provide ‘sound’ journalistic habits.

Although I have since switched to an academic life, some of these habits remain. Perusing the BBC website is still as much a part of my morning ritual as brewing a pot of strong coffee. Reading a paper, sadly, has been relegated to weekend luxury. Yet the intervening years have seen me substitute the daily ritual of reading the paper with less effort-intensive forms of news consumption. Unlike my morning forays on the BBC website, these acts of consumption are first-and-foremost leisure activities, it being serendipitous that they simultaneously provide me with knowledge about the events of the day. Whether it be winding down my day with *The Daily Show*, or having the less-than-dulcet tones of Lou Dobbs accompany my dinner hour, I have found alternatives to the newspaper that inform and entertain in chorus.⁸³

Initial forays into research found that I was not alone in this popularisation of alternative conduits to the ‘news’. Not only did *The Daily Show* interview prominent political figures (Bill Clinton, Pervez Musharraf, Desmond Tutu), an oft-cited 2004 Pew Research study found that 21 per cent of 18-29 year olds cited Comedy Central’s *Daily Show* or *Saturday Night Live* as their primary news resource for the U.S. presidential campaign. Only 23 per cent named the traditional network newscasts. This shifted from 9 and 39 per cent, respectively, in 2000 (AP 2004). Lou Dobbs, along with other leading pundit-journalist hybrids like Bill O’Reilly on Fox News, or Chris Matthews on MSNBC host the top- or second-rated shows on their respective news networks.⁸⁴ At the same time that national and

⁸³ I should note that *The Daily Show* frequently parallels my own perception of American media and politics while watching *Lou Dobbs* satisfies a fascination I have with jingoistic, incredulous reportage.

⁸⁴ Ratings and demographic information can be found at <http://www.mediabistro.com/tvnewser/>.

local news were suffering ratings downturns, cable news was increasing in terms of viewership (PEJ 2006). This trend has gained traction in popular culture as well. For instance Dobbs graced the cover of *The New Yorker* in 2006 ('Mad as Hell'), Stewart appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in 2004 ('Good News: Jon Stewart Beats the Real Thing'), while Stewart and Colbert appeared together on a 2006 cover ('America's Anchors'). Bill O'Reilly has had four books make it to the top of the *New York Times* non-fiction best seller list.

In recent years, it seems that a self-proclaimed 'fake' news anchor in Stewart and a former tabloid-news anchor in O'Reilly have become the media darlings of the U.S. political left and right. As these programs mimic (though do not usurp) many of the traditional functions of national broadcast news (interviewing prominent political figures, covering the major national issues of the day, reporting on atypical human interest stories, etcetera) I am not sure whether one would call these programs journalism, in the traditional sense, but the parallels are undeniable. This is the genesis of this project, which gradually developed into an urge to explore these emergent forms of 'news' to see if mainstream broadcast news displayed any similar characteristics to these alternatives. This rationale underlies the choice of empirical categories – cable magazines, satirical, and traditional network news – examined in the following chapters. The specific choices in each category, *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Lou Dobbs Tonight* for cable magazines, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* for satire, and the *CBS Evening News*, reflects each program's prominence and popularity on their respective networks and in their respective genres of news.

In terms of sample size and period, I decided to take an in-depth look at two weeks' worth of episodes from each show. Specifically, the weeks of May 7th to 11th and May 14th to 18th, 2007 were recorded, a period which falls during the Nielsen ratings' May sweeps.⁸⁵ The

⁸⁵ May sweeps ran from April 26, 2007 to May 23, 2007.

logic behind this selection was that May sweeps is one of four periods each year that help determine local advertising rates. My assumption is that ‘branding’ is likely to be most evident during this period. It is important to note that I do not draw my conclusions and analysis simply from this period. Rather, this sample is selected to provide consistent examples of the broader conclusions I draw based on academic theory, popular accounts and interviews, and personal interpretations arrived at over a much longer acquaintanceship with each show.

In addition, I decided that if my working argument was that a news of feeling was emerging within American broadcast journalism, it would be beneficial to offer some sort of temporal contrast which allows one to see whether we can identify any tendencies in network newscasts over the past 30 years. In this regard, through the Vanderbilt television news archive, I obtained four episodes: March 28th, May 14th, November 5th and November 21st, 1979, of the *CBS Evening News*. The choice of the year and the dates were not coincidental. Foremost, during this period Walter Cronkite, the archetypical ‘cool’ journalist, was the anchor of the broadcast. The purpose of acquiring footage from Cronkite’s term as anchor was to see what, if any, changes had occurred in network news over this near three-decade period.⁸⁶ The choice of dates was based on having a diversity of content to see how Cronkite handled days with a diverse tone of stories. The November programs came during the height of the Iran hostage crisis and offered a potentially interesting parallel to the current U.S. presence in Iraq. The May program considered the early days of Presidential primaries, something in common with the 2007 period examined, while the March broadcast contained a variety of international and economic stories. While it is one thing to say that there are emergent forms of journalism, a rather trivial observation in light of the rapidity of cable and

⁸⁶ An interesting corollary which also led me to choose the *CBS Evening News* was the significance of hiring Katie Couric in 2006, the first woman to ever solo-anchor a network evening newscast.

satellite expansion during this period, it is quite another to investigate what, if any, pressures this has placed on networks to adapt elements from a news of feeling into their broadcasts.

To paint a more complete picture how these news of feeling alternatives have attempted to craft an experience of involvement, and what relation, if any, this has with potential alternations in network news, these textual analyses were placed in a dialogue with the creators and producers of each program. While interviews with the hosts were not deemed to be feasible, adequate secondary sources were readily available to address this shortcoming. The first step in generating this material was a broad internet search utilising the names of the hosts and titles of each program. A similar Lexis-Nexis search spanning the duration of each broadcast from the year before its inception was also undertaken. A substantial number of articles which contained first-person interviews with each host, or guest articles written for various publications, were discovered and consulted in this manner. These interviews proved quite revealing and the most telling excerpts appear throughout the empirical chapters, adding significant context to my empirical analyses and impressions based upon being acquainted with each program over a lengthy period. These discussions were found in publications ranging from magazine articles in *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone* and other prominent publications, to radio interviews on NPR, newspaper interviews, television appearances and other similar sources.

Additionally, books authored by Bill O'Reilly and Lou Dobbs, *Culture Warrior* and *The War on the Middle Class*, respectively, had recently been released and contained a number of insights into the rationales behind each program and their views on the state of the journalism industry. An unauthorised biography of Bill O'Reilly, *The Rise of Bill O'Reilly* by Marvin Kittman, also contained lengthy interviews with O'Reilly and his musings on the

journalistic craft.⁸⁷ Books by Stewart and Colbert, respectively titled *America (The Book)* and *I Am America and So Can You*, were less useful as the former is a satirical textbook and the latter is written in the Colbert character's voice, tackling issues to "fix America". While Colbert rarely appears out of character in interviews since his program became successful, a few lengthy interviews about his views on the state of journalism and the significance of this vis-à-vis *The Colbert Report* were located. Stewart's opinions were far easier to uncover through a variety of interviews in the secondary sources previously described. Couric has similarly spoken at length about her goals for the *Evening News* and responded to some of the changes enacted under her stewardship, both in interviews and on the program's website. Cronkite's views were primarily found in his memoir, *A Reporter's Life*, and interviews upon his retirement, though much of this does not appear in Chapter 7. Much of it was deemed repetitious as it mirrors the 'traditional' objectivity perspective, already discussed at length in Chapters 2 and 3.

While mainstream secondary sources were easy to locate, academic accounts were far less forthcoming. A Cambridge database search of the Arts & Humanities Citation Index, British Humanities Index, Communication & Mass Media Index, Communication Abstracts, Communication Studies, CPI.Q, E-Journals, Humanities Abstracts, MLA International Bibliography, Political Science, Social Sciences Abstracts, Social Sciences Citation Index, Sociological Abstracts, Sociology, and the Worldwide Political Science Abstracts was conducted using the same search terms and timeframe (one year before inception) as the internet and Lexis-Nexis searches described in the previous paragraph. *The Colbert Report*, *The O'Reilly Factor*, *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, and the *CBS Evening News* with Katie Couric were not a

⁸⁷ This was originally agreed to be an authorized biography but O'Reilly pulled his support for the book at the last minute when Kittman refused to remove details of a sexual harassment lawsuit involving the Fox News host.

primary focus of a single academic article. An updated search in mid-2008 indicated the appearance of three peer-reviewed articles on Colbert, and one on O'Reilly, while the other three programs were still not represented in the academic literature.⁸⁸ *The Daily Show* had approximately five relevant articles published about it when I first examined satirical news, but the 2008 update illustrated a rapid rise in the final few months of 2007 alone. This enlargement continued throughout 2008, and if one considers conference papers, it seems *The Colbert Report* is also subject to increasing academic attention. It seems safe to say that *The Daily Show* is no longer as innovative and novel an academic research site as when I first began investigating it in 2006. *The Colbert Report* may soon replicate this trend as academics draw further links between the emerging television genre of satirical news and the literature previously written on the significance of satire and parody. Irrespective of this emerging stream of literature, this dissertation can be seen to take a novel approach in analysing these programs by looking at how they craft an experience of involvement. However, for the remainder of the contemporary research sites academic attention is still impoverished, and as such, much of the analysis which deals explicitly with these broadcasts in the following chapters falls either to myself or to media critics from publications like the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*.

As was outlined in the introduction, the following empirical chapters utilise these samples to provide concrete examples of how a news of feeling has emerged over the past 25 years and why such programs are not only popular, but at times critically acclaimed and highly influential sources of news. The first of these chapters, focussing on cable news, outlines the rise of the cable magazine and some of its most prominent practitioners, which

⁸⁸ The first draft of the chapters on satirical news and cable news were completed by fall 2007, the chapter on network news by spring 2008. I assume that academic investigation will not remain so meagre.

happen to be among the most successful programs on cable news. This chapter has been chosen as the initial foray into a news of feeling as such programs provide a clear example of the ‘newsiness’ of cable – influential programs which feel like and are said by those who watch them to be trusted forms of news – but which are more evidently ‘involved’ than their network counterparts. The chapter which follows looks at the rise of satirical broadcast news, an even clearer departure from network newscasts and another evident example of a news of feeling. Shows like *The Daily Show* have the interesting honour of being frequently on the receiving end of much critical acclaim; lauded as a form of journalism that can have greater effectiveness than traditional broadcast sources for getting at the ‘truth’. The final empirical chapter looks to what is arguably one of the pillars of American broadcast journalism, the *CBS Evening News*, to see what, if any, changes the last few decades have witnessed and whether this traditional news of fact has incorporated elements from an emergent news of feeling. For while Cronkite’s trademark sign off, “And that’s the way it is” may live on in journalistic lore, it does not mean that network news remains the way it was.

Chapter 5: No-Spin Zones – The Growth of the Cable Magazine

I don't *have* to be a culture warrior. I could make millions doing straight anchor work or just writing books. But I'm on a mission, one that I'm going to define for you throughout this book, and the mission is important. At this point, all the conflict has been worth it. *The Factor* has changed many things in America and put a horde of bad guys on the defensive and some out of business. Of course, some Americans see *me* as the bad guy. They are entitled to their opinion. But after ten years of unprecedented success, millions of you understand that my programs are trying to fight the good fight. You know the culture war is serious and needs to be fought honestly and effectively. We do that on *The Factor*. And we do it with no fear.

Bill O'Reilly, Culture Warrior (2006) – explaining the rationale behind his aggressive posture.

Each night, as I conclude my nightly broadcast on CNN, I have the gut-sick feeling that we have chronicled another twenty-four hours in the decline of our great democratic republic and the bankrupting of our free enterprise economy.

Lou Dobbs, War on the Middle Class (2006) – noting the necessity of his broadcast for the challenges that face America.

Belief is a concept often misconstrued as faith. Both may be associated with religion, yet faith implies an absence of the possibility of proof. Belief, meanwhile, implies a disputable position based on the accumulation of fact. Often, it is said that fervent religious supporters act with 'blind faith', failing to interrogate or question doctrine, especially in conjunction with its more controversial applications. But we never speak of 'blind belief'. Deeply held, certainly. Misguided, more often than one cares. But never blind. And harnessing belief – as opposed to professing faith – is the staple of opinion and editorialising in journalism; hypotheses, convictions, and suppositions weaved in with rhetoric and fact.

Customarily, objective journalistic regimes seek to clearly delineate between belief and fact, op-ed and reportage (Tuchman 1978; Hackett and Zhao 1998; Schudson 2001; Ward 2005). Yet there have always been areas of journalism where such divisions are blurred and broken. Sports reporting, for instance, frequently goes beyond boxscores and league tables to combine the facts of the game with opinions on performance. Style, arts, and travel

sections are similarly unencumbered by the need to keep opinion at arm's length from fact. Ostensibly, this is because these foci are considered part of a sphere of leisure; unbiased knowledge of them is not crucial in terms of fourth estate aspirations. While these spheres willingly mesh fact with opinion, so-called 'hard' news generally tries to maintain 'objective' boundaries.⁸⁹ However, a new breed of television journalism, the cable magazine, sees hosts who appear quite comfortable sauntering between the roles of reporter or source, journalist or pundit, often appearing to wear all these hats at the same time.

What is significant about these developments is not that 'belief' has crept into reporting. Nor is it necessarily that being open with one's beliefs is any greater of an impediment to 'truth' than attempting to bury them below the surface. What is novel, however, is the wilful intertwining of the two in such a brazen fashion. For viewers, rather than having to engage in a minimal level of contextualisation, as with traditional network broadcasts, such cable magazines often 'pre-digest' the facts to impute stance and significance. Instead of presenting a mere summary of the events of the day, such a news of feeling in effect tells you what you should or should not believe, how you should feel about it, and what actions you should take in response. Sources are no longer the only ones offering interpretation, with the anchor intervening on the audience's behalf to leave little doubt over the definitive word. And with the archetypical cable magazine, as an audience member, one is put in a very George Bush-esque black and white world, where you either are with the anchor, or with their opponents (cf. Kitman 2007). No longer just the expert mediator between sources and facts, the belief-driven journalist becomes a personality. They become news in their own right.

⁸⁹ Some newscasts, BBC World for instance, issue advisories to 'acknowledge' when their journalists are going beyond reporting to editorialise.

Of course, one finds echoes of such personality-driven journalism throughout its history. A.J. Liebling practiced a ‘modest’ style of journalism from the 1930s to 1950s which,

required letting the reader know that the reporter was not godlike, as the old-time religion of “objective reporting” presumed, but merely another frail human, maybe too woefully human to be entirely trustworthy. This meant establishing the individual reporter’s presence in the material, in violation of the old rule that the reporter was to be read, but never sensed. Liebling was almost always present in his reporting. It is a way of treating readers with respect. A glimpse of the party who is doing the reporting helps the reader judge how far he can be trusted (Baker, 2004: 12).

The modern cable magazine anchor also takes cues from Edward R. Murrow’s commentaries on *CBS Evening News* and reports on *See It Now*, seen to possess honesty and integrity without shying away from trenchant opinion. There is also a hint of Barbara Walters, whose success is based not only on the status of her interviewees, but on her emotively-driven interaction with them.

The relative novelty of these programs is evidenced by the fact that there is not an established term to describe them. My terminology, ‘cable magazine’, suggests an affinity with news magazines such as *60 Minutes* and *20/20* which have been around for decades; long-form journalism, typically an hour in length, that consider events in greater detail than the network newscasts. These shows also have a semblance of the Sunday-morning talk show, like *Meet the Press*, with prominent political interviewees and roundtable discussions on politics. A hint of the traditional newscast is found in these broadcasts via reports that are virtually indiscernible from stories that would be filed on the *CBS Evening News*. Political debate shows like *The McLaughlin Group* or *Crossfire* lend their embrace of conflict and volume. There is an occasional flavour of tabloid magazines such as *A Current Affair* or *Entertainment Tonight*; salacious stories of sex, celebrity, crime, and violence. And of course, the format, purpose, and style of each program are heterogeneous, making it quite challenging to classify this emergent genre of news. A more accurate description might be ‘cable talk-magazine

newscasts’, but this noun-train is an awkward construction. As such, I have conceptualised them quite literally as the print news magazine adapted by the cable networks; short news briefs, longer social stories, interviews, and opinion pieces brought together in a predictable and consistent format.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the popularisation of this genre as the staple of the cable news networks. Originally envisaged as a continuous update of the news, the image of cable news has increasingly become these highly stylised and personalised hour-long shows. And this directive is embraced at the top. The President of CNN, Jonathan Klein, notes that the inclusion of personality sees, “the passions of our journalists show up on television rather than being left on the newsroom floor” (Swarns 2006). The C.E.O. of Fox News, Roger Ailes, remarks, “Cable is an edge business ... Brian Williams [anchor of the *NBC Nightly News*] has no edge, so he sits there and mumbles in his nice shirts and can’t get through” (Auletta 2003). These perspectives challenge fundamental assumptions about how journalists should make the news – and it seems to have met with success.

Books by the hosts of the two shows focussed upon in this chapter, Bill O’Reilly and Lou Dobbs, have ascended the *New York Times* bestsellers list just like the ratings for both shows have risen sharply. As stated previously, a 2005 Annenberg Public Policy poll found that 40 percent of Americans identified Bill O’Reilly as a “journalist” as opposed to only 30 percent who could identify Bob Woodward (Lester 2005). And the issues raised by Dobbs often find traction within the Beltway (Anderson 2006). Yet the posture of these shows flies in the face of accepted journalistic wisdom, as when the Associated Press notes, “By definition, the act of informing the members of such a society is the act of separating fact from opinion. People want to make up their own minds, and a reporter who seems to be trying to do it for them quickly loses credibility” (Kalbfeld 2001: 27). Reflecting this, while

The O'Reilly Factor and *Lou Dobbs Tonight* may have audiences that are enamoured with the host, their position within the journalistic community is more contentious.⁹⁰ A similar Annenberg poll to the one above found only 11 percent of journalists identified O'Reilly as "somewhat close" to being a journalist while 93 percent said Woodward was "somewhat close or very close" (Lester 2005).

Yet at a time when network newscasts continue to experience falling ratings, the success of the cable magazine provides an intriguing contrast. They are no longer second-class journalistic citizens: the rise of the cable magazine has led to comparisons between the stalwarts of American journalism and the influence of these cable journalist-pundits. For instance, O'Reilly's feuds with others in the media, references to him, the relentless promotion of *The O'Reilly Factor* on Fox News, and the nightly parody of him in *The Colbert Report*, prompted *The New Yorker* to declare that "O'Reilly dominates cable news as much as Walter Cronkite dominated network news during his heyday, if not more so" (Lemann 2006). As such, despite inferior ratings, and a sense of scepticism and unease within the journalism industry, it appears successful cable hosts have nonetheless been elevated to a position alongside their network news counterparts.

Feeding the Beast – The Rise of Cable News

We're all worried about the arithmetic. They're worried about their ratings; I'm worried about the number of voters that are going to vote for my guy. ... They're trying to make their newscast the most exciting and visual and the least wordy and thoughtful. If they can do that they may get the highest ratings. There's nothing wrong with that, just admit it. Just say, "Folks, we're in show business and these candidates are in show business. You are the audience, and everybody is trying to get to you and entertain you. We'll give you whatever you want, because we're all in the business of selling." The thing that I object to is these journalists running around saying that Roger Ailes is doing something different from what they're doing.

⁹⁰ Many industry pieces have questioned the practice, style and professionalism of both Dobbs and O'Reilly.

Roger Ailes, Chairman and C.E.O. of Fox News, All the News That's Fit to Sell (2004) – in his pre-Fox days, explaining the congruence between his job as a political advisor and the goals of journalism.

He says, she says journalism is a poor substitute for the investigative groundwork, analysis – and yes, opinion – that aims to offer a non-partisan, independent reality. The truth is seldom fair and balanced, and rarely captured by simply balancing a Democratic view against a Republican view. I have no interest in being objective in my practice of journalism if objectivity can only be achieved through neutrality. I'm never neutral on any issue that affects the common good, our national interest, and the working men and women of this country.

Lou Dobbs, War on the Middle Class (2006) – railing against a mainstream journalistic style he feels is ineffective and passé.

Fox News is on daily display all over the world 24/7, and that power blunts the S-P [secular-progressive] jihad big-time.

Bill O'Reilly, Culture Warrior (2006) – speaking to the balancing effect of Fox against what he feels is a predominantly liberal media.

In the 1980s and 90s, NBC's Thursday night line-up, dubbed "Must See TV", had a string of popular sitcoms. From the *Cosby Show* to *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, and *Friends*, NBC dominated the Nielsen ratings each Thursday from 8:00 to 10:00 p.m. ABC attempted to control Friday evenings with its "TGIF" line-up. In 2001, CBS attempted to break NBC's dominance by moving their two highest-rated programs, the reality show, *Survivor*, and the crime-drama, *CSI*, to Thursday evenings. The point of such strong line-ups was to dominate timeslots, a habit-building relationship where audiences set aside time to watch their favourite shows. When it comes to news, certain timeslots are equally entrenched in the viewing patterns of audiences, and are 'appointment' viewing. National newscasts fall from 6:30 to 7:00 pm in the evening, while local news occurs between 6:00 and 6:30 p.m. and 11:00 to 11:30 p.m. As such, news serves to bookend the prime time program grid and partitions the shift from prime-time to late-night programming. Viewership of national news is a matter of preference and choice for all these newscasts run opposite one another. From 6:30 to 7:00 p.m., CBS runs its *Evening News*, NBC has its *Nightly News*, while ABC counters with *World News*

Tonight.⁹¹ Twenty years ago, to miss this half hour meant to miss the nationally-televised news of the day. Yet with the introduction of cable news, network news ceased to be the sole daily broadcast journalism option.

At a time when people are working longer and more diverse hours, a 6:30 to 7:00 p.m. program has greater potential to conflict with one's job requirements or the commute. Enter cable news, which provides continuous updates and covers the news as it breaks. Cable news, which first came to prominence in North America when CNN launched in 1980, now includes Fox News, MSNBC, CNBC, CNN Headline News, CBC Newsworld, BBC World, and Bloomberg Television among others. While the first ten years of this innovation met with limited success, the 1990s ushered in a new era with CNN's ongoing coverage of both the OJ Simpson trial and the first Gulf War leading to a rapid increase in viewership (Hodgkiss 2006). Even previous to this, events such as the student protests in Tiananmen Square or the fall of the Berlin Wall gave a sense of the potential impact of a continuous, real-time, broadcast news outlet. The political impact of this shift towards instantaneous and saturated news coverage is encapsulated in the theory of a so-called 'CNN effect', which posits that the new globalised communications environment accelerates government analysis and demands a faster tempo of response (Brookings 2002). And not only does cable news have a political effect, it has an economic effect. Cable news organisations are tremendously profitable enterprises (Auletta 2003). The events in the late 80s and early 90s, which established CNN as a major player in an increasingly globalised mediascape, inspired other networks to launch all-news options to compete in this novel and unexpectedly lucrative genre (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999).

⁹¹ The titles of the three network broadcasts shift from time-to-time, generally based around a change in host. For instance, ABC recently re-branded its broadcast *World Tonight with Charles Gibson*, while the official title during the Peter Jennings era was *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*. In everyday vernacular, these newscasts are commonly referred to without the anchor addendum.

The staple of cable news is threefold: ‘news on demand’, up-to-the minute coverage of the latest headlines and breaking news; ‘crisis coverage’, uninterrupted coverage, continually updated and on the scene, ranging from the significant (Hurricane Katrina, Asian Tsunami) to the trivial (the death of Anna Nicole Smith); and the prime time cable magazines, programs that rely heavily upon personalities and conflict and serve as the ‘appointment’ programming for these networks (Auletta 2006; PEJ 2007). While the audiences for these cable magazines are not up to the level of the network broadcasts, there is no doubt they occupy a prominent position in the journalism landscape (PEJ 2006; 2007).⁹² Many of the personalities that host these broadcasts, such as Larry King, Anderson Cooper, and Bill O’Reilly, have become celebrities in their own right, appearing on *Oprah*, being discussed on shows such as *Entertainment Tonight*, and in publications like *People*. And while this is mere speculation, it seems these journalists have become prominent for different reasons than previous ‘news of fact’ counterparts such as Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, or Dan Rather. While the big three of Brokaw, Jennings and Rather came to prominence for epitomizing the ‘hard’ news archetype – fair but tough, intrigued yet detached – these newer news celebrities have gained status by practicing a far more ‘involved’ presentational style. These programs amplify the emergence of a ‘two-way’ genre of exchange between anchor and reporter that has appeared on newscasts over the past decade, further ‘conversationalising’ reporting and lowering the expectations of serious reportage (Cameron 2004). Asked to explain the success of Fox News, O’Reilly feels it is attributable to it being consistently more stimulating, daring, entertaining, and plain “interesting to watch” than its traditional network counterparts (Auletta 2003; O’Reilly 2006a).

⁹² The most popular show on cable news, Fox News’ *The O’Reilly Factor*, draws an average just over 2 million viewers per night, compared to an average of 9.5 million for NBC’s *Nightly News*

As such, one cannot separate the rise of the cable magazines from the rise of the cable networks. As the appointment programming for the cable news networks, these programs are less reliant on the news cycle than programs like *The Situation Room*, anchored by Wolf Blitzer (CNN) or *The Fox Report*, anchored by Shepard Smith (Fox News) – the cable equivalents of a news of fact, replicating to a closer degree the form and style of the network newscasts.⁹³ Rather, the magazines are built around cultivating an audience that is concerned with what interests the host, as opposed to world events that inform the broadcast (see Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999; PEJ 2007). The most prominent of these shows, *The O'Reilly Factor*, *Hannity & Colmes*, and *On the Record with Greta* on Fox, and *Larry King Live* and *Anderson Cooper 360°* on CNN compete directly with the entertainment-based prime time schedule of the national networks and represent the highest viewership for the cable networks outside crisis coverage when audience numbers spike dramatically.⁹⁴ The exceptions are *Lou Dobbs Tonight* (CNN) and its Fox News counterpart, *Special Report with Brit Hume*, which both appear between 6:00 and 7:00 p.m., placing them in direct competition with network newscasts.

The personalities who host these shows are the faces most often associated with the networks: Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity and Brit Hume for Fox; Larry King, Lou Dobbs, and Anderson Cooper for CNN. And it is these cable magazines which act as the flagship programs for each network – and by association – embody the characteristics outlined in their respective slogans: 'The Most Trusted Name in News' (CNN); 'Fair and Balanced' and

⁹³ It seems no small coincidence that these shows, despite attempting to be the 'news of record' for each cable network, do not compete directly with their network counterparts, instead airing between 7:00 and 8:00 p.m.

⁹⁴ MSNBC's flagship shows (*Hardball with Chris Matthews*, *Scarborough Country*, and *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*) have never achieved the same level of viewing as their CNN or Fox News counterparts. Since 2004, 8 of the top 10 rated cable news shows air on Fox (the nightly 11:00 pm repeat of *The O'Reilly Factor* is the only show to consistently appear twice on the list). See PEJ (2006; 2007) and Inside (2007).

‘We Report, You Decide’ (Fox News); and ‘A Fuller Spectrum of News’ (MSNBC).⁹⁵ The two considered in this chapter – *The O’Reilly Factor* on Fox and *Lou Dobbs Tonight* on CNN – offer an interesting comparison not only because they are the top shows on their respective networks, but because Dobbs is in competition with the networks’ newscasts while O’Reilly competes against their entertainment programming.⁹⁶

What Factors In? – Typical Format, Recurring Segments, and Guests

No longer is the American public a captive audience, and no longer will the folks settle for an expressionless recitation of the news. With the advent of the Internet and round-the-clock cable news, the audience quickly knows the basic facts of a story. But often along with those facts comes instant spin and contradiction. Informational fog develops, leaving busy Americans in need of context. They want to know how the journalists they trust feel about things that are important to their lives. The news consumer is almost desperate for someone to define the truth of the matter. Thus, the good old days when the Brinkleys, the Cronkites and even Tom, Dan and Peter could simply introduce stories in measured tones are coming to an end. The audience for dispassionate TV news is shrinking; the demand for passionate reporting and analysis is on the rise.

Bill O’Reilly, Chicago Sun Times Editorial (2003) – upon the death of David Brinkley, detailing the need for ‘involved’ anchors.

As Fox News reminds its viewers throughout the day, *The O’Reilly Factor* is “The #1 Show That Dominates Cable News.” It’s no wonder they do this; according to Roger Ailes, *The Factor* accounts for over one-tenth of the Fox News Channel’s revenue (Kitman 2007). This dominance is not constrained to cable news; O’Reilly has penned four non-fiction books that reached the top of the *New York Times* bestsellers list and co-authored a non-fiction children’s book in 2005 that was a top seller. His *Radio Factor* is one of the top 10-rated talk radio

⁹⁵ Fox has also utilised the slogan ‘The Most Powerful Name in News’, a seeming counter to the CNN slogan, while MSNBC has experimented with ‘The Place for Politics’.

⁹⁶ *The Factor* is consistently the top-rated show on cable news, generally by 33 per cent over its nearest rival. The cumulative ratings of the CNN, MSNBC, CNBC and Headline News during this timeslot do not equal O’Reilly’s numbers. CNN has put 10 different shows up against *The Factor*, MSNBC, 13 (Kitman 2007). *Lou Dobbs Tonight* recently topped CNN’s ratings, yet traditionally *Larry King Live* is its top-rated show.

programs in the U.S. and he was placed on the Forbes 100 list of the most influential celebrities in 2006 with earnings estimated around \$9 million per year.⁹⁷ A divisive figure, O'Reilly has also spawned books written specifically about him, something usually reserved for journalists upon their retirement.⁹⁸ As we will see in the following chapter with Jon Stewart, the influence of O'Reilly seems to stretch far beyond what one would expect from a show drawing between 2 and 2.5 million viewers per evening.

Yet while the influence of O'Reilly may have the taste of overnight sensation, his background far pre-dates his days as controller of the so-called 'No Spin Zone'. O'Reilly was a broadcast reporter for over 20 years before landing his role with the launch of Fox News in 1996, debuting his *The O'Reilly Report* which was re-titled the following year. During previous stints with CBS and ABC news, O'Reilly picked up two Emmy awards for local reporting. However, it is his role as host of the tabloid magazine *Inside Edition*, from 1989-1995, which is prescient of his current incarnation as cable news' most (in)famous personality. Covering crime, haranguing those who disagreed with him, O'Reilly's role as anchor introduced mainstream America to this loud, imposing (O'Reilly stands 6'4") figure who would meld this act with his journalistic background to create the *O'Reilly Factor* persona (cf. Lemann 2006). As O'Reilly (2006a: 3) himself notes, "*The Factor* concept is very simple: Watch all of those in power, including and especially the media, so they don't injure or exploit the folks, everyday Americans. Never before in the United States had a television news guy dared to criticize

⁹⁷ The only other journalists on the lists were Dianne Sawyer (#78) and Katie Couric (#62). O'Reilly placed at #76 behind other 'Talking Heads' who made the list such as Oprah Winfrey, Howard Stern, and David Letterman. He dropped off the 2007 list in which Barbara Walters (#75) was the only journalist included.

⁹⁸ The highly critical include *Sweet Jesus, I Hate Bill O'Reilly*, written by the operators of a web site with the same name and *The Oh Really? Factor*, by a contributor to Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR). O'Reilly participated in interviews for *The Man Who Would Not Shut Up: The Rise of Bill O'Reilly*, but pulled his support for the book when the author included details about a 2004 sexual harassment scandal.

other journalists on a regular basis.” Thus, it comes as no surprise that the focus of *The O'Reilly Factor* is squarely on its involved host.

The first image we are treated to each evening is O'Reilly himself, looking straight into the camera, leaning forward to project himself outwards to his audience as he intones, “*The O'Reilly Factor* is on. Tonight...”. At this point a graphic of the show's title appears, sweeping away to reveal short video packages and titles, punctuated by a whooshing noise between each, which serve as teasers for each evening's broadcast. Having teased us with three or four items, we return to O'Reilly, who sweeps his arm around, a serious expression on his face, as he points at the camera to declare, “Caution! You are about to enter, [raises eyebrows, intonation] *the* no spin zone.”⁹⁹ At this point, O'Reilly smiles before continuing, “*The Factor* begins; Right now.” The posture of this famed ‘no spin zone’, as McChesney (2003: 7) notes, is that

all the B.S. and hot air that politicians and hustlers try spew before the American people to mask their naked self-interest will be exposed for the tripe it is. O'Reilly claims to slice through the crap and reveal the truth to the masses. As one watches this lover of truth slay his victims on a nightly basis, one is to be reminded of the plain-talking, straight-shooting classic American hero, a veritable Abe Lincoln from a Long Island log cabin.

As Kitman (2007: 200), whose biography is supportive of O'Reilly notes, this “is a brilliant Orwellian conceit – black is white; peace is war; entertainment is news – since it is actually all spin. ... The difference is that it's all O'Reilly's spin.” And right from the outset, one has a pretty good idea where O'Reilly is going to focus his sights.

The warmth and confidence of O'Reilly's welcome stands in stark contrast to the mood created in the opening teasers, which typically give a sense of threat and injustice. On

⁹⁹ Originally, O'Reilly informed his audience that they were about to enter, “a no spin zone”. One suspects, as a greater number of ‘tell-it-like-it-is’ cable anchors have appeared on the scene, O'Reilly decided to switch to this definite article to emphasise his top-rated, as well as pioneering, status of this particular news style.

May 7th for instance, the first teaser informed of a “Far-Left Frenzy.” As O’Reilly went on to explain, “The far left continuing to run wild [photos of Sean Penn, Rosie O’Donnell, and George Soros flash across the screen] and a shocking new poll to prove it” (Factor 2007a). The next teaser, “Paris to Prison” showed an image of the heiress as O’Reilly asked frustratedly, “will young people finally get the message?” At this point, a computerised graphic of prison bars slammed across her photo. On May 14th, the first teaser promised a “Vermont Confrontation”, another in a series of ongoing segments over ‘Jessica’s Law’, with a *Factor* producer confronting a Vermont congressperson with the question, “Why aren’t you protecting the children against child rapists, instead you’re passing bills that protect transsexual rights” (Factor 2007e). This juxtaposition of threatening information with a confident host is also subtly reflected in the videos that accompany each package. While each video is bordered by the capital ‘O’ shape that dominates the computerised montage that follows, at times the ‘O’ thickens and lines are added, the effect of which is a target focussed upon the images being displayed (see figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1. Opening Teasers from *The Factor*.

The opening title sequence following these teasers is quite short, lasting only about 15 seconds; a fast-paced, visually stimulating, red-white-and-blue creation of continually swooping stripes and a rotating capital letter ‘O’. The tag line of the show, ‘No Spin Zone’,

halts the ‘O’'s movement, superimposed with a cattle-branding-like effect at the end of the sequence. During this progression, background music plays which is reminiscent of latter portions of the theme for the 1980s police drama, *Miami Vice*, remixed in a style evocative of network news theme music. As it builds to a crescendo, the mood which is set is almost a meld of the news and police crime genres – excitement, seriousness, and law and order (cf. Bull 2001). The tempo of this music increases throughout the introduction, giving a sense of mounting importance before we return to O'Reilly in studio. At this point, he smiles and delivers a pleasant, “Hi I’m Bill O’Reilly. Thank you for watching tonight” (see figure 5.2).



Figure 5.2. Opening Following O'Reilly's Declaration, "Caution! You are About to Enter The 'No Spin Zone'."

The segment which follows these pleasantries is always the “Talking Points Memo”, a commentary on a social issue or recent event. Appearing in split screen (see figure 5.3) O'Reilly's remarks in this segment are definitive of the “No Spin Zone” posture which acts as both tag line of *The Factor* and carriage of O'Reilly. Unsurprisingly, Conway *et al.* (2007), use this segment to generate the empirical data that is the foundation of their study into O'Reilly, the sole peer-reviewed article discovered to date to focus upon *The Factor*. Their content analysis of this portion of the show counts the frequency of certain words, and the instances of these per minute, starting from the analytic point of departure that the program uses techniques more closely associated with propaganda, such as the use of fear and

construction of good versus evil, than with journalism. While these conclusions seem somewhat accurate, unfortunately, this promising line of inquiry neglects to consider the mannerisms, broader themes, or presentational styles within this segment which are arguably crucial to its popularity. The role of this short segment in relation to the other segments of the hour-long broadcast is similarly ignored. As such, their conclusions on O'Reilly have the feel of the commonly tread path of counting journalistic failings rather than considering these alongside elements that lend credibility or attempt to craft a connection with his audience, an emphasis this dissertation tries to avoid. As such, while Conway *et al.* (2007) effectively point out contentious elements of this segment, they miss much in terms of the nuance, journalistic validity, and appeal of his program. For instance, one such observation noted by Hart (2003: 30) is the frequency with which O'Reilly goes beyond observations in this segment to embark on "crusades", giving instructions and imploring action by his audience.¹⁰⁰

The irony is that while this segment is the one which most clearly replicates op-ed journalism, O'Reilly is far more circumspect with his use of personal pronouns in this section than in other segments of the broadcast. Specifically, he reifies "Talking Points", speaking in the third-person, as in 'Talking Points disagrees' or 'Talking Points is concerned'. He is also at his most calm and 'professional' during this segment, harkening back to the commentary of Edward R. Murrow. This 90-second segment often segues nicely into the next segment, "Top Story" which is the portion of the show most likely to dovetail with the lead stories on network newscasts. However, this is no guarantee, as days without a dominant story are likely to see O'Reilly cover issues that are not on the national radar, especially if these are exemplary of his pet projects. As with the Memo, "Top Story" may simply cover the latest

¹⁰⁰ Some of these include: declaring boycotts (French products upon France's refusal to enter the Iraq War); avoiding media organisations he is trying to keep 'honest' (the *New York Times* and NBC news are frequent targets), or contacting politicians he feels need to be reprimanded.

development in one of O'Reilly's ongoing social concerns, the most prominent of these being child sexual predators, left-wing media, or the 'culture war'. The difference is that "Top Story" sees Fox News analysts and personalities interact with O'Reilly, often engaging in a non-confrontational debate (Factor 2007e; i).



Figure 5.3. *Working Through the Nightly Talking Points.*

The remainder of the show maintains this steady format. The "Impact Segment" is the third segment where O'Reilly brings on guests to look at law and order, natural disasters, government decisions, and issues that have a bearing upon U.S. citizens.¹⁰¹ From here, the show transitions to a set of middle segments, interchangeable in terms of order, which do not appear on a nightly basis. These include "Unresolved Problem", which considers issues O'Reilly perceives are not receiving adequate media attention; "Personal Story", where a person in the news is invited to recount their experience, and "Factor Follow Up", which operates as the title would imply.

During this middle portion, *The O'Reilly Factor* intersperses recurring segments featuring correspondents. "Mondays with Kirsten and Michelle" sees Michelle Malkin, a right-wing pundit and occasional guest host of *The Factor*, and Kirsten Powers, her left-wing

¹⁰¹ For instance, May 7th focussed on the "Twister Tragedy" in Kansas, May 11th looked at radio shock jocks, and May 16th considered the political fallout from Michael Moore's trip to Cuba (Factor 2007a; e; h).

counterpart, debate an issue with O'Reilly. Supposedly confrontational, the tone is closer to a pleasant disagreement between friends (see figure 5.4). “Fridays with Geraldo”, sees a former talk show, now Fox News host, discuss issues with O'Reilly in a tone that ranges from mutual-appreciation to back-and-forth shouting; “Miller Time” allows Fox News contributor and former *Saturday Night Live* “Weekend Update” host Dennis Miller to provide comedic commentary; while “Weekdays with Bernie and Jane” witnesses media analysts Bernie Goldberg (right-leaning) and Jane Hall (left-leaning) engage in media criticism.



Figure 5.4. *Genial Debate on The Factor.*

The final third of the program returns to a consistent format. “Back of the Book” is a feel-good segment that replicates the kicker often run at the end of network newscasts: from the recurring “Great American Culture Quiz”, which pits two Fox personalities against each other in a quiz that harkens back fondly to an image of a white-picket fenced, neighbourhood BBQ, America, or the similarly nostalgic “American TV Icon”, to unique segments such as “Nudist Emergency?” (Factor 2007i), which considered naturalists attempt to recruit the younger generation. The “Back of the Book” sees a less intense, more spontaneous O'Reilly (see figure 5.5). The penultimate “Most Ridiculous Item of the Day” segment looks at an event or issue O'Reilly finds absurd, while “Viewer Mail”, ends each broadcast. Before flogging memorabilia that can be bought on his website, O'Reilly ends the

show with a pleasantry, often self-deprecating, that instructs his viewers not to act in a certain manner (i.e. curmudgeonly) or adopt a certain tone or style of correspondence with him (bloviating), for, as he generally notes, *Factor* viewers should ‘Leave that to [him]’, it’s ‘[his] job.’



Figure 5.5. *Happy Talk with Fox Personalities Steve Doocy and Martha MacCallum.*

For those who have not viewed *The O'Reilly Factor* on a regular basis, clips of O'Reilly's famed outbursts probably first come to mind (Kitman 2007). Yet his performance is a lot more subtle and nuanced than such clips incline one to believe. As is generally acknowledged (see Auletta 2003; Gross 2005; Lemann 2006; Kitman 2007) of all the new breed of cable hosts, O'Reilly is the most polished in his seeming awareness of expression and performance. A constant mannerism is unwavering confidence, but O'Reilly hits a host of levels, from quiet introspection, to inquisitive questioning, deferential debate, and light-hearted banter. This performance relies heavily on body language and facial expressions. The effect, well summarized by Lemann (2006) is that O'Reilly is,

the beat cop for the American neighborhood, who may have been a little excessive at times, may occasionally have run afoul of Internal Affairs, but law-abiding folks trust him because they know he's on their side. His liberal guests are like suspects he's pulled over: in the end, he's probably just going to frisk them and let them go with a genial warning, but if they try anything, well, he carries a nightstick for a reason.

As Ailes noted when he hired him, even with the sound off, O'Reilly makes for compelling viewing. From time-to-time, O'Reilly brings on a body-language expert, Tonya Reiman, to analyse prominent politicians, often in the context of his interviews with them. The purpose of this exercise, according to O'Reilly, is to get behind words to see what each person was feeling. But in case it be interpreted that he only does this for his targets, Reiman is also invited to analyse O'Reilly's body language.

The sort of equal opportunism is another key component of O'Reilly's presentation. Part of the O'Reilly persona, evidenced in the controversy about his working class background (see Hart 2003; O'Reilly 2006a; c), is fashioning himself as a shining beacon of the American meritocratic ideals of hard work and perseverance. This is critical to his image, for it makes his support of 'the folks' appear noble and committed, while simultaneously giving him the authority to criticise the poor for perceived moral or personal failings. Just like his stated lack of political affiliation, such allegations assist claims of unimpeachable independence. He may appear to be a tough-on-crime, moralistic, hawk of a Republican, but he also maintains to be for gay civil unions, favours curbing global warming, and is amenable to stricter gun control.¹⁰² Yet under scrutiny, his critiques are frequently disproportionate. Consider this 2005 summary of the "two big stories of the year":

Katrina demonstrated just what can happen when the water hits the dam; no branch of government can save you from disaster. Those who didn't have the smarts or the wherewithal to flee the hurricane got blasted, especially in New Orleans. A metaphor for life: Get smart and depend on yourself. No bureaucracy can protect you from crisis or disaster. Iraq taught us that well-intentioned theory can be trumped by unpredictable behavior. Before the invasion, the Bush administration was convinced the Iraqi people would be so thrilled by the prospect of a life free from tyranny that they would embrace

¹⁰² It is hard to know how to interpret this against his self-described 'revenge fantasy', *Those Who Trespass* (1988). "A tall, b.s.-intolerant television journalist named Shannon Michaels", the "product of two Celtic parents," is "pushed out by the Global News Network" [an incident paralleling O'Reilly's dismissal from CBS], before he sets out to "systematically murder the people who ruined his career" (Lemann 2006).

coalition forces and a chance for democracy. It turns out that some Iraqis are addicted to tyranny and enjoy inflicting terror on anyone who opposes it.

What he felt was underreported and represented the bulk of the article was the,

full-blown emergence of the “hate Bush media.” ... This loathing of the president is, without a doubt, dangerous for the nation. ... The press is supposed to be an honest watchdog, not a vicious pit bull bent on destruction. Most important, if the mainstream media will not give Bush a fair shake, the terrorists score a major victory. Chaos at the top aids the enemy (O’Reilly 2006b).

Yet by claiming to critique both sides, as implausible as it may seem, O’Reilly maintains that he is ideologically unclassifiable. To say this is absurd neglects the impact of O’Reilly’s performative ability. While the above passage is from a special to the *Chicago Sun Times*, O’Reilly’s nightly broadcast affords levels of performance, an assumed and explicitly stated strong connection with his audience, and a host of interview techniques that make such brazen statements more easily stomachable. As Lemann (2006) notes,

Mainly, O’Reilly, like every political talk-show host with a big following, is a populist, who, in his beyond-irony way, is a rich, middle-aged white guy aligned with the ruling party, and who has the guts to stand up to the elitists who run (but also hate) this country. To say that that doesn’t make any sense is to deny oneself the pleasure that a close study of O’Reilly affords.

In this sense, *The O’Reilly Factor* has elevated itself to the most dominant position on cable news while assuming a posture that works up from the concerns of its (working or middle class) audience, rather than relaying events to them. It is this brand of populism that seems related to the recent success of *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, a program whose host, much like O’Reilly, has shifted news from what the critical facts lead one to believe to what one believes are the critical facts.

From Financier to Populist – The Re-branding of Lou Dobbs

A populist is, after all, nothing more than “a supporter of the rights and the power of the people.” In fact, I’m a damn proud populist.

Lou Dobbs, I’m a Populist, Deal With It (2006) – responding in an editorial on CNN about his shift from supporting corporate to supporting middle class America.

In the history of popular culture, there is no shortage of celebrities who re-brand themselves to maintain status or to rescue a flagging career. In recent years Hollywood has witnessed Angelina Jolie transform her image from sadomasochistic, gothic, wild girl to humanitarian; an official Goodwill Ambassador for the UN. The tabloid press are fond of documenting the ‘downfall’ of childhood stars like Lindsey Lohan or Brittany Spears or the ‘maturing’ of former wild-child icons such as Prince Harry or Drew Barrymore. And while such re-inventions are common in the world of celebrity, they are far less common in journalism. Upon their retirements, one often gets a sense in autobiographies about the leanings and opinions of formerly ‘neutral’ anchors like Walter Cronkite or Dan Rather. However, the transformation of Lou Dobbs is somewhat unique in the world of journalism in that it happened right in front of our faces. For over the past two years, Dobbs has seemingly metamorphosed, from a fervent supporter of free-market big business to an in-your-face, full-throated defender of the middle class (Auletta 2006; Mullins 2006).

Lou Dobbs, like Bill O’Reilly, began life on cable news with the launch of his current network. And the similarities do not end there. While he opines on it with far-less frequency, Dobbs also claims to come from that which he now defends, noting: “We aspired to the middle class. Both my parents worked. I was a poor kid. And obviously, you know, I’ve been the beneficiary of this great society of ours. And I’ve never forgotten where I come from. You know, working class might have sounded pretty spiffy about then” (Rose 2006). A Harvard graduate in economics, when Ted Turner launched CNN in 1980 Dobbs

was hired on as host of *Lou Dobbs Moneyline*, the first dedicated business newscast. He gradually gained power at CNN, becoming an executive vice president for the network and president of the now defunct CNNfn business network when it was launched in 1995. He also garnered honours in the journalism community, winning a Peabody award for coverage of the 1987 stock market crash, and a Luminary award by the *Business Journalism Review* in 1990. During this time Dobbs was an ardent supporter of Wall Street and big business, with extremely close ties to the corporate community (ibid.).

Rick Kaplan, whose tenure as President of CNN saw Dobbs resign in 1999 after a host of personal disagreements and apparent conflicts of interest, notes, “Lou doesn’t think he’s opinionated. He just thinks he’s stating the truth” (Auletta 2006). There seems to be a generally accepted notion that Dobbs became more at ease displaying his pro-American tendencies in the highly patriotic post-9/11 media environment (Aday *et al.* 2005). Yet something unexpected happened when Dobbs rejoined CNN in 2001; he gradually began shifting his full-throated support away from corporate America, which as recently as 2001 was the focus of a *Moneyline* ‘puff piece’ entitled ‘Hail to the Chiefs’ (Mullins 2006). He notes that, “with September 11th and the attack on this country by radical Islamist terrorists, our global war against radical Islamic – radical Islamist terrorism, with the corporate corruption scandals which became clear in 2000 – yes, I was fundamentally changed” (Rose 2006). However, the direction and sheer potency of this change, especially over the past few years, is surprising. The C.E.O.’s and corporations which were lauded throughout the 1980s and 1990s are now on the receiving end of seething pronouncements in critical segments such as “Exporting America”, which focuses on the transfer of U.S. jobs to overseas labour markets. This transformation prompted the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page to declare that it was as if

this serious journalist, once a “font of economic reason,” now reminded one of the demagogues “doing talk radio at 2 a.m. in Youngstown.” The editorial went on to note,

Old admirers are aghast. It’s as if whatever made Linda Blair’s head spin around in “The Exorcist” had invaded the body of Lou Dobbs and left him with the brain of Dennis Kucinich. No public figure has moved so far left so fast since the transfiguration of Arianna Huffington (Henninger 2004).

The piece went on to conclude that Dobbs’ transformation had little to do with the economic future of America and everything to do with the economic future of Lou Dobbs.

In response to such criticisms, Dobbs explains,

I blame us for forgetting that the United States is first a nation, and secondly a marketplace or an economy, and I blame us for being taken as fools by both political parties for far too long. It is not nationalism by any stretch of the imagination for me to remind those in power that our political system, our great democracy, makes possible our free-enterprise economy, and not vice versa as the elites continually propagandize. (Dobbs 2006b)

And according to many in the media, not only has Lou Dobbs embraced this position, he has become the foremost populist in the United States (Leonhardt 2007).

While scepticism over the authenticity of commentators like Dobbs and O’Reilly can easily come across as embittered sniping, the *Wall Street Journal’s* 2004 editorial was certainly prescient about the ratings potential for Dobbs’ newly embraced populism. What really separates Dobbs from other anchors is his unfailing focus on a single issue like the exporting of jobs or illegal immigration. While some consider this relentless pounding of the same drum to be numbing and monotonous, it is widely acknowledged that it takes a great deal of energy to keep the fires stoked on the same given subject night-after-night (see Gross 2005; Auletta 2006). For Dobbs’ part, he considers his technique to be neither tiresome nor repetitious but “thorough and ongoing” (Stahl 2007). What can certainly be agreed is that his re-branding from financier to populist has made for an immensely successful past few years. Dobbs’ prominence and ratings have experienced some of the healthiest growth amongst

cable news programs during this period. In April 2005, Dobbs was the 6th highest rated program on CNN (behind *Larry King Live*, *Newsnight with Aaron Brown*, *Paula Zahn Now*, *Anderson Cooper 360°*, and *Wolf Blitzer Reports*), drawing an average of 559,000 viewers per evening (TVNewser 2007). By April of 2007, Dobbs had increased this to an average of around 963,000 viewers per evening, frequently topping the 1 million mark, which made *Lou Dobbs Tonight* the top-rated show for CNN on such evenings. (ibid.; Inside 2007). This near 75 percent increase, much of which took place over 2006 (Auletta 2006; Johnson 2006), made *Lou Dobbs Tonight* consistently the 2nd most popular show on CNN (behind *Larry King Live*), and the 12th most popular on cable news. Add to this a 2006 book, *The War on The Middle Class*, which became a *New York Times* bestseller; increasing coverage in the media, from *Newsweek* to the *New York Times*, a cover story in *The New Yorker*, and a profile on *60 Minutes*; CNN's use of Dobbs as an anchor for the 2006 midterm elections; and CBS's 2007 hiring of Dobbs as a commentator for the *Early Show* and it is safe to say that Dobbs has firmly established himself as one of cable news' most influential anchors.

An episode of *Lou Dobbs Tonight* begins in a similar fashion to *The O'Reilly Factor*, offering teasers for three or four stories. Dobbs occupies the left half of the screen and intones opinion-laden dialogue in a serious tone while a montage of video and graphics for each piece occupies the right half. For instance, on May 8th teasers announced: "Plot to Kill" while Dobbs (2007b) noted, "Federal agents say they've smashed a radical Islamist terrorist plot to launch a cold-blooded attack against our troops at Fort Dix, New Jersey. Three of those suspected terrorists in the country illegally." The second teaser, "Food Danger", contained the commentary, "Startling new evidence that contaminated food from Communist China has entered our food chain in this country." Over the final teaser, "God and Amnesty", Dobbs intoned, "And many Catholic leaders are aligned with the illegal alien

lobby supporting both amnesty and open borders and Catholics aren't any more happy about that than I am." After these teasers have aired, the camera quickly returns to Dobbs in studio, who announces the guest for his nightly interview, smiles and nods before announcing, "All of that, and all the day's news; much more straight ahead, here tonight."

At this point the graphical montage begins for *Lou Dobbs Tonight* (see figure 5.6). Following a short military tattoo played on a bugle, serious music, reminiscent of the marching-band like rhythm common to most national network newscasts, leads the title sequence. By relying on a similar mood-setting theme as the network newscasts, Dobbs' music associates him with gravitas and importance (cf. Bull 2001). The title of the show, written in large capital letters which occupy approximately 80 percent of the screen, scroll from left to right, superimposed over an American flag which can be made out in the background. Images of a person in the process of mining, a young African-American girl assuming a hopeful expression, and U.S. Army troops in a desert are introduced, interwoven with titles like "War on the Middle Class", "America's Bright Future", and "Tribute to Our Troops" respectively. A deep male voiceover intones, "This is *Lou Dobbs Tonight*. News, debate, and opinion," before stating the day's date. The final image is a black and white photo of the anchor, which unlike previous photos that take up approximately 50 percent of the available screen, covers 90 percent of it. Similarly to O'Reilly, the theme music builds to a flourish, while a red, white, and blue colour scheme is ubiquitous. Returning to the studio, we find Dobbs at the anchor desk, an image from the first story above his left shoulder, a banner with his logo splashed across the bottom of the screen, all backgrounded against large video screens displaying the Stars-and-Stripes.



Figure 5.6. *The Patriotic Title Sequence from Lou Dobbs Tonight.*

The show certainly lives up to its description offered in this opening montage, containing elements of news, debate, and opinion. Yet the distinctiveness of these elements, interwoven throughout the broadcast, is less definitive than this announcement would suggest. It takes a keen eye to spot the boundaries where ‘news’ translates to ‘opinion’ or ends up in ‘debate’. Generally, the opening segment on each show is reminiscent of the networks’ evening newscasts, which, beginning at 6:30 p.m., overlap with *Lou Dobbs Tonight*’s 6:00 to 7:00 p.m. timeslot. Lasting approximately 10 minutes, the top two or three stories are reports filed by notable CNN correspondents such as Suzanne Malveau, the White House correspondent, Dana Bash, the Congressional correspondent, John King, the chief national correspondent, Jamie McIntyre, the senior Pentagon correspondent and so forth. In essence, these act like a typical network newscast, though they air a half-hour earlier. The journalist for each segment, identified in the banner below them by their CNN title, presents reports in a familiar network style; Dobbs gives the lead and introduces the correspondent and location, they file the piece and summarise at its finish, at which point we return to Dobbs in studio. Occasionally, he will offer commentary masquerading as questions but the correspondents generally conform to expectations of journalistic conduct – achieving ‘objectivity’ by attributing any opinion to sources, relying on official quotes or deferring to Dobbs for

commentary. A typical example would be the May 9th lead story filed by Jamie McIntyre, which commented on which Pentagon ‘benchmarks’ would determine ‘success’ in Iraq. After the report noted that reduction in violence would not be included, Dobbs asked McIntyre, “A highly ambiguous, amorphous definition of success clearly in contradiction of any rational benchmark for progress. What, in the world, is going on at the Pentagon” (Dobbs 2007c)? As is typical in these segments, McIntyre’s response was to simply relay the Pentagon-stated rationales.

These sorts of news of fact segments appear sporadically throughout the show, stories filed in typical inverted-pyramid format. Dobbs, much like a network anchor, will narrate correspondent-free pieces, such as a report on “Fires & Floods”, in a relatively straightforward manner, describing the event, the position of official sources, and the projected resolution/climax in the upcoming days (Dobbs 2007b; c). In this way, unlike a *Daily Show*, which as we will see in Chapter 6 has a reliable satire; parody; interview format, or the predominant news of fact format of network broadcasts which we investigate in Chapter 7, Dobbs sprinkles a news of fact reporting style throughout his hour-long show.

The interviews by Dobbs and commentary on his recurring segments (i.e. “Exporting America”, “War on the Middle Class”, “Broken Borders”, “The Great American Giveaway”) are quite obviously opinion and commentary where Dobbs’ beliefs drive the questions and presentation of facts. What is less clear, however, is how one characterises the segments offered by the correspondents that work specifically for *Lou Dobbs Tonight*.¹⁰³ Christine Romans, Kitty Pilgrim, Bill Tucker, Lisa Sylvester, and Casey Wian (some of who guest host for Dobbs) file reports that appear similar in form to the CNN correspondents who appear on the show. Yet the tone, both discursively and visually, is subtly different, in line with the

¹⁰³ These commentators are distinguished from the CNN reporters who appear at the top of the broadcast as their identifier simply lists their names without a corresponding CNN title.

softening of objectivity discussed in Chapter 3. Rather than letting contrarian sources establish ‘the spectrum’ of positions, correspondents outline the significance of the story. Bill Tucker, who has worked with Dobbs for 23 years, notes that the stories filed by the program’s correspondents are expected to fit within Dobbs’ editorial point of view but should leave the commentary to him (Auletta 2006). For instance, the in-studio chat that followed a May 9th story on “Divine Sanctuary” had the following exchange.

TUCKER: [These leaders] are positioning themselves not only in opposition to immigration law but to the sovereignty of the United States.

DOBBS: I have to say to listen to a Catholic priest say, say that –

[pauses puts on reading glasses]

– Let’s be sure I quote him correctly: “The law of god that says there are no borders is the one we’re required to follow.”

[shifts to a wide-angle shot of Dobbs and Tucker at the anchor desk, Tucker leaning forward]

That is –

[pauses, removes glasses, camera shifts back to a close-up of Dobbs]

– breathtaking in its implications (Dobbs 2007c).

As Auletta (2006) notes, Dobbs frequently treats all aspects of these reports as a scandal against his cherished middle class, relying on descriptions such as “outrageous,” “alarming,” “idiotic,” “disgusting,” or “sickening.” His reporters are generally deferential when he offers commentary, which stands in marked contrast to the CNN reporters who appear in the first segment of the program, and who (one gets the sense) are often ill at ease with the opinionated contextualisation Dobbs adds to the stories they file.

Whether or not he is aware of it, Dobbs’ rants which go against the neutral stance traditionally practiced by journalists bears affinity to the plea of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, to establish a sociology of sociology. The project, which Bourdieu (1989: 33) dubbed ‘reflexive sociology’, took issue with sociologists commenting on the object of study rather than realise “that what their apparently scientific discourse talks about is not the object but their relation to the object.” Put another way, Bourdieu wished to move away from the

type of sociology that placed the researcher outside the object of study, that ignored the positioning of the researcher within a specific social field. All research is thus inscribed with the perception(s) of the researcher – the product of research is filtered through a specific theoretical gaze dependent on the field in which it is produced.¹⁰⁴ Dobbs notes, “What you won’t see on our broadcast is ‘fair and balanced journalism.’ You will not see ‘objective journalism.’ The truth is not ‘fair and balanced’” (Auletta 2006). And while this sort of thinking may be a less-academic version of reflexivity, it takes on board the conjunction Dobbs recognises between his point of view and the types of reportage crafted on his program. He flatly states, “I believe the truth, as best we mortally flawed human beings can try to obtain it, can be empirically demonstrated. It, the truth, can be objective. We seldom can be about it.” Yet while he rails against the current manifestation of what passes for ‘objective’ journalism, he simultaneously reflects it by purporting to search out truth, and reflect reality.

Fair, Balanced, and Trusted – Similarities to Traditional Broadcast News

The standard of the craft as it should be is the energetic gathering of facts and the objective reporting of the news, without fear or favour.

Lou Dobbs, War on The Middle Class (2006) – claiming that his show upholds foundational journalism tenets now ignored by mainstream media.

Fact is, I could give you scores of examples of how *The Factor* is an independent broadcast, but why bother? Facts and truth never satisfy the secular-progressives. They want to kill us because we are very effective at unmasking their strategies and exposing their dangerous agenda. You see, our huge success means, among other things, no more “under the radar” for S-P actions. They know that we’re watching every move they make. I’m the spy satellite they desperately want to shoot down.

¹⁰⁴ As I alluded to in Chapter 4, this dissertation is also subject to this relationship. For instance, I evaluate many of the developments in this dissertation in regards to ‘objectivity’, something that would be less likely if was studying French journalism. Similarly, my background in journalism leads to an implicit judgement of ‘good journalism’ that is somewhat traditional and conservative.

Bill O'Reilly, Culture Warrior (2006) – asserting that *The Factor* recaptures journalistic obligations of truth and representation that the media's current liberal agenda circumvent.

A lesson imparted into first-year students of poetry is how different forms – sonnet, haiku, ode, and so forth – have consistency. Not only are the rhythm, metre, and intonation of such formats relatively consistent within cultural periods, the effect produced by the form can be seen to suit a certain form of storytelling. Sonnets often relate to romance, odes muse on themes, haikus associate with nature, and so forth. It is not just writing which implies such constancy. Jazz, known for its improvisation, relies upon common chord progressions. Horror films, known for indiscriminate murder, still involve a progression of killings leading the (axe-, chainsaw-, knife-wielding) psychopath ever closer to a final confrontation with the protagonist. Even surrealist art, the 'anti-art' which relies on the rejection of reason, is immediately recognisable. Such constancy and predictability is why we can quickly identify genres and styles. And journalism is no stranger to such predictability, the form and style of a newscast making it instantly recognisable and distinct from other broadcast productions.

Predictability and consistency helps an audience to digest emerging stories, shifting angles, and breaking developments.¹⁰⁵ The structure of each broadcast is somewhat like a Quentin Tarantino film or a whodunit mystery – seemingly out of progression with a conventional narrative arc. After a perfunctory greeting we are introduced to the lead stories, not necessarily the most salacious, but those signalled as the most 'important' for the audience.¹⁰⁶ During the broadcast, the anchor often recaps these items, while segments like sports or weather appear at a regular interval, and lighter material and human interest stories are reserved for the end of the newscast. Within each segment, narrative and pacing are also

¹⁰⁵ As we see in Chapter 7, story composition has remained relatively stable for decades.

¹⁰⁶ The exception to this rule seems to be many local newscasts, which often lead with isolated crime stories, fires and other stories with dramatic visual content.

held fairly constant. A common structure is that we first learn of a newsworthy turning point (the climax that leads the anchor's introduction), then a sense of the current resolution (the dénouement offered in the reporters intro), before learning of the inciting incidents (exposition) and history and future of the newsworthy event (rising and falling actions).

Further augmenting this consistency is the look of news programs. The semiotic layout of the cable magazines replicates the culturally-familiar form of broadcast news (cf. Holsanova *et al* 2006). Be it ABC's *World News Tonight* or CNN's *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, the predictable scene which greets us is an anchor at a large desk, backgrounded by video screens, with over-the-shoulder graphics introducing each story. This 'scannable' design enhances visual consistency (Cooke 2005). Even without sound, our cultural knowledge informs us that the program on the screen is news (cf. Barthes 1957). On the whole, both *Lou Dobbs* and *The Factor* replicate the network practices of adhering to a predictable visual and contextual template, designating lead stories, and relying on teasers and recaps.

Further similarities between cable magazines and the networks surround expectations of accuracy and integrity. As with satirical news, one of the more telling similarities with traditional network news comes in the forms of responsibility and accountability. One of the more obvious examples of this concerns O'Reilly's famed directive to those he disagrees with to 'shut up', which seems fundamentally incongruous to the premise of an interview. One noted instance was a 2003 encounter with Jeremy Glick, whose father, a New York City Port Authority employee, was killed on 9/11. Glick, an anti-war protestor, was ejected from the studio after being told by O'Reilly to shut up for opposing the war. While he contends he has used the expression sparingly, O'Reilly acknowledges such outbursts are tactical boondoggles if one wants to be taken seriously (O'Reilly 2006a). Dobbs' current persona (and consistent with his journalistic background as a business reporter) is less confrontational

and aggressive than O'Reilly's (consistent with the latter's history as a local correspondent and tabloid anchor). Nevertheless, Dobbs is not without his own share of controversy over conduct. A May 2007 report on *Lou Dobbs* grossly overstated the number of new incidences of leprosy in America and appeared to tie this rise to an onslaught of illegal immigration. Dobbs eventually acknowledged the error, but dismissed its seriousness, questioning the effrontery of those he felt were trying to create controversy (Stahl 2007; Starkman 2007).

Thus, while the demeanour of cable magazine anchors may deviate from their 'cooler' colleagues, they are still publicly held to a certain degree of professionalism in terms of accuracy, accountability and responsibility. By employing what Clayman (2002) refers to as the 'Tribune-of-the-People' stance – legitimised aggressive questioning which invokes the fourth-estate notion of the public – O'Reilly and Dobbs play upon the fact that journalists have always been granted a degree of leniency in their hostility towards evasive sources. Yet there is an unspoken line, that when crossed, slips into 'gotcha' journalism and, as such, is considered unprofessional (Frank 2003, Ward 2005). For a Dobbs or O'Reilly, despite the threshold of acceptable conduct being more relaxed than for a Dan Rather or Ted Koppel, they are nonetheless judged by journalistic guidelines of conduct.

While these critiques over professional conduct relate to appropriate behaviour as a journalist, a related element of objectivity that melds cable magazines to network news is the assumption of factuality. Despite being evidently opinion-based journalism, the elementary claim of these shows is that they are conduits of fact. These anchors may have beliefs, and these beliefs are what drive the show, but in this sense their belief is understood to be backed up by verifiable fact. For instance, the lack of exactitude which often accompanies O'Reilly's assertions in "Talking Points" is mitigated a small underlying graphic which identifies the segment as "commentary" (see figure 5.3). But despite this, O'Reilly's factual missteps in this

segment and others have been well-documented. Peter Hart's (2004) book *The O'Reilly Factor?* meticulously chronicled O'Reilly misstatements, while Media Matters for America, a left-leaning organisation reviled by O'Reilly, systematically documents conservative tendencies that appear in his show. Much of the film *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* focussed on unmasking the tactics and techniques of O'Reilly. What is unclear is whether O'Reilly simply misspeaks (the justification offered by Lou Dobbs in the aftermath of the alien leprosy controversy), knowingly manipulates or skews, or whether he in fact is consciously lying.¹⁰⁷ Yet there is an assumption that, in the words of the Associated Press, cable magazines, like all 'good' journalism, have "their facts straight" (Kalbfeld 2001: 68). Unlike an *Entertainment Tonight*, which unabashedly parrots gossip on celebrities, the standard of proof is assumed to go beyond simple assertion to verifiability.

So while these hosts may appear to wear their hearts on their sleeves, unlike network anchors who keep theirs buttoned up, the expectation of conveying facts – the core of the journalistic endeavour – is consistent. It should come as no surprise then that many of the techniques relied upon to generate an appearance of reality are also shared by both genres (cf. Tuchman 1978; cf. Schlesinger 1987). Despite forswearing the notion of political balance on both their programs, Dobbs and O'Reilly nonetheless rely on it extensively. This is not always outwardly evident as Dobbs (2006a: 9) feels "he says, she says" journalism, gives at best an illusion of truth.

¹⁰⁷ A good example is a 2004 exchange with Canadian journalist Heather Mallick. In threatening to initiate a boycott on Canadian goods, O'Reilly claimed it would wreak havoc on the Canadian economy as it had on France. When Mallick protested that his French boycott was having little effect (something which U.S. import figures support) O'Reilly interrupted and bellowed "they've lost billions of dollars in France according to *The Paris Business Review*!" As Colapinto (2004a) notes of the exchange, "In short, amazing TV – the modern media equivalent of witnessing a Christian torn apart by lions, with a touch of opera buffo thrown in." The problem? No such publication, or similarly named journal, exists (ibid., Media Matters 2004).

When a newspaper, magazine, or news network presents a Republican's view along with that of a Democrat, and passes off such fair and balanced reporting as the truth, it involves a lot less mental heavy lifting for journalists; it's a way for the news organization to avoid the costly, time-and-resource-consuming demands of gathering data and analyzing it before reporting a story. It may even be somewhat satisfying for a reader, viewer, or listener who gets to see or hear his own partisan view expressed for as much as one half the report. Unfortunately, the result of that approach is that the media usually doesn't even manage to produce half-truths.

Dobbs (2006a: 91) accordingly claims that he does not feel the need to balance interviews with politicians with a view from the opposing party, adding

The truth stands by itself. The idea that fair and balanced is a substitute for truth and fact is mindless nonsense that has captured too much of the national media. There seem to be only two sides, both political, to every story. Does that mean that if we had three major political parties there would be three sides to the truth?

This is even more evidently the case for *The O'Reilly Factor*, a program which promotes itself based on its suspicion of political rhetoric and whose host assumes the role of championing the little guy.

Closer investigation indicates that this disavowal of balance only holds for a very narrow interpretation, for when one goes beyond elected officials to lobbyists, party strategists, pundits, and the like, both Dobbs and O'Reilly seem beholden to it. The panels that Dobbs conducts with radio talk-show hosts invariably include both right and left-leaning shows; reports by CNN and *Lou Dobbs Tonight* correspondents ensure both sides of the aisle are covered; and roundtable discussions on Dobbs' pet issues include Republican and Democratic strategists. Furthermore, if one side is invited but refuses to appear, such snubs are mentioned to verify an attempt at balance was made. The disconnect between O'Reilly's attitude and application of the notion of balance is much the same. While his website states the following: "Other interview news shows are guest-driven ... The O'Reilly Factor is driven by me. I will not stand for 'spin'" (Fox 2007a), in discussions on social issues, be it "Mondays

with Kristen and Michelle” or “Weekdays with Bernie and Jane”, *The Factor* is always sure to include guests from either side of the established American political spectrum.

This is closely aligned with another journalistic technique subscribed to by both network newscasts and cable magazines, namely the exhaustive use of ‘experts’ as sources. As with balance, while disavowed on the surface, both Dobbs and O’Reilly’s seem beholden to the tenet of the objectivity regime that lauds expertise. When we consider the credentials of guests, be it retired military commanders who analyse the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, prominent reverends, imams, and rabbis, who speak to issues of secularism, and religious extremism, or economists, professors, members of lobby groups and think tanks, experts represent an overwhelming proportion of the guests that warrant time on these programs.¹⁰⁸ In this regard, an accurate description of the influence of the professional practices of network news is that, while damaged along the journey, many of the tenets and techniques of objectivity have been transported over to the cable news magazine.

From balance, to accountability, and conduct, part of the legitimacy of cable news comes from the preservation of traditional journalistic values, which generate an appearance of truth (cf. Wall 2005). This derives from the obvious affinity between network news and the cable news networks. They seek out many of the same experts, utilise similar live, stock, and archival footage, and have a similar presentational feel in terms of graphics, the anchor desk, and so forth. Like network news, the cable magazines have also seen shifts in terms of

¹⁰⁸ However, the confidence in expertise is far from unconditional, as we see in the subsequent section.

female participation in the labour force (Weaver *et al.* 2007).¹⁰⁹ And despite O'Reilly's and Dobbs' claimed dissatisfaction with the current state of the media, there is a prominent echo of the 20th-century tenets of objectivity when they speak about the rightful goals and aims of the industry (see Dobbs 2006a; O'Reilly 2006a). In this regard, it may be more accurate to claim that they are not dissatisfied with objectivity but its manifestation in common practices like passivity and neutrality (cf. Lichtenberg 1991).

If *CBS Evening News* is one of the pinnacles of U.S. journalism, anchored by industry luminaries like Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather, cable news is almost a nod to its success. This is arguably the most pertinent similarity to network news – the host of the cable magazines are at the top of the news hierarchy, at least in terms of their status at their respective networks. This high status bestows on them, albeit indirectly, the predominant claims of the networks they represent; in CNN's case, to be 'The Most Trusted Name in News', or for Fox, to be 'Fair and Balanced'. Audience surveys by CNN consistently rate Dobbs as its 'most trusted' anchor (Burman 2007). Put otherwise, placement at the top of a network dedicated to news confers journalistic validity.

What distinguishes a Dobbs or O'Reilly from the network luminaries whose images they are building upon is the manner in which they go about attempting to generate this sense of trust. During a time when network newscasts have experienced ever-decreasing ratings, these programs have experienced a ratings growth. By bending, twisting, and altering the conventions of a news of fact, the cable magazines give the appearance of a greater sense

¹⁰⁹ Some have questioned whether this increased preponderance of female journalists is necessarily indicative of equality and respect. In a *Daily Show* segment on this trend, Stewart hinted that the attractiveness of on-air 'talent' questions what motivates the shift. *Daily Show* correspondent Samantha Bee took the analysis one step further, noting "this isn't gussied-up or attractive news we're seeing. This is News I'd Like to Fuck." (Daily Show 2007h). The point is that there appears to be a common 'look' among U.S. cable's female journalists.

of personal involvement, not just in terms of the content of news, but with the audience that comes to them for it.

'Involved' News Anchors – Divergences from Network News

Personally, I'm not alarmed by the news media's liberal bias. I'm far more concerned by the denial that it exists. I encourage everyone in our newsroom at *Lou Dobbs Tonight* to freely and fully express their political views – their bias, if you will. I prefer a newsroom whose journalists are energetic and engaged with one another in discussions of the day's news and issues, and who have to support their political points of view and biases with the facts. While such open discussion of politics, and even of religion, makes some of our younger journalists uncomfortable initially, they quickly find greater respect for the facts and the truth, and a diminished commitment to ideology and partisanship. The result is that our newsroom has far more independent thinking and honest discussion.

Lou Dobbs, War on The Middle Class (2006) – outlining his rejection of the detachment and independence associated with a traditional news of fact.

There is a basic energy that traditionally came out of journalism that is pretty much lacking in American journalism today. Whether you agree with me or not, whether you like my style or not, you can't deny that what we're trying to do here is not only report the truth, but hold people accountable for their behavior.

Bill O'Reilly, The Man Who Would Not Shut Up (2007) – explaining how advocacy underlies the rise of his program at a time when network news is suffering.

If we accept the premise of Boorstin (1961: 3), that “When we pick up our newspaper at breakfast, we expect – we even demand – that it bring us momentous events since the night before,” it seems news outlets are in a tight spot. How to be objective but still interesting? How to meet the temporal demands of the industry but still adhere to the objective tenets of proportionality, balance, and factuality? While such concerns are endemic throughout the industry, network news has traditionally been constrained by the news cycle, something it both creates and is controlled by, to decide what events warrant coverage. On many days this is unproblematic. A major policy initiative by a President, lead story. Declaration or cessation of hostilities in a conflict involving the home country, to the top of the broadcast.

But as authors like Boorstin (1961), Dayan and Katz (1992), and Kovach and Rosenstiel (1999) have explored, the slow news day presents a challenge.

There is always news, but how does one take humdrum day-to-day occurrences – interest-rate adjustments, scientific studies, international negotiations – which may not lend themselves to splashy visuals, dramatic content, or personal involvement on behalf of the audience? Moreover, the difficulty of generating an attentive and enthusiastic audience on the dreaded slow news day is compounded by the ideal of journalistic objectivity; its dictate that both anchor and correspondent remain neutral and detached from that which they cover (Rosen 1999; Ward 2005; cf. Barbalet 2002). Likewise, the professional journalist cannot be seen to generate stories based on personal interest or belief as they go about practicing this professional variety of aperspectival objectivity, colloquially referred to as a ‘view from nowhere’ (Tuchman 1978; Hackett and Zhao 1998). Within this news of fact, one could be forgiven for assuming that ‘nowhere’ is also where news appears to derive. Captured from the ether, the journalist acting under the traditional objectivity regime claims to act like a news aerial; a receiver of substantial developments in the public sphere.

The advent of cable news brings the difficulty of the slow news day into sharp relief. If filling a half-hour national newscast with interesting, engaging stories can be a challenge, this is compounded exponentially when 24 hours of coverage are demanded. One easy way around this is coverage of breaking news covered by local news affiliates. These sorts of stories, ranging from police standoffs to fires, fill up the news hole at a minimum of expense to the cable network. However, the viewing patterns of audiences make reliance on these events precarious, especially during the peak prime-time viewing period. A school fire in Des Moines may be ‘newsworthy’ at two o’clock in the afternoon but national interest in such a story is marginal when set against the local news, national newscasts and entertainment

options which occupy the programming grid from 6:00 to 11:30 p.m.. However, the commercial realities of news production influence what can be covered during this period, as it is economically prohibitive to attempt to fill an entire evening with well-researched, sophisticated and diverse news programming (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999).

Accordingly, as a commercial enterprise, cable news finds itself in a tough spot during these broadcasting timeslots. Not only is it placed opposite national newscasts that pour their budgetary capabilities into a mere half-hour period, and local news that is more immediate to the average viewer, the cable news networks also compete against the entertainment programming which drives the ratings, and accordingly the profit, of the various network and cable channels. This tension has been addressed through the creation of the cable magazine, programming that is news-related yet diverges from established configurations in a journalistic field. These hour-long programs succeed in covering national and global issues without matching the budgetary depth and contextual meticulousness of the network newscasts; personalise their presentation despite lacking the immediacy of local news; and embrace dramatic presentation more evidently than their network counterparts while stopping short of the pure entertainment function of sitcoms, dramas and reality shows. Instead of starting with a sphere of public interest, such as government policy, political debate, the economy, or international affairs, then covering the breaking events within each sphere (a traditional broadcast news model),¹¹⁰ the cable magazine tends towards an overriding narrative premise that draws in the audience, much like a television drama,¹¹¹ then covers stories that fit within or reinforce this frame. Each broadcast is an utterance in

¹¹⁰ As the Associated Press instructs its broadcast reporters, newsworthiness is determined (in order) by: the 'nature of the event', 'when it happened', 'which newscast' the report is going to air on, 'who was involved', 'the story's context' in relation to public expectation, the 'news environment', in terms of what else happened that day, and 'your audience' (Kalbfeld 2001: 69-70).

¹¹¹ If one thinks of a standard premise, such as doctors trying to manage personal lives amidst the hectic environment of an emergency room, there is an inbuilt tension.

an ongoing dialogue and segments are contextualised in terms of this broader discourse over time (Knox 2007).

This becomes evident when one examines the mission statements of the cable magazines. For instance, both Dobbs and O'Reilly's programs embrace an overriding theme of ignored threats to America. Frames such as standing up for the folks, refusing to accept political spin and so forth reflect this broader theme and help generate more or less standardised news scripts (cf. Knight 2001). The preamble on the *Lou Dobbs Tonight* web site notes,

He's an independent populist and the leading media advocate for working men and women, their families, our middle class and the American way of life. Our team of outstanding journalists covers the news that matters most to Americans and America (CNN 2007a).

Fox News' spiel for *The O'Reilly Factor* notes it,

uncovers news items from the established wisdom [sic] and goes against the grain of the more traditional interview-style programs. ... Pushing beyond just the headlines, "The O'Reilly Factor" also features issues from local markets that do not find the national spotlight on other newscasts. According to O'Reilly, "Just because a story originates from somewhere the networks typically avoid, doesn't mean it contains less challenging issues, or compelling ideas (Fox 2007a).

Other successful cable magazines also have thematic overtones in the explanation of their shows, seemingly to separate them from rival newscasts. The description for *Hannity & Colmes* declares,

unlike similar debate shows — which often appear scripted — "Hannity & Colmes" conducts a live, spur of the moment deliberation on politics and social topics. Also, differentiating the show is its dedication to "move away from the Beltway," bringing audiences an alternative discussion program without the "in" comments (Fox 2007b).

Anderson Cooper 360° boasts, "The show's hallmark is its 'Keeping them Honest' franchise — demanding answers and finding the truth" (CNN 2007b). More generally, we can say that within these statements, there is at least an implied cultivation of a relationship between the

host and the intended audience. As a long-time CNN staffer said of Cooper, who travels to troubled regions, such as New Orleans post-Katrina, and shares the personal opinions this generates with his viewers, “It’s almost a fact-free zone. It’s a feeling zone” (Auletta 2006). Even the fact that cable magazines have mission statements is telling. Network newscasts either feel their goal is self evident and do not offer a program description (CBS, ABC) or offer a narrative – “provides reports and analysis of the day’s most newsworthy national and international events” (NBC 2007) – that puts one in mind of the traditional fourth-estate discourse.¹¹² In this sense, cable magazines, to varying degrees, flip multiple elements of journalism on their heads. Coverage shifts from events to issues, the assumed audience shifts from the general citizen to the personal viewer, authority shifts from the expert to the anchor, and personal involvement is embraced rather than eschewed.

As such, the focus is increasingly centred on the impact to the audience (O’Reilly’s ‘folks’ or Dobbs’ ‘working men and women’) or broader society (idealised America), rather than on the event itself. This populism means the traditional news cycle is not the primary determinant of each broadcast, a dramatic departure from the network newscasts. The event orientation of network news basically means the priority and attention to the top stories of the day are virtually indistinguishable across the evening newscasts (Dayan and Katz 1992). National tragedies (natural disaster, school shootings, large industrial accidents), updates on the Iraq war, substantial policy initiatives, major congressional debates, and so forth dominate the top portion of each show. But for the cable magazines, while prominent events will demand coverage, ongoing issues which capture the cultural zeitgeist are covered in segments that drive the substance of the show (cf. Jurkowitz 2000). For Dobbs, rarely a

¹¹² These mission statements are accurate as of August 31, 2007. In the rapidly shifting and competitive field of journalism it would be naïve to assume ABC and CBS will continue to eschew this sort of online statement or that established programs on cable news will not ‘re-brand’ some element of their self-description.

program passes where illegal migration does not warrant mention in the opening segments. The new red menace, communist China,¹¹³ or the exporting of U.S. jobs (and other general threats considered part of what Dobbs broadly identifies the ‘War on the Middle Class’) also make near-nightly appearances. For O’Reilly, it is sexual predators and the legislative and judicial issues surrounding them, or the left-wing media which demand his constant vigilance. In this respect, the cable magazines rarely, if ever, experience the ‘slow news day’.

The fact that *The O’Reilly Factor* eschews any mention of the current date either at the outset or throughout his broadcast is further evidence of the increasing irrelevance of events. While current network newscasts, *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, and even *The Daily Show* give the date at the top of the broadcast, O’Reilly’s intro simply intones “Tonight” before running down the teasers for the show. It is almost as if daily events are deemed secondary to the ongoing issues and the unique stories that fall under the gaze of O’Reilly and his *Factor*. It is not until the mid-way point of the show, when *The Factor* breaks for commercials, that Fox News informs us of the date at hand by displaying it immediately before its half-hour news update. This sort of posture reflects that audiences are assumed to tune into O’Reilly not to catch up on the events of the day but to catch up on O’Reilly. As Lemann (2006) notes, “Every journalistic medium produces a characteristic set of forms and attitudes; network news is – even now – about authority, and cable news, increasingly, is about itself.” World affairs do not determine content as the title of the program suggests – O’Reilly determines what the viewer needs to factor in.

What is witnessed on the cable magazines is, to borrow a political phrase, a ‘common sense revolution’ of the news. It is as if the on-your-side populist posture of local news was

¹¹³ Dobbs nearly always adds the communist adjective to describe China, illustrating the enduring impact of Cold War rhetoric and the mistrust, suspicion and threat this signifies (cf. Bathes 1957, Herman and Chomsky 1988).

stretched to envelop issues of national and international importance. As the three tag lines that accompany advertisements for *The Factor* note, the show prides itself on ‘No Spin’, ‘No Free Pass’, and is ‘Looking Out for You’ (Factor 2007 a-j) (see figure 5.7). This practice is reflected in the style of interaction between the journalist and source. Anchors measure responses to interviewees based on whether what they are saying ‘makes sense’, rather than on the accuracy of their information or the credentials of their expertise. Put otherwise, lay knowledge (in the form of the anchor acting on behalf of the audience) comes to be embraced at the same time that expert knowledge (in the form of sources acting on behalf of official institutions) is questioned (cf. Wynne 1996). Personal pronouns are not only released from their cages but march to the fore, as anchors and correspondents embrace their opinions and speak to ‘you’. Reflecting the critique by Herman and Chomsky (1988), that the time constraints of news make it very difficult to express a countervailing viewpoint, especially a radical one, a common-sense approach compounds this by insisting responses to highly complex issues be put in ‘plain’ English – this focus on so-called straight talk claiming to cut through political posturing to get more effectively at the truth. This is part of a broader trend across “most forms of public discourse [which] now work hard to avoid the formality and distance that were once important markers of its identity as ‘public’” (Cameron 2004: 124).



Figure 5.7. *Advertisement for The O'Reilly Factor.*

This anti-elitist (or as Dobbs and O'Reilly refer to it) populist approach to news simplifies vastly complicated and nuanced affairs into understandable generalisations. While there is a common critique that the shifting nature of attention spans, proliferation of media options, and focus on style over substance has turned American politics into a sound-bite driven form of news, cable networks take this one step further by discouraging explanations that do not jibe with everyday understandings (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999; Delli Carpini and Williams 2001; Cameron 2004). Take the following exchange O'Reilly had with a Democratic strategist in response to a 2007 report that 35 percent of registered Democrats believed that President Bush had knowledge of the 9/11 attacks before they occurred.

O'REILLY: Why do you think they believe this?

ROGINSKY: Like I said, I think it's primarily because they've been lied to time-and-time again.

[Camera cuts back to O'Reilly, eyes closed, looking down while he shakes his head.]

Whether it's mission accomplished or whether it's we'll be greeted as liberators or –

O'REILLY: That doesn't make any sense.

ROGINSKY: Well it does make sense to me –

O'REILLY: It just doesn't make any sense. Because you can't make that quantum leap from a disagreement in policies – and there are no lies, we had George Tenet in last week –

[adopts dismissive tone, makes slashing hand movement]
and there are no lies (Factor 2007a).

While O'Reilly's premise for having the guest on is that he wants to understand how such a large percentage of Americans could believe what he refers to as "madness", all potential explanations are interrupted and rejected out of hand as not making sense. It is instructive to note that the other interviewee in this segment, a Republican strategist, is left unchallenged when she parrots O'Reilly's oft-sung contention the 'far-left' has taken control of the mainstream media.

The broader implication of this discussion is twofold – events/issues that do not conform to common sense are aberrations and proof is held in belief. For instance, O'Reilly explains that the Iranian government is not speaking on behalf of its citizens because, "I know Iranians" (Factor 2007e); and Katie Couric's poor ratings on CBS are explained as "a woman thing", which he defends by saying, "of course I can prove it ... It's an authority position, most Middle Americans who watch news feel comfortable with a man in that position. That's what's going on" (Factor 2007f). In the world of the cable magazine, the beliefs of the host are the starting point for debate. While disagreement is permissible, even encouraged, the types of contestation which are given credence are those which fit established controversies (i.e. pro-war – anti-war; pro-life – pro-choice).

O'Reilly's dismissal of countervailing views may be bellicose but he is certainly not alone in rejecting what does not fit with his beliefs or the studies he chooses to recognise. Dobbs' common-sense populism manifests itself in a head-shaking response, ranging from eyebrow-raised bemusement, through jaw-clenched righteousness, to slack-jawed bewilderment, when a story contravenes 'basic common sense'. Consider the exchange between Air America host Laura Flanders and Dobbs when she asserted violence against illegal-immigrant protestors was partially attributable to stereotypes of migrant workers, which he was helping to perpetrate (see figure 5.10).

DOBBS [angrily]: Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! You're being absolutely absurd!

FLANDERS: It's not helped by language like yours. They're not aliens Lou, they're people. You're dehumanising them.

DOBBS [sarcastically]: What do you want me to call them, undocumented workers? (Dobbs 2007b).

While Flanders presents a fairly elementary argument, familiar to anyone who has taken undergraduate courses in psychology or sociology, to Dobbs (who along with O'Reilly is Harvard-educated), her argument is absurd. Ironically, one show later, his coverage of the Don Imus scandal¹¹⁴ noted the harmful potential of words (Dobbs 2007c). As such, it seems disingenuous to claim that Dobbs does not comprehend Flanders' argument. Rather, her argument, whatever its logical validity, contravenes his indurate common sense about issues that define his broadcast. Much like O'Reilly's dismissals of what he views as nonsensical, by challenging the expert and factual-orientation of journalism, such cable magazines defy some of the performative aspects of objectivity. Rather than assess political rhetoric against expertise, they counter with common-sense.

This is reflective of the highly personalised orientation of cable magazines. O'Reilly admits that the types of stories he selects need to be able to quickly draw in an audience and sustain its interest (Kitman 2007). In this sense, O'Reilly is attuned to the 'speeding up' of social life (cf. Virilio 1999) which may lead to lower levels of patience with stories in which the audience does not feel connected or involved. As Dobbs (2006a: 78) notes, "Each night, my audience expects me to deliver the news that is most important to them and the lives they are leading." Language selection reflects this sort of 'in crowd' mentality. *Factor* viewers are familiar with O'Reilly-speak, shorthands such as "S-P jihad" (secular-progressives and their associated cultural agenda) that are immediately recognisable to the devoted viewer. For Dobbs, concepts such as 'War on the Middle Class' (a confluence of economic hardships

¹¹⁴ Imus, a radio host, incited controversy by calling the Rutgers' female basketball team "nappy headed ho's."

attributable to government neglect), or ‘Broken Borders’ (concerns over illegal immigration and security) are offered up during interviews and commentary as self-evident terminology, again assuming a dedicated audience. This is a parsed example of a broader logic whereby cable magazines display great control not only in terms of terminology and sources, but in terms of which events warrant coverage. Put otherwise, these hosts often are their own news cycle.

In this sense, the cable magazine, while certainly claiming to be journalism, performs the illusion of existing outside the mainstream. This stance is achieved by commenting on traditional outlets – be it the *New York Times* or *CBS Evening News* – as part of a nearly undifferentiated mass. The implication, especially by O’Reilly, is that their programs are ‘above’ the pitfalls that befall traditional news.¹¹⁵ In this respect, there is a sense conveyed in both *Lou Dobbs* and *The Factor* that these programs are almost a vanguard for a new type of populist journalism that covers news, at a national level, that has a ‘real’ impact on the (American) public. The national, and even the global, is brought home locally. This bears affinity to the characterisation in certain academic circles that Western society is experiencing a period of reflexive modernity (alternately termed postmodernity, liquid modernity, late modernity) that is characterised by a continual re-examination of the knowledges, practices, products, risks, institutions, and so forth that modernity created. One element of this trend is people turning away from expertise – to lay knowledge, home remedies, religious edicts, and community groups – to find solutions (Beck 1994). ‘Trust’ is no longer simply bestowed by expertise but must be won over and actively sustained. Giddens (1994: 187) notes that

¹¹⁵ One feature of O’Reilly’s personal website is a “Hall of Shame” that focuses on “Media Outlets that Traffic in Defamation”, including MSNBC, *The New Yorker*, and *Newsday*. It notes, “We believe the following media operations have regularly helped distribute defamatory, false or non-newsworthy information supplied by far left websites,” and adds, “We believe these are the worst offenders and are not worth your time and money.”

institutions now utilise “a process of mutual narrative and emotional disclosure,” in order to gain and sustain the trust of their public. The basic idea is that we are in the midst of an epoch marked by a continual re-assessment of modernity’s social forms and institutions, by the public and also by the institutions themselves. It may be that cable magazines break down the lay-expert divide, simultaneously critiquing traditional news outlets, in an effort to win over the trust of audiences that are increasingly turning away from network news to embrace other news alternatives (cf. PEJ 2007).¹¹⁶

In what is an unexpected echo of the left-leaning propaganda model (see Herman and Chomsky 1988), the implication of such newscasts is that a news of fact falls prey to special interest groups, corporate interests, powerful lobbyists, and politicians; coverage reflects this by replicating discourse that originates within boardrooms and the Beltway. There is a sense conveyed by these hosts that eschewing this traditional model takes bravery, placing a Dobbs or O’Reilly in the position of being lone voices of truth in an otherwise broken system of journalism which has its agenda set by those it covers, rather than focussing on what ‘really matters’ to the average person. As O’Reilly is fond of proclaiming in his reports, “You won’t see this anywhere else” (Gross 2005). O’Reilly is not merely implying that he is outside the mainstream; he flat out claims he has the courage to tackle issues that traditional outlets are either too intimidated or too beholden to critique.

Battle is not only exhausting and dangerous; it also requires skill and discipline to emerge victorious, much less unscathed. That’s why few of us, except for some weirdly self-destructive souls, seek out conflict. ... For a variety of reasons that I will explain, I have chosen to jump into the fray and become a warrior in the vicious culture war that is currently under way in the United States of America. And war is exactly the right term (O’Reilly 2006a).

¹¹⁶ The Project for Excellence in Journalism provides statistics that do an effective job of illustrating the precipitous decline of network news audiences over the past few decades.

Dobbs adopts a less conspiratorial tone but his message is nonetheless similar. He notes, “By forsaking its role as the institution entrusted by the public to present the truth, the media has become complicit in the war on the middle class. The truth is no longer its goal” (Dobbs 2006a: 9). One imagines the effect of such indictments is powerful for the committed audience. These anchors go beyond being a choice based on preference or habit, the primary bases upon which one assumes network anchors are selected; watching a Dobbs or O’Reilly is akin to following an activist – someone prepared to risk it all to tackle the establishment.

This sort of analysis may seem heavy on rhetoric but this is a reflection of the message continually reinforced by these programs. O’Reilly relentlessly updates his audience on the media coverage of issues he finds important. He believes the mainstream media is beset by left-leaning groupthink that is out-of-touch with the majority of Americans, lamenting that “At one time in this country, the media was supposed to respect and look out for the folks” (O’Reilly 2006c). By emphasizing who has not covered what he has, O’Reilly (2006a: 5) gives an impression, at times bordering on the paranoid, that his steadfast tackling of the stories is noble and heroic.

Yes, I do truly despise the ideological fanatics, the media vermin who couldn’t care less about truth or justice. But you know who they are. I have bigger, more dangerous targets in my sights – establishment players who can change your life with the stroke of a pen, an activist court ruling, or a dishonest article in the press. My goal is to expose and defeat people who have the power to do you great harm. My weapons will be facts and superior analysis based on those facts. It is absolutely fair and vital to democracy to confront people in the arena of ideas. I’ll leave the smears to the yapping character assassins. They will destroy themselves. Just wait and see.

He backs this up by giving example after example on *The Factor* of the ‘far-left’ attacks he faces for his independence (Kitman 2007). It is a rare example of a win-win-win situation for O’Reilly. If his spotlighting of an issue is followed by similar mainstream coverage, it is offered as ‘proof’ that he is in front of the curve. If coverage follows that takes a different

perspective to him, it is ‘proof’ of a left-wing perspective pervading the media. If no coverage is offered, it is ‘proof’ that the far-left controls the media by suppressing coverage. When one also includes ‘leftist Hollywood’, according to O’Reilly, “traditionalists are really up against it in the media – with two huge exceptions talk radio and Fox News” (ibid: 59). The fact that O’Reilly’s spectrum seems devoid of a far-right, or anything in between his show (which he portrays as centrist and independent, though traditional) and the far-left (there does not appear to be a slight or gradual-left) lessens not the resolute delivery with which he claims to unmask the workings of an all-powerful far-left.

Dobbs avoids pointing to a lack of coverage of his pet issues as having a partisan or ideological impetus. Instead he treats it as an oversight, a failing, of simple indolent and static journalism. When one of his issues spreads to the mainstream, his technique is to imply that public outcry demanded it could no longer be ignored. Yet while he may abstain from claiming credit, guests on his show efface such modesty. Not only is he lauded, he is often credited for bringing issues to the public eye. Colorado senator Tom Tancredo, a 2008 Republican presidential candidate states that, “he regularly overhears his colleagues telling each other, “If you do this Dobbs will go after us, or if you do this it will play well on Dobbs”” (Mullins 2006). As Anderson (2006) recounts, a Washington insider told him that “the Lou Dobbs factor” has become,

routine shorthand when calculating the potential for grassroots political backlash to particular policies. Two weeks ago ... [Bill] Clinton singled [Dobbs] out for praise: *I disagree with a lot of what Lou Dobbs says, but I still watch every night—and I learn something every time.*”

In 2007, Dobbs was invited to testify before a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee with a talk he entitled “Trade, Foreign Policy, and the American Worker.”

In other words, despite ratings standing around only 1 million viewers per evening, his influence seems to far outstrip these numbers. His rapid ratings increase during 2006,

seemingly coinciding with his spearheading of an illegal immigration and border security agenda, even generated talk in the blogosphere and talk radio about a possible Reform Party presidential campaign in 2008. Yet despite this, Dobbs refrains from trumpeting these successes as his own, instead praising his show's reports for striking a chord. While both shows take their cue from grassroots populism, the posture of O'Reilly is of *alerting the populace* to issues of concern; Dobbs is of a *journalist tuned in* to areas of concern. In this regard, while Dobbs displays a similar degree of involvement as O'Reilly, his particular news of feeling is stylistically closer to a network newscast. Not only does it contain less Lou throughout the show (as opposed to eternal O'Reilly), it utilises a higher proportion of elected officials and frequently files news of fact segments.¹¹⁷ In sum, the most vital distinguishing characteristic between these two involved anchors is that, whereas Dobbs seems to impart his beliefs *over* the news, O'Reilly takes his beliefs and *makes them into* the news.¹¹⁸

When one considers the cumulative narrative effect of these programs and books by both hosts, the image generated by their rhetoric is protecting a threatened or disappearing American way of life. It is not only rhetoric which shapes this image. The performance of both these anchors is far more complex than the traditional network anchors. Not only do they switch between the roles of journalist, pundit, citizen, and expert that are usually played by distinct sources on network news, both Dobbs and O'Reilly weave between these

¹¹⁷ Some of this may be attributable to the degree of abrasiveness that O'Reilly displays towards some of his guests. Ailes notes it is difficult to book high-profile politicians on *The Factor*. "Do you want to be lectured by some eight-foot guy telling you you're an idiot, and you don't give a shit about the country, and he gives you the last word, then he interrupts you and goes to commercial? I don't know, I wouldn't" (Kitman 2007: 198).

¹¹⁸ This, potentially, is why one gets a sense that Dobbs demands a greater degree of respect than O'Reilly among established journalists and politicians.

characters with effortless performance. O'Reilly has countless expressions that can immediately convey or alter the mood in a segment (see figure 5.8).



Figure 5.8. A Sampling of the Various Levels of Performance in a Single Interview.

This performative style of the talent, in terms of the facial and vocal cues that accompany each segment, is largely tied to the overriding narrative archetype of the program (Jacobs 1996). As Ailes notes of his time as a broadcasting consultant previous to running Fox News, he would habitually watch news with the sound off. “If there was nothing happening on the screen in the way the host looked or moved that made me interested enough to stand up and turn the sound up, then I knew that the host was not a great television performer” (Auletta 2003). This logic led O'Reilly to be one of Ailes' first hires when Rupert Murdoch started Fox News. The broader point is that content and performance mutually reinforce how these programs work to craft an experience of involvement. And further narrative intrigue is created by the overriding metaphors of both broadcasts.

While not necessarily bellicose, a constant presence of war, both actual and metaphoric, pervades both programs. The posture of both anchors, first and foremost, is to protect America's interests, be they economic, moral, sovereign, or security. For O'Reilly (2006a), it is a 'secular-progressive' agenda that engenders a creeping immorality that threatens America. In his mind, his show is one of the few things that attempt to stop this "S-P agenda" (O'Reilly 2006a: 208-9).

Even if I'm wrong and the unthinkable happens – that is, the United States "evolves" into a secular-progressive country – I'll know that I have fought on the side of the angels. I will have fought the good fight, and will have fought it honestly. Also, I will always have insights the S-P legions will never have: There is a right and a wrong in this world. There is justice and fairness. And, finally, there is a strong, binding tradition that has made America the most successful country the world has ever seen.

As such, his approach to stay the disastrous consequences of what he views as this 'culture war' is through aggressive journalism that "demands energy and commitment, courage and persistence" (O'Reilly 2006a: 205). While a 'secular-progressive agenda' is to be avoided for O'Reilly, conversely, a progressive journalistic style is to be embraced. Dobbs (2006a: 5) also reflects this antagonism, resolving to fight against 'the war on the middle class' and recapture the 'American Dream' by employing a revolutionary approach to news.

To call [the war on the middle class] anything less is a disservice to the truth and to the American people. The mass capitulation of most Americans to political correctness over the past two decades have frequently provoked me to forgo gentle and indirect language in favour of simpler and more direct statements of meaning. I'm biased in my preference for direct language, but I'm convinced there is no other way to address the most critical issues facing the country.

Both anchors are patriotic icons in the sense of representing a de facto eminence of America (cf. Graber 1994). As O'Reilly (2006a: 199) notes, he feels it is vital to "Stand up for your country! You can't be part of the traditional force unless you truly believe the United States is a noble nation." The symbolic use of graphics adds to this posture, the stars-and-stripes

ubiquitous throughout both programs, from the introduction and background visuals, to pins of the U.S. flag adorning each anchor's lapels (Hall 2002).¹¹⁹ And while visuals certainly reinforce, even a blind person would be aware of this foundational belief that underlines both programs, for is it declared repeatedly by both anchors, and any challenge to this assertion invokes immediate and harsh rebuke.

These beliefs, repeated ad-infinitum on both shows, reinforced by graphical representation, put one in mind of Soviet agitprop, something which if considered would add depth and further support Conway *et al.*'s (2007) analysis of O'Reilly. The fear and prejudice that Dobbs' and O'Reilly's words and graphics invoke, the flag-waving palette, the use of repetition and slogans, and the association both shows maintain with 'hard working' 'decent folks'¹²⁰ bear a striking similarity with techniques used to convey propaganda. While propaganda is often misconstrued with falsity, a more accurate description is fact infused with partiality and an eye to persuasion. Put otherwise, propaganda is about spreading belief, something embraced by these programs and shied away from in a traditional news of fact.

As O'Reilly noted of his style in 2000, when the show achieved its status as the #1 program on cable news, "I provide a solution, and then [the guests and I] debate that rather than the problem" (Larson 2000: 50). Yet despite such simplicity, his use of "generic, decontextualized, and anonymized images," along with the report's sweeping rhetoric and generalised frames, goes beyond simply crafting his particular vision of the world; these types of report "iconize and legitimize" these depictions as discursively familiar and phenomenologically 'real' (cf. Machin and Jaworski 2006: 363). One could describe a segment on *Lou Dobbs* on illegal aliens from Mexico, or the threat of consumer items produced in

¹¹⁹ While I am not sure when this occurred, O'Reilly and some of the other Fox anchors who so assiduously wore the pin in the years following 9/11 have recently removed it.

¹²⁰ The claim to represent the 'average' American resonates with a vast proportion of the populace who, despite economic or social standing to the contrary, view themselves as typical (Chinni 2005).

China, as a similar style of congruent reportage – leaving little doubt as to not only the problem, but who is responsible, and the preferable solution. And within each segment, the graphics, lettering, visuals and dialogue work harmoniously to create this effect (see figure 5.9), as the various components anchor, illustrate, and relay to-and-fro (Barthes 1977). The assumption by both hosts of the greatness and eminence of the United States makes these shows more overtly politicised than a traditional news of fact. O'Reilly and Dobbs are not mere anchors, but spokesmen for a like-minded flock.

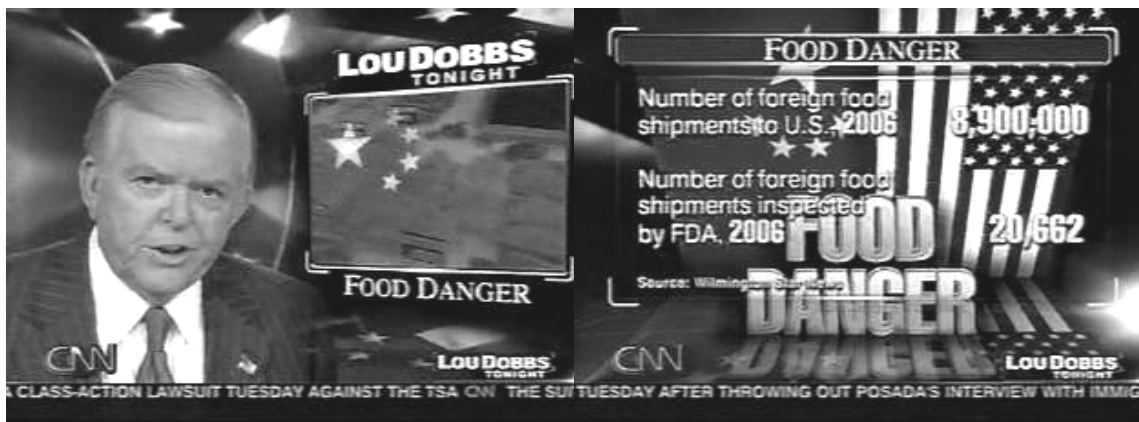


Figure 5.9. *The Strategic Use of Visuals in a Segment on Chinese Imports.*

There is no question that the anchor has played a substantial role in the history of U.S. network news. In the 1980s and 90s, network anchors moved beyond being expert reporters to attain almost celebrity status (Brants 1998). Salaries rose and the anchor became established as the face of the network news division. The network anchor is the trusted occupier of the desk; the reigning monarch of a family who possesses a pseudo line of succession to the throne. As such, the anchors' responsibility is to maintain or increase the status over that which they govern. The cable magazine anchor, on the other hand, is the product, they are the brand; with success largely tied to their persona. This is part of their appeal; by employing a charismatic type of leadership (cf. Weber 1946b), a Dobbs or O'Reilly type appear to break the stoic façade of the serious journalist. The fact that the anchor's

name always appear as part of the program title – *The O'Reilly Factor*, *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, *Anderson Cooper 360°*, *Hannity & Colmes*, *Scarborough Country*, *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, *On the Record with Greta* – is accordingly no mere coincidence. While *NBC Nightly News*, ABC's *World News Tonight*, and the *CBS Evening News* foray into the events of the day with trusted anchors, and *60 Minutes*, *Dateline*, and *20/20* take longer looks at current issues with dedicated correspondents, the personality-driven cable magazine provides time with involved anchors where content is secondary.

This flies in the face of conventional journalistic wisdom, exemplified by the Associated Press broadcast handbook which notes, "We are watchers, not participants; our role is to stand in for the public to make it possible for everyone to stay abreast of the latest developments" (Kalbfeld 2001: 27). This tendency which we have come to expect from 'objective' news is challenged by the cable magazines. Yet while both acknowledge their involvement, it is much less clear whether Dobbs and O'Reilly appreciate the methodological caveats engendered by an awareness of the epistemological effects of participation (cf. Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). The emancipatory potential of a reflexive approach demands an awareness of the inseparability of individual and collective knowledge and its impact on knowledge creation.¹²¹ If anything, the role of belief in these broadcasts amplifies the posture of certainty and incontestability of the information imparted. The 'truthiness' of such programs comes from interweaving the claim to fact, evidenced in network news, with relaxed rules of truth afforded by the certainty of belief.

¹²¹ Maton (2003: 54, emphasis in original), in a clear and succinct synthesis of the forms of reflexivity, notes "it has now become a sin to *not* be reflexive", within the Anglophone social sciences.

The Truthiness of Cable – The Role of Belief

I have to deal with a massive amount of social injustice and chicanery on a daily basis and it takes a healthy amount of agita to deal with it all efficiently and effectively. Trying to right wrongs in this country will wear you down, but anger can keep you going when everybody else is exhausted. So it's a tough situation for the traditional culture warrior: You need to keep the fires of indignation lighted but avoid the backdrafts

Bill O'Reilly, Culture Warrior (2006) – noting how emotion is not a hindrance but a catalyst to his brand of journalism.

The idea that a reporter should be disqualified because he or she actually cares, actually isn't neutral about the wellbeing of the country and its people? That's absurd!

Lou Dobbs, 60 Minutes profile (2007) – justifying his involvement and passion in conveying the news.

Journalism is a craft that flourishes in moments of uncertainty and the unexpected. And in a similar vein, the common cultural image of the journalist is one who thrives in the adrenaline-charged atmosphere of breaking news. Some of its most celebrated practitioners have garnered acclaim from placing themselves in dangerous wars, investigating shady characters, and embracing risks outside the everyday (cf. Lyng 1990; cf. Simon 2002). Yet paradoxically, the traditional presentation of network news, as with its news of fact equivalents in print, attempts to strip away or repress emotional extremes; portraying calm and detached renderings of the facts of the day (Hackett and Zhao 1998; Ward 2005). Despite its 'hot' content, broadcast news is calculatingly 'cool' (cf. Stearns 1994).

Traditionally, broadcast journalism has tried to find the appropriate balance between dispassion and interest, being impersonal but friendly (Stearns 1994; Aday *et al.* 2005). The regime of objective journalism can be viewed as one where overtly-expressive presentation has consistently been distrusted, and as such, is discouraged among those entering the craft (cf. Sparks 2000). We can see this is acted out in a number of ways, by demanding the separation of 'fact' from 'value', clearly delineating opinion or editorialising, and creating

schools of journalism and organisations that inculcate codes of professional ethics (Schudson 1990; 1995; 2001). The predominantly negative response within the industry to the civic journalism movement of the 1990s in the U.S. seems to stem from a sustained rejection of the personal and subjective in the crafting of news (Rosen 1999).

Yet the entry of the cable magazine seems to have either ignored or outright rejected the industry dictates that for the past century have acknowledged a key element of being professional is to control one's degree of personal engagement with a story. Much like medicine, law, and education, journalism is a field where practitioners are traditionally allowed to be interested in the people they need to interact with, but must simultaneously maintain distance to be considered professional. This thinking has evident roots in Enlightenment perceptions surrounding the proper exercise of reason and emotion. Whereas discourses around reason locate it in the mind, emotions are located discursively in the body (Barbalet 1998). This rationale leads to a historical distrust of the body, the site of passions, lust, drives, and desire. A distrust of emotion can accordingly be seen to stem from this misgiving (Elias 1982; Shilling 2002; Dixon 2003). As such, like other endeavours that follow an 'objective' method, the craft of journalism has historically shied away from displaying a sense of involvement. While the subject matter of journalism can be emotional, the trusted journalist (like the scientist, judge, or doctor) is encouraged to distance herself.

The cable magazines implicitly reject this logic, or at least the manifestation of such thinking in terms of performative and stylistic mandates. Anchors like O'Reilly and Dobbs, and from what they state, their audience, are persuaded to a greater extent when passion and involvement are evidently displayed (Dobbs 2006a; O'Reilly 2003; 2006a). On these programs, the distance one sees in a news of fact is transformed from a mandate to a modicum. Involvement in the cable magazine is not seen as an impediment to truth; on the

contrary, utilising one's beliefs often appears to be the point of departure. Practices common in the cable magazines, arriving at broad conclusions with only a cursory examination of specific factors, disregarding a need for expertise to support contentions, would simply not be acceptable under the mandates of a news of fact. It is only through the belief of the anchor that such assertions can be dispensed with confidence and ease. And through the strength of these convictions, it is possible the audience watching these cable news magazines may consider this to be as valid as more rigorously researched newscasts.

While consumption of various media products has always been associated with a specific form of audience gratification – *Financial Times* readers associate themselves with the business elite, the *Guardian* with the academic elite, and so on (cf. Curran and Sparks 1991) – cable magazines are more effusive than their news of fact counterparts in offering their audience continual praise, both implicitly and explicitly, for selecting the 'right' brand of news. In this sense, both shows can be seen to be part of a Madison Avenue culture that increasingly brands a product not only on its function but on the values it represents (Machin 2004). For instance, a staple of both shows are pat-on-the back viewer polls, which generate direct contact with the audience, thus leading to a sense of involvement (cf. Wall 2005). Indeed, these polls frequently generate laughable results in terms of a response rate that favours the 'preferred' response by 90 - 95 percent.¹²² This sort of response points toward a level of trust and concurrence with Dobbs and O'Reilly that makes them more akin to journalistic prophets than journalistic professionals. The danger with such overwhelming support is that it is indicative of an audience that is not forced to arbitrate between contrary and conflicting positions (Webster 2005). While both Dobbs and O'Reilly offer written

¹²² For example, the May 9th poll on *Lou Dobbs* asked "Do you believe the political adventurism of our religious leaders is a threat to our constitution and the separation of church and state?" 95 percent of participants responded in the affirmative. A similar poll the previous day registered 94 percent.

caveats in small print about the non-scientific nature of such polls, they are often inclined to refer to such responses to validate their perspective. The results, announced with gravitas at the end of each episode of *Lou Dobbs*, and to a lesser extent on *The Factor*, is pseudo-scientific affirmation of each host's beliefs.

Accordingly, in the search for truth, the posture assumed by these shows indicates the best avenue towards this is emotionally-engaged debate. Ironically, debate implies a mutable, contestable truth and while these shows may claim to value debate, much of what passes for it on *Lou Dobbs* and *The Factor* does little to shift the stated beliefs of either host. Kitman (2007: 3) notes of O'Reilly, he is "radical for TV journalism in that he thinks he knows what it all means. You may not agree with his analysis, point of view, or value system, but you always know where he stands." The danger of this degree of certainty by both anchor and audience is that such "customized media materials ... take this lifestyle segregation further. It will allow, even encourage, individuals to live in their own personally constructed worlds, separated from people and issues that they don't care about or don't want to be bothered with" (Turow 1997: 7). Yet this is seemingly inconsequential to both anchors.¹²³ Both claim that strongly held conviction is an appropriate, or perhaps even superior, journalistic method to uncover truth. Belief, it is important to remember, should not be misconstrued with faith – it relies on a foundation of fact, but often marshals only those facts which function as evidence for pre-held opinion, ethics, and morality.

The rationale for altering this established precept of journalism is twofold. From a rules of truth standpoint, oftentimes a lack of involvement in the story is perceived to be a limitation that allows political rhetoric and ideological doctrine to overwhelm so-called

¹²³ When challenged on their flexibility, O'Reilly and Dobbs are equally adept at trotting out issues where they have been swayed or had opinions transformed through persuasive debate 'based on the facts'.

independent common-sense reality. Or perhaps more accurately, the network news of fact model is adjudged to produce elite-oriented depictions of the issues of the day that do not factor into account the lived realities of the average person. Hence O'Reilly promises to hold each guest accountable in his 'no spin zone', ensuring the information delivered resounds with what 'the folks' understand. Dobbs (2006a: 84) roots out the policy initiatives deemed to ignore, or worse, neglect 'hard-working American men and women' in a broader 'war on the middle class'.¹²⁴ He notes that,

Broadcast news has homogenized its coverage to the point that the evening newscasts – aside from their anchors – have become almost indistinguishable. ... New York is the media and financial capital of the country; D.C. is the political capital. That leaves us about 250 million people across the rest of the country to account for, and to.

Such rhetoric is consistent with the second impact of this switch: a conscientious attention to falling network ratings that is interpreted as an increasing public disconnect with the traditional narrative style of objective journalism.¹²⁵ The effect of both these postures is a broadcast that far more explicitly works to involve the audience than traditional network news. These anchors are actively engaged with each and every story they tell, relating notions of fear, anger, and anxiety with their core viewership. The camera techniques to shoot both O'Reilly and Dobbs buttress this sensation – a clever amalgam of camera angles which allow the expressions and mannerisms of each anchor to be prominent – the result being a strong sense of interaction and involvement with each story being told (see figure 5.10) (cf. Graber

¹²⁴ Heibrunn (2007) notes in his review of O'Reilly's *Culture Warrior*, "There is something more than a little nonsensical in O'Reilly's lachrymose nostalgia about his humble origins, as well as in his self-important declarations about his heroic battle to save America from the cultural elites." Mentioning Dobbs, he notes, "One of the last lucrative growth industries in journalism, apparently, is defending the working stiff."

¹²⁵ As Auletta (2005) notes, while the evening newscast used to be the profit centre for network news, in the midst of falling ratings this role has been filled by 'feel good' morning shows like NBC's *Today* or ABC's *Good Morning America*, which are now responsible for around three-quarters of the news-generated revenue.

1994). This heightens the sensory experience from consuming such cable magazine texts (Howes 2006). In short, Dobbs and O'Reilly don't just tell the news of the day; they feel its impact and convey this with an intensity that almost radiates out of the television set.



Figure 5.10. Dobbs 'Debating' Laura Flanders.

As Ailes noted when O'Reilly pushed him to explain the success of *The Factor* on the fledgling network, there is an authenticity that comes through in O'Reilly's presentation, that he is not merely putting on an act but is an aggressive, temperamental, "prick" even when he is not on the air (Kitman 2007). According to staffers that work on the show, curiosity about O'Reilly's mood at the start of the day is somewhat pointless, for "everyone knows that O'Reilly is always pissed off, aggrieved, spoiling for a fight" (Colapinto 2004a). In this sense, the charges of fabrication (usually accompanied by charges of ratings-focus) which accompany the performance of a Dobbs or O'Reilly seem misguided. As Hochschild (1983: 35) perceptively notes, unless there is an inner acceptance of the rules of performance, jobs which involve an interaction that conveys feeling will come across as staged. As she notes, surface acting, the "body language, the put-on sneer, the posed shrug, the controlled sigh" will eventually come across as inauthentic if it is not developed into deep acting where the "display is a natural result of working on feeling; the actor does not try to *seem* happy or sad but rather expresses spontaneously, as the Russian director Constantin Stanislavski urged, a

real feeling that has been self-induced.” So whether what O’Reilly and Dobbs *think* is consistent, it less important for the consistency of their performance than the fact that they *believe* it to be true. As Jacobs (1996) notes, journalists come to see the world through narratives, a sort of ontological narrativity.

Thus rather than control being ingrained in performance, something characteristic in the traditional network anchor, belief comes to be the performative quality that must be deeply acted. The dampening of emotions that occurred across the news industry over the 20th century parallels a more general tendency over the same period towards a muting or constraining of what is perceived to be overly-involved or inappropriate emotive display (Elias 1982). One of the most evident manifestations of this shift can be seen in the rise of the bureaucratic organisational form, a rule-bound culture focussed on stable and predictable reactions (Weber 1946a; Flam 2002). ‘Professional’ journalism, developing during this period, seemed to imbue this accepted wisdom as it went about creating the codes of ethics that would delineate it from industries like public relations (Schudson 2001). So when broadcast news appeared in the 1950s, it should come as no shock that the demeanour of network anchors conformed to a calm, rational, archetype consistent with the preferred print techniques to reflect ‘reality’. As Walter Cronkite spoke of his momentary lapse in announcing the death of John F. Kennedy, to display personal involvement or a lack of control was assuredly unprofessional. Even Edward R. Murrow’s segments, which did not shy away from confrontation and critique, were expressed in a clipped, contained, and controlled manner.

Yet while intense emotive display in day-to-day interaction may have been infantilised during the 20th century, a concomitant rise in outlets provides zones where ‘being emotional’ is not considered childish (Stearns 1994). Quite obviously, one can look to sporting events

(Dunning 1999), film (Elias 1983), retail therapy (Campbell 1987) and psychiatry as fields where being involved is not only acceptable, but encouraged. Recent years have also seen the emergence of discourses around the desirability of emotional involvement in fields traditionally epitomised by detached, rationalised discourses. Laster and O'Malley (1996) observe 'sensitive' legal developments such as victim-impact statements and restorative justice which encourage the reassertion of emotion. Du Gay (1994) remarks that the business world began experiencing a shift away from a bureaucratic organisational model to a culture of managerial enterprise in the 1980s. Themes from one of the more influential texts by business 'gurus' Peters Waterman (2004: 13-14), note the best companies have: a bias for involvement, in terms of "active decision making – 'getting on with it,'" as well as a commitment to being close to the customer, "learning from the people they serve." Within journalism, cable magazines appear to be treading a similar path in terms of rejecting some of the rationalised values embraced by the objectivity regime. Such 'emotive' participation has prompted some academics (see MacDonald 2000; Zelizer 2000; van Zoonen 2005), to re-evaluate tabloid journalism, positing that entertaining journalism might be a catalyst for greater civic involvement.

Another interesting parallel to the rise of the cable magazine is interpretations by recent Eliasians on decivilisation.¹²⁶ Pratt (2002) considers how the re-emergence of 'ostentatious' punishment over the past few decades in the United States corresponds to a

¹²⁶ It is important to note that 'civilised' bears a closer affinity to behavioural observations of social domestication and impulse control, as opposed to a more pejorative connotation that associates it with social graces and moralistic conduct. To illustrate, a gentleman acting upon his righteous anger may have been perfectly 'civilised' during Victorian times, however, a civilising process transforms the behavioural norms associated with violence. Elias (1982) contends that the rise of security and economic interdependence in modernity gradually developed a sense of 'self' in relation to a larger, largely unknown, collective. But with this 'self' came a need for 'self-restraint', 'self-control' and 'self-denial'. The emotional extremes of life became lopped off, "at least as far as the direct release of pleasure [was] concerned" (Elias 1982: 242).

growing dissatisfaction with correctional practices perceived to rob the public of an experience of involvement. Mennell (2001) considers how the rise of the culture of sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll can be traced to a dissatisfaction prompted by the formality and dispassion of post-war America. In this sense, Dobbs and O'Reilly practice a style of journalism that is somewhat 'decivilised' in the sense of comfort with expressive outbursts. When it comes to certain issues, like immigration for Dobbs or paedophiles for O'Reilly, self-control is seen to sanitise the issue. All in all, there is quite an activist sense to these presentations, symbolised by O'Reilly's militaristic view of Fox News.

Our army is very George Pattonesque. We charge. We roll. The other armies that we're competing against are very Omar Bradleyesque. They're defensive players. They're cautious. They don't go into uncharted territories. They don't outflank. They play it the way it's been played for forty years. Those days are over (Auletta 2003).

In this regard, O'Reilly concedes that the famed slogan of Fox News 'We report. You decide,' might more accurately be described as 'We report. We decide' (ibid.). In this sense, what one witnesses in the cable magazines is op-ed journalism that presents itself as no-less valid than 'objective' news. Whereas in traditional network news, editorialising is something that demands special notification to the audience, lest it be misconstrued as factual reportage, the cable magazine makes no such distinction. The certainty of facts becomes wed with the conviction of beliefs.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated that the rise of the cable magazines is far more complicated than simple charges of sensationalism or pandering might often suggest. As was shown, programs such as *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Lou Dobbs Tonight* contain many similarities with network broadcasts, from stylistic resemblances, to a focus on balance and expertise, to shared

assumptions over professionalism and accuracy. Similarly, their position and heavy promotion as top broadcasts on their respective cable news networks implies a status of trust, a position which parallels the cultural role of the network anchor. In short, cable magazines contain many similarities to traditional newscasts in the ways that they attempt to evoke a sense of journalistic authenticity, something which is often ignored in the criticisms of such programs.

While the legitimacy of such programs may derive from these similarities, their success seems more likely attributable to their divergences. Specifically, this chapter has explored how such programs attempt to craft a connection with their audience, through a more impassioned and involved presentational style. This is cited by the creators of such programs as the primary innovation which has helped determine their success and, concomitantly, the decline of network news. As was witnessed in the textual analyses of both programs, such involvement is ubiquitous throughout each broadcast, and the rejection of passivity generates an appearance of caring about the issues. Aided by a highly personalised discourse, which refers to the audience directly, and claims to report on its behalf, O'Reilly and Dobbs can both be seen as successful examples of tailored products which have found a dedicated audience in an increasingly fragmented journalistic marketplace. As was discussed throughout this chapter, such dedication is at times aligned with influence and political effects, be it Dobbs' traction in the beltway or attention to one of O'Reilly's crusades. The journalistic impact of these hour-long programs is that they succeed in covering national and global issues without matching the budgetary depth and contextual meticulousness of the network newscasts; personalise their presentation despite lacking the immediacy of local news; and embrace dramatic presentation more evidently than their network counterparts

while stopping short of the pure entertainment function of sitcoms, dramas and reality shows.

The broader point is that these sorts of cable magazine are far more varied in terms of the intensity of their presentation than network news and far more nuanced than simplistic critiques would indicate. They blur the expectations that tie neutrality and passivity to reasoned argument and allow for an experience of involvement that is far more interactive with the audience and far more prone to extremes in terms of its tone (cf. Delli Carpini and Williams 2001). And this sort of thinking derives straight from the top. When Ailes saw an antiwar protest out in front of Fox's New York studios in 2003, he switched the ticker which circles the building to read "Attention protesters: the Michael Moore Fan Club meets Thursday at a phone booth at sixth avenue and 50th street" (Auletta 2003). In this sense, it is not that opinion is embraced that seems to displease the critics of such shows – indeed Edward R. Murrow and Bill Moyers are examples of editorial voices who are recognised as illustrious members of the broadcast journalism community – it is that the specific style of a Bill O'Reilly or Lou Dobbs is so often doused with hyperbole, intolerance, arrogance and dismissal of alternative voices that any advantage gained by a reflexive awareness is quickly outweighed by these journalistic shortcomings.

The O'Reilly Factor and *Lou Dobbs Tonight* have established a firm foothold as news partially by finding a successful and innovative form of broadcast that does more than just tweak the traditional frames within the field. As if recognising that traditional news sources are finding the balance between informing and entertaining, editorialising and muckraking, more challenging to achieve, both Dobbs and O'Reilly unapologetically reject well-established journalistic conventions as outmoded in the modern era. Just as network anchors

perform a solemn role, and weatherpeople are expected to be cheerful types,¹²⁷ the cable magazine anchor has come to be expected to practice the craft of journalism with a level of involvement far beyond the network anchor, without compromising a sense of importance. These shows escape many of the generalisations associated with tabloid journalism, purporting to cover serious issues with social significance rather than dealing in unique curiosities or mere titillation. The involved style they epitomize, reflected in the nature of the recurring segments on their shows with titles such as “Outrage of the Week” and “Unresolved Problem” (*The O’Reilly Factor*), or “Homeland Insecurity” and “War on The Middle Class” (*Lou Dobbs Tonight*), give an immediate sense of this concerned tone. As Dobbs’ producer refers to them, these recurring segments act as the ‘brands’ of the show (Auletta 2006).

The sense one gets from these cable magazines is accordingly not only that passivity, neutrality and a cool demeanour is uninteresting; the ancillary implication is that such techniques are ineffectual avenues to the truth. When asked whether his approach, which he feels is superior to traditional broadcast journalism, equates to a greater ability to discern the truth, Dobbs asserts, “I have strong feelings that I do. I have strong evidence I do” (Carter and Steinberg 2006). It is this confidence in their beliefs, in conjunction with the characteristics that resonate with established news programs, which helps legitimise cable magazines. The claim, so evident in both *The O’Reilly Factor* and *Lou Dobbs Tonight* is that truth is better served by their brand of news. Colbert’s notion of truthiness quips that such shows attempt to feel the news, at you. However, I think it is possible to go slightly further. By pre-digesting the news to feel it *with* you, the cable magazines contain all the qualities of

¹²⁷ As Auletta (2005) notes in his discussion of the morning news genre, the purpose of *Today*’s “Al Roker is not to provide weather reports but to play a character – friendly, jokey – called Al Roker. The weather is beside the point. [Good Morning America executive producer Ben] Sherwood says that it is important for the audience to get the feeling “that good things are possible today.””

being newsy, yet simultaneously eradicate the requirements of neutrality, detachment, and independence traditionally associated with quality news.

Chapter 6: Moments of Zen – The Popularisation of Satirical News

It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that's not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything. It's certainty.

Stephen Colbert, AV Interview (2006) – explaining how 'truthiness' has spread throughout the media.

The role of a free press is to be the people's eyes and ears, providing not just information but access, insight, and most importantly context. It must devote its time and resources to monitoring the government, permeating the halls of power to determine who is doing the people's work, who is corrupting the process, and who will promise to be a mole in the State Department if their homosexuality is kept secret. Only after that – and only with time permitting – should it move on to high-speed freeway chases.

Jon Stewart, America (The Book), (2005) – opening sentences on the chapter dedicated to the media, "Democracy's Valiant Vulgarians".

Comedy is a complicated craft. Fantastically pleasing when it strikes the right chord, painfully awkward when it does not, humour has myriad levels, intensities, and sophistication. Anyone who has ever learned a second language can attest that the ability to appreciate humour is one of the final and most challenging stages in the path to fluency. Even within our mother tongue the differences are notable. Just consider the vagaries and varieties of comedic form and genres – satire, wit, ridicule, parody, sarcasm, irony, slapstick, pranks, gags, toilet humour, wind-ups, black comedy, sketch, sitcom, romantic comedy, mockumentary, stand-up, impression, cartoon – that result in chuckles, sniggers, guffaws, giggles, and laughs as we react with amusement, mirth or hilarity. Occasionally, as with *Monty Python*, comedy is a pleasing mishmash of various genres and styles. And while we have all 'got a laugh' at some point, one of life's simple pleasures to be sure, the ability to hold a captive audience with humour, much less generate commercial success, is a completely different matter.

The work of many professional comedians is often little more than common folkisms would lead us to believe. It is a release, a lift, a soul-cleansing activity that, in the words of Canada's Comedy Network, is "Time Well Wasted". This is not a normative evaluation.

‘Good’ comedy may make insightful social observations without necessarily being profound, timely, or political; *Seinfeld*, *Blackadder*, and *The Office* being prime examples. Yet for certain comedic professionals, they bring the funny to bear on matters of social import and political consequence. Historically, literary satire has provided forms of moral and political critique (Griffin 1994). Twenty-first century incarnations of this movement can be seen in works like Heller’s *Catch-22* or Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and in films such as Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. One of the most successful examples of popular satire in recent years is *The Simpsons*, a show which bears a hallmark trait of much satire: despite varying degrees of subtlety, at times, it is quite conceivable the social edifice behind the entertainment façade escapes many viewers. It is both entertainment and commentary, able to be appreciated on a variety of levels. Within journalism, humour has long played a role in the form of the political cartoon, “mini-histories that speak about the concerns of the moment while addressing the human comedy in pointed and memorable terms” (Philippe 1980: 322). In short, comedy has the potential to go beyond its purely pleasurable affects to act as a discursive point of resistance to mainstream rationales of knowledge and power (cf. Foucault 1980).¹²⁸

The primary distinguishing point of satire from other forms of ‘pure comedy’ is that its targets exist in the ‘real’ world (Griffin 1994). Thus, while the intent of the comic may not be first-and-foremost social commentary (it could be entertainment, commercial success, and so forth) the fact remains that satire captures some element of the zeitgeist and contemporary political climate. Considering the history of political cartoons, it could be said that satire is a

¹²⁸ Of course, comedy also has the potential to be an instrument that transmits and reinforces dominant relations of power/knowledge. As Dentith (2000: 28) notes, “the cultural politics of parody is comparable to that of the cultural politics of laughter, which has likewise been claimed both for anti-authoritarian irreverence and as a means of ridiculing and stigmatising the socially marginal and the oppressed.”

bastion of the journalism industry, a mainstay of the mass press since its inception. Over the past few decades, satirical news has become a mainstay of television comedy as well, as evidenced by *Saturday Night Live*'s popular "Weekend Update" segment and the commercial and critical success of half-hour shows such as Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and *The Colbert Report* in the United States, and CBC's *Rick Mercer Report*, and *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* in Canada. A quick Wikipedia search reveals satirical broadcasts in the United Kingdom, Australia, Spain, France, Sweden, Chile, Israel and Quebec that also spoof journalism, an observation that indicates humorous critique is neither a uniquely North American nor English-speaking phenomenon. Despite differences, it is fairly evident that we can speak of 'fake' news being or quickly becoming its own distinct genre of broadcast – a modern adaptation faithful to the satiric tradition.

Yet it is not simply the popularity of satirical news broadcasts that is intriguing but suggestions that that these shows are not just being viewed as pure entertainment, but as valid sources of news. For instance, a 2004 Pew Research Center poll found that 21 per cent of 18-29 year olds cited Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live* as their primary news resource for the U.S. presidential campaign while only 23 per cent mentioned the traditional network newscasts. This shifted from 9 and 39 per cent, respectively, in 2000 (AP 2004). Baum (2005) notes that these shows act as gateways to consumption of traditional news sources, while Young and Tisinger (2006: 130) note that the "weeping, scolding, and ridiculing" of *The Daily Show* "is filling a void that news *alone* simply cannot." They add that consumption of *The Daily Show* is more in line with political behaviour than it is with the traditional consumption patterns of entertainment products. As Bakhtin (1984) notes of comedy, its purpose is often revival and renewal, and in the fractious political climate of the past eight years, it would seem that for many, the expression of such desire for

change has often been found through *The Daily Show*, and more recently, through *The Colbert Report*. Further indication of the growing authority and importance of this genre can be gleaned from the guest lists of these programs, from former-Presidents Clinton and Carter on *The Daily Show*, to political heavyweights Henry Kissinger and Madeline Albright appearing on *The Colbert Report*. In no small instance of irony, it appears not only is the audience taking such shows ‘seriously’, prominent political figures are granting access in the same manner they would a predominant news outlet. This seems part of a general trend towards more diverse manifestations of what ‘counts’ as news, especially within broadcast journalism (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001).

The purpose of this chapter is to take a look at two of the more prominent successes in this emergent television genre to see what, if any, relation they bear to mainstream conceptualisations of journalism. What makes them successful? What similarities are there with broadcast journalism and where do these products diverge? Are they legitimate forms of news, and if so, how do they convey this legitimacy while at the same time performing the role of entertainment-based programming? This leads us to interrogate a broader question that underlies this dissertation, namely, can we neatly distinguish between news and entertainment or is the unpleasing hybrid, ‘infotainment’, truer to the current state of media? Assertions which mirror that of *LA Daily News* columnist Scott Young (2004), who noted during Bush’s re-election campaign, that “Stewart is 1974’s Walter Cronkite. The most trusted man in America. His ‘Daily Show’ on the Comedy Channel is the most consistently funny show on television. It also just might be the most honest news show, fake or real,” are not radical points-of-view on the frontiers of public opinion. Indeed, this platitude is commonly heaped on both Stewart and Colbert as subsequent sections of this chapter illustrate.

These products, which challenge the rules of truth we require from traditional news sources, beg the question: what makes a news of feeling often as (or even more) compelling than a news of fact and how, exactly, is this accomplished? The ancillary question that naturally flows from this is: do these act as accompaniments or substitutes for traditional news? After laying out the similarities and divergences of satire from conventional broadcast journalism, this chapter closes with a theoretical consideration of the crafted experience of involvement when watching ‘fake’ news. The hope is that this will help bridge the sort of binary thinking that associates news with rationality; mistaking the cool, passive, detached emotional posture of traditional news as an absence of emotion and thus relegating all emotively-involved products to the realm of entertainment, sensationalism and tabloid. This leads to analytic confusion surrounding, and oftentimes dismissal of, news products that do not conform neatly to a pre-established, prototypical view of proper, professional journalism. By offering a more nuanced conceptualisation of the traditional binary of emotion and rationality we can begin to understand that satirical news does not occupy one-end of a well-intentioned, but ultimately flawed journalistic spectrum that places hard news on one end, soft on its polar opposite. Rather, satirical news is a product that shifts forms of communicative action while maintaining many of the basic frames we associate with the news.

The Most Trusted Names in News? – Bringing the Funny to the News

I want to say something about your show, and not just to flatter you, but it makes a point. I know that there are a lot of people here who feel the way that I do, that actually if you want to get through a lot of the nonsense and get to the heart of what the most important news of the day is, this is really one of the places to go to get the straight story, and it's ironic. I mean, it's true, it's true, Jon. You know, back in the Middle Ages – this'll sound a little weird, high-fallutin', but – the court jester was sometimes the only person who was

allowed to tell the truth without getting his head cut off, and in the current media environment, making jokes about serious stuff is about the only way...

Al Gore, appearance on the Daily Show (2007) – commenting on the place of satire within the broader field of journalism.

Attend a theatre performance and we know it is about to start when the lights dim. National anthems prelude the kick-off of sporting events around the world. The roaring lion of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer signals the start of films. In the 1980s and 90s, many sitcoms began with the announcement that they were “filmed in front of a live studio audience.” Such openings are cues, simultaneously letting us know things are about to begin and the type of product we are to expect. These are cultural artefacts, some, like the anthems before sporting events, universally-recognised.

So what would we expect the uninitiated viewer to make of a program that opens with a computer graphic of a rotating globe – the date superimposed over the equator – as a drum beat reminiscent of the military plays in the background? A deep stentorian voice intones the date and within seconds there is a bugle call. As the camera zooms in, we see that the date on the equator has been replaced by cycling list of prominent world cities: Hong Kong, London, New York and Moscow. This computerised graphics package gives way to a live shot of the studio, centred on an anchor at a desk, resplendent in a dark suit, backgrounded by three large video screens, one of which shows a computerised map of the world. One could be forgiven for mistaking these opening moments as indicative of a newscast; global graphics, display of the date, and anchors being leitmotifs of broadcast news (see figure 6.1). Yet as the opening graphics dissolve, the unwitting viewer gets the first clue that this differs in tone from a traditional news of fact (cf. Hartley 1982). As the scene switches to the studio, the serious background music suddenly changes to louder and less solemn rock-and-roll, and we hear a live studio audience cheering, screaming, whistling, and

whooping. This immediately shifts the mood of the opening (cf. Bull 2001). Our anchor grins and smiles, before speaking directly to his studio audience. If this is news – and it unquestionably relies on a visual literacy of what we expect news to look like (cf. Siber 2005) – it is certainly playing fast-and-loose with the archetypical opening. Thus begins *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

The Daily Show started in 1996 with Craig Kilborn, a former ESPN personality, as its host. Stewart took the reins in early 1999, signing on as both anchor and executive producer. His introduction is widely acknowledged to have sharpened the focus of the show to a more serious, politically-minded form of satire (Larris 2005). A more derisive take was offered by a *Rolling Stone* writer who claimed Stewart inherited, “an entire production team and writing staff schooled in the fine art of making jokes about supermodels” (Colapinto 2004b). As Stephen Colbert, who worked under both hosts notes, the correspondent pieces under Kilborn highlighted the ignorance of laypeople more than targeting people in positions of influence or power.¹²⁹

The purpose of the show is summarised quite clearly in the tag line on its official web site: “One anchor, five correspondents, zero credibility.” It notes: “If you’re tired of the stodginess of the evening newscasts, if you can’t bear to sit through the spinmeisters and shills on the 24-hour cable news networks, don’t miss *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, a nightly half-hour series unburdened by objectivity, journalistic integrity or even accuracy” (Comedy Central 2007a). Yet these contentions of frivolousness within this statement are significantly undermined in the next few lines of the online spiel. “The Emmy and Peabody Award-winning *Daily Show* takes a reality-based look at news, trends, pop culture, current

¹²⁹ Colbert notes he “never enjoyed that aspect of the show. I have no desire to club the equivalent of baby seals” (Fretts 2003).

events, politics, sports and entertainment with an alternative point of view.”¹³⁰ Thus the recurring contention of Stewart, that the show is only fake news, seems disingenuous at best, as prominent politicians increasingly traverse the interview desk, critical acclaim is heaped upon the show, and academics begin to interrogate the effect of *The Daily Show* as news (see Baym 2005; Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Young and Tisinger 2006; Fox *et al.* 2007).¹³¹ I have an affinity towards Baym’s (2005: 261) conclusion that, “*The Daily Show* can be better understood not as ‘fake news’ but as an alternative journalism, one that uses satire to interrogate power, parody to critique contemporary news, and dialogue to enact a model of deliberative democracy.”

The majority of the papers, which focus specifically on *The Daily Show*, investigate the program in terms of its impact on political engagement and attitudes towards the political process. One of the more evident cases of this was a forum held during the National Communication Association’s annual conference in 2006, which interrogated the claim by Hart and Hartelius (2007) that Stewart’s cynical approach to discuss politics was a threat to democracy, resulting in mistrust and antipathy in the process. Similar arguments have been made by Bennett (2007) and Baumgartner and Morris (2006), though Bennett argues that the context and the intended audience of the program may mitigate this effect. The opposite position is pursued by authors such as Hariman (2007), who asserts that Stewart’s comedic

¹³⁰ The Peabody awards, administered by College of Journalism at the University of Georgia, recognise “distinguished achievement and meritorious service by radio and television networks, stations, producing organizations, cable television organizations and individuals” (Peabody 2007). They are considered the most prestigious awards for American broadcast journalism, the Pulitzer being its print counterpart.

¹³¹ The lack of attention to date is partially attributable to its adolescence but is also likely part of a general academic negligence displayed towards non-traditional, soft news forms (Carter *et al.* 1998). However, there are signs this is changing. Between the first draft of this chapter in mid-2007 and year end, a number of peer-reviewed articles began to appear that focussed upon *The Daily Show*, including a selection of papers arising from a forum held during the National Communication Association’s annual conference, which interrogated *The Daily Show*’s relationship with democracy. Interestingly, the cable news magazines discussed in the previous chapter do not seem to have generated a comparable growing interest.

yet cynical take illustrates the equivalency between the average citizen and politicians, potentially promoting re-engagement. The other prominent academic thrust is to consider *The Daily Show* vis-à-vis traditional news sources and, through content analysis, attempt to judge whether its coverage is comparable. Authors such as Fox *et al.* (2007) and Marquardt (2007) conduct such studies, finding a reasonably similar level of ‘serious’ content. These sorts of discussions, while intriguing, bear little relation to this project as they often focus upon audience effects, or potential audience effects,¹³² and content while ignoring elements such as presentation, stylistic similarities to network news, and textual significance. Put otherwise, political and content research on the *Daily Show* rarely looks beyond its surface.¹³³

A few exceptions to this are worth mentioning, as they are more in-line with the discussion advanced within this project. Feldman (2007: 407) takes a look at the broader popularization of *The Daily Show* and considers how industry discourse about the program’s media criticism allows the journalism community to examine its own practices, noting that the show makes journalists reconsider their strict distinctions between news and entertainment; an assertion this dissertation reflects in its discussions of the relationship between Stewart and mainstream journalists. Borden and Tew (2007) make an argument that parallels this, noting that Stewart and Stephen Colbert are better viewed as media critics rather than journalists. This project, while agreeing with this sentiment, broadens this discussion outward to look at what similarities *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* share with traditional newscasts, which are reflected in the popular discourse around both programs and hosts as ‘news’. And Baym’s (2005) previously mentioned study parallels my assertion that

¹³² Most of the ‘politically-focussed’ studies surmise potential audience effects without actually measuring audience.

¹³³ A notable exception which is not germane to this project is Ross and York’s (2007) analysis of the humour towards foreigners in the program, which asserts that despite being a subversive program, *The Daily Show* relies on a stock of us/them stereotypes for its international humour.

The Daily Show is best-conceptualised as part of a increasingly growing field of acceptable styles of journalism, exemplified by the emergence of a news of feeling.

Of course, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* are not the sole instances of satirical broadcast news. We should also be aware that there has always been a certain muddying of entertainment, polemic, and truth in journalism (Sampson 1999). As such, we need to be wary of identifying them as pioneers of some sort of avant-garde style of news making. In the United States, Chevy Chase signed on to *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update" anchor desk in 1975. The mood of the segment, which runs about eight minutes at the mid-way point of the broadcast, has changed over the years but its core essence of summarising an event from the previous week, punctuating each summary with a punch-line or two, has remained consistent. Canada's *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* (launched in 1993) and its spin-off *Rick Mercer Report* (2004) take elements from this tradition of summary-and-quip but also mimic elements of HBO's marginally successful *Not Necessarily the News* (1983-90), based on BBC's more successful *Not the Nine-O-Clock News* (1979-82) in terms of stretching the segment to a half-hour broadcast and including a number of sketches and parodies.¹³⁴ Similar to Bakhtin's (1984: 38) observations on the philosophy and liberating power of laughter, such programs often act as resistance; "Is there upon earth a more potent means than laughter to resist the mockeries of the world and of fate? The most powerful enemy experiences terror at the sight of this satirical mask, and misfortune itself retreats before me, if I dare laugh at it."

¹³⁴ A late-1990s BBC program, *The 11 O'clock Show*, continued this tradition. Its most famous alumni are Sacha Baron-Cohen, better known as Ali G and Borat, and Ricky Gervais, creator and star of *The Office*. In this regard, faux news proves fertile ground for comics. Chevy Chase, Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray and Dennis Miller (now a commentator for Fox) all spent time behind the "Weekend Update" desk, Steve Carell was a *Daily Show* correspondent, and Rowan Atkinson was the primary cast member of *Not the Nine O'Clock News*.

Yet one needs to be careful not to teeter in the opposite direction, in that while it is important to acknowledge the influence of earlier instances of broadcast satire, it would be erroneous to claim they achieved the same degree of prominence as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. While only 1.2 to 1.4 million people watch either show on a nightly basis, their influence reaches disproportionately beyond the scope of these numbers (Larris 2005). So essential questions to ask of both programs are the interweaving queries of why here and why now – in other words, what are the particulars about the social space, cultural climate, and political environment that provided a fertile network for these creations to thrive (cf. Latour 2004; cf. Callon 1986)? Related to this is the question of how each program has managed to achieve both critical and popular acclaim. And while the political climate, technological developments, and alteration of both the journalism and entertainment landscape are certainly relevant factors, the most straightforward avenue to begin answering these questions is to examine the specific format, repeated night-after-night, as these products came into focus, moving from mere glance to fall under the full gaze of the public eye.

Daily Occurrences – Typical Format, Recurring Segments, and Guests

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart – it's even better than being informed.
Comedy Central (2007) – closing sentence of the network's online spiel
 about the show and its purpose.

It is hard to point to a specific moment when Stewart established his imprint on *The Daily Show*, and equally difficult trying to assess when it moved from cult to popular status. However, the win of a Peabody award for its 2000 U.S. Presidential coverage could certainly be considered one of the stepping stones. In its recognition of *The Daily Show*, the panel noted:

Out of the convoluted sameness of media coverage of the last presidential election sprang the irreverent and inventive "Daily Show with Jon Stewart:

Indecision 2000.” Offering biting political satire, these scintillating segments had something droll and amusing to say about almost everything and everyone associated with American politics and the presidential election. The highly original pieces covered the campaigns, conventions, election night and recounts with flagging and with exceptional insight. Providing a bird’s eye view of an ever-expanding circus, “Daily Show” host Jon Stewart and “Indecision 2000” lampooned politicians as well as reporters for taking themselves too seriously. ... No one was safe, and no topic was sacrosanct as they chased celebrities, political figures and ordinary people-on-the-street in their quest for unpredictable and hilarious “news.” (Peabody 2007)

So this could certainly be considered one of the earlier moments in terms of critical acclaim being extolled on the program. It seemed popular acceptance was soon to follow. By 2003, the audience for *The Daily Show* had nearly doubled under Stewart, from 427,000 in 1999, to 788,000 (Bauer 2003). This is not to say critical acclaim was on the wane. That same year the Television Critics Association named *The Daily Show* its winner for “Outstanding Achievement in News and Information”. It is instructive to note that the two previous and following years, the award was given to PBS’s *Frontline*. The year it won, *The Daily Show* beat out such notables as *60 Minutes* and *Nightline* (TCA 2007). During the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries of 2004, *The Daily Show* drew more viewers among the 18-34 male age bracket than any of the nightly network broadcasts (AP 2004). By 2005, Stewart was averaging 1.4 million viewers per evening (Goetz 2005) while winning another Peabody for the show’s “Indecision 2004” election coverage. As an increasingly popular source of election coverage, mid-term reporting by *The Daily Show* in 2006 drew just shy of 2 million viewers per evening (Fitzgerald 2006). The irony is that a comparison of the guest list over the years quickly illustrates that ‘star power’, in terms of the Hollywood celebrities appearing as guests during the interview segment of the show, has declined substantially since 1999. While the vast majority of guests in 1999 were luminaries of television and film, a gradual change seems to have occurred since; such that by 2007 interviewees are predominantly from

the world of politics and media.¹³⁵ This shift seems recognition that interviews with celebrities are the staple of the other late-night talk shows (Fretts 2003). In recent years the interview segment has been extended, moved permanently to the final slot in the program, and given over to more serious conversation (Larris 2005). The interview is now somewhat reminiscent of the one-on-one interviews conducted on the Sunday morning talk shows, except less confrontational, and with continual injection of levity from Stewart.

Yet it is before Stewart gets to his nightly guest, when he presents a satirical news update and parody news report, that much of the growth and success *The Daily Show* is likely derived (Baym 2005). In this regard, the format of the show is very consistent, a nine to ten-minute introduction and news update, followed by commercials, a shorter five to six-minute news report parody, another commercial break, and an interview that regularly lasts six to seven minutes.¹³⁶ The last portion of the show before its credits is *The Daily Show*'s trademark "Moment of Zen", a short 10 or 15-second video that habitually bookends the show by offering an ironic or humorous clip relating to a story covered during the opening update. From the style of the opening graphics, to the light-hearted 'kicker' which closes the show, all of these elements are reminiscent of a news of fact, both in terms of form and in terms of style (see figure 6.1). So while the program may have a comedic-focus, its setup has the predictability and regularity we have come to expect from the news.

¹³⁵ A comprehensive list of guests throughout the years can be found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_The_Daily_Show_guests.

¹³⁶ With prominent political guests, Stewart forgoes the second segment to conduct an extended interview.



Figure 6.1. A Similar Look to Network News.

Immediately after Stewart quiets the crowd from his rock-and-roll news opening, he generally performs a short teaser for the evening's guest. It is not an especially in depth or crucial function of the show, as it really does not 'tease' like a typical journalistic teaser, which aims to keep the audience watching based on the implied interest of the forthcoming story. Rather, it is a comedic technique Stewart uses to interact on a more informal, personal level with his audience (both in studio and at home). Indeed, oftentimes Stewart will follow this teaser with a short riff about something he has shared with the studio audience in the warm-up to the show. Again, it is this sort of informal personalisation, frequently sprinkled with pop culture references, that clearly delineates Stewart from network news products. By speaking in a personal manner to the audience – and unlike the cable news pundits who do this as well – Stewart's self-deprecating humour makes for an audience that is attentive, yet at ease. Similar to politicians who use this same technique of offering amusing anecdotes before delving into more serious fare, the effect of such comedic intervention is to set a

pleasant mood of expectation that, in theory, makes for a receptive audience (Fairclough 1995; Delli Carpini and Williams 2001; cf. Baum 2005).¹³⁷

The first portion of the show is a news update on the leading issues of the day. These updates (usually no more than two) are unlike the opening monologue of late night talk show hosts, or “Weekend Update”, in that *The Daily Show* coverage is far more substantive, both in terms of a focus on policy and in terms of the length of time devoted to each issue (Baym 2005). Fox *et al.* (2007) argue that on a substantive level, *The Daily Show*’s coverage of the 2004 Presidential election was on par with network newscasts, even when one takes into account the humorous asides. While studies indicate that American journalism increasingly covers stories that address the cultural zeitgeist, rather than issues that relate directly to civics and government action (Jurkowitz 2000), Stewart’s coverage is almost entirely political. And his treatment of politics is quite different from *SNL*, Jay Leno or David Letterman’s comedic consideration, the nature of which is “determinedly non-issue oriented. In most years, nine out of ten political jokes are not directed toward a political issue but more likely to a personal foible of a political leader. According to late night shows, presidents and presidential candidates are incredibly old, fat, dumb, lecherous, or prone to lie” (Nevin *et al.* 2003: 130). In this respect, the form of this opening segment is far more similar to newscasts than other political comedy. In its own words, Stewart and his *Daily Show* correspondents “comment on the day’s stories, employing actual news footage, taped field pieces, in-studio guests and on-the-spot coverage of important news events” (Comedy Central 2007a). Recurring issues, again like both cable and network broadcasts, are given a title and corresponding graphic when discussed. The news update portion of the show, in

¹³⁷ Although I can not substantiate this, my sense is that setting expectations is a crucial element of a news of feeling. By acting informally to precede the show, Stewart lowers the tacit requirements of proof for the following stories. Conversely, the teasers that precede cable magazines raise the implicit standards of proof.

this respect, looks very much like broadcast news, employing similar video footage, over-the-shoulder graphics, banner headlines, and ‘on-the-spot’ correspondents – all-the-while anchored by a white male in a dark suit.

Upon returning from its first commercial break, *The Daily Show* correspondents are called upon to present longer current affairs pieces that have the effect of news parody. While frequently focussing on significant political and social issues such as racism, immigration or gay marriage, the correspondents concentrate either on the fringes or at the inane or ridiculous. For instance, a recurring segment recently launched is “Wilmore-Oliver Investigate”, a spoof of investigative reporting. In the first episode, an exposé on a city councillor who wanted to ban the “n-word”, Oliver (who is white and British) kept getting Wilmore, *The Daily Show*’s “Senior Black Correspondent”, to say “nigger” every time he wanted to ask a question that contained the word. In a June 2007 interview on *NPR*, Wilmore commented that it was the perfect forum to satirise the overreaching of political correctness (*NPR* 2007). While these segments generate a laugh, as Baym (2005: 269) notes they serve a purpose; “their deeper thrust is subversion, an attack on the conventions and pretensions of television news.” Utilising “exaggeration, often to the point of ludicrousness,” these reports take a broad sweep at news conventions, the political process, and extremist viewpoints, often simultaneously within the same report.

Entering the Nation – The Spin-off Colbert Report

The Truth hurts; fortunately for America, I’m a masochist.

Stephen Colbert, The Colbert Report (2005) – a trademark truthiness metaphor to open the show.

On October 17, 2005 *The Daily Show* gave birth to *The Colbert Report*, a mark of success in terms of an already niche product having the popular capital to launch a similarly focussed

spin-off. *The Colbert Report* is almost an evil twin of *The Daily Show*; if Stewart is the droll network anchor, Colbert is the overzealous cable pundit. His show is a parody of cable magazines that deliver news designed for you, not necessarily news that is important to you (cf. Jurkowitz 2000). Broadly defined, “parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production of practice” (Dentith 2000: 9). As the official website intones:

On October 17th, 2005, television and linguistic history was made with the premiere of *The Colbert Report*, hosted by former *Daily Show* correspondent and bear-hating patriot Dr. Stephen T. Colbert, D.F.A. It was on that show that Stephen coined the word “truthiness”, which went on to become Merriam-Webster’s 2006 Word of the Year. ... With the gravitas of Stone Phillips and the spirit of Captain America, nobody feels the news at you like Stephen Colbert. (Comedy Central 2007b)

For a show on cable, the early ratings were quite successful, debuting with approximately 1.13 million viewers (Crupi 2005). In the first week, Colbert established his ‘character’ through the introduction of “truthiness”, by engaging Stone Phillips, his first guest, in a “gravitas off” where each of them had to repeat inane phrases seriously, and by cultivating a devoted right-wing persona, evidenced when he commemorated the death of Rosa Parks in his segment, “The Wørd”.¹³⁸

Yesterday was full of loss for America, the greatest of which was beloved civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks. Which brings us to tonight’s Wørd: Overrated. ... Now, I know this isn’t going to win me any popularity contests, but am I the only person who remembers that Rosa Parks got famous for breaking the rules? ... Look, there were other options. How about renting a car? If so many people were upset, why not start your own bus company? Let the free market do what it does best: bring justice to the disenfranchised (McFarland 2005).

In terms of critical recognition, *The Colbert Report* was nominated for both Emmys and Television Critics Awards during its first year of eligibility. However, it is the popular success

¹³⁸ It is interesting that in its first week, Leslie Stahl of *60 Minutes* and Fareed Zakaria, editor of *Newsweek* international, appeared on *Colbert*, lending journalistic credence to the production (Masland 2005).

of Colbert that is more remarkable, and at times, as bizarre as the “bear-hating patriot” he purports through his nightly character. *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* are both consummate examples of a rapid ‘YouTube-isation’ that has swept popular culture. While each program may only be watched by between 1.2 and 1.4 million viewers per evening, countless others see segments of the shows which are linked to by bloggers (Goetz 2005). As a BBC technology special noted, we are in the midst of a second dotcom boom, Web 2.0, where content is not only available to, but created by, the millions of web users (Kelly 2007). From Wikipedia to YouTube, Colbert seems to have recognised this trend towards re-mediation and uses it to promote his show. In this respect, *The Report* embraces the spirit of media convergence (cf. van Cuilenburg and McQuail 2003; cf. Jenkins 2004).

One need only look at the Wikipedia entry for *The Colbert Report* to get a sense of the depth and pedantry provided by his following, the somewhat rabid “Colbert Nation”.¹³⁹ Colbert addresses his audience under the shorthand “Nation” throughout each show, at times instructing them to mobilise to a cause that strikes his fancy. One of the more notable examples of this was hijacking a bridge naming contest in Budapest. The mobilisation of the ‘Nation’, alerted by Colbert to the contest, resulted in the “Stephen Colbert Híd [bridge]” winning the online voting; his 17,231,724 votes in the first round garnering over 50 per cent of the vote. Although the bridge was not named after him, the Hungarian ambassador to the United States appeared on *The Report* to present Colbert with a document recognising his triumph along with an official Hungarian passport. A similar grassroots call led to the

¹³⁹ Incidentally, the Colbert Nation is basically an official fan site for *The Colbert Report*, complete with a welcome note from Colbert, inauthentic bio, fan gear, a covenant, and updates of ongoing elements of the show. Other prominent sites dedicated to Colbert include www.nofactzone.net (a play on O’Reilly’s ‘No Spin Zone’) and www.wikiality.com (a Colbert ‘truthiness’ specific encyclopaedia that uses the Wikipedia engine.)

Saginaw Spirit of the Ontario Hockey League renaming their mascot “Steagle Colbeagle the Eagle”, after Colbert’s Nation was called upon to dominate an online vote.

This parody of kowtowing to the enormous ego of Colbert, offering as many honours as possible to recognise his greatness, is one of the less subtle swipes at the cable talk show hosts he imitates. In terms of this over-hyperbolic sense of self, Colbert notes, “I saw O’Reilly do an interview with President Bush, and he said, “Guys like us,” and I said, “Shit, the most powerful man in the world and a guy with 2 million people a night watching his show.” I keep that equation in the forefront of my character” (Dowd 2006). Other institutions have gotten in on the joke of their own accord: The San Francisco Zoo named a baby bald eagle, Stephen Jr., with Colbert’s blessing; Ben and Jerry’s introduced the “Stephen Colbert’s Americone Dream” ice cream flavour in 2007; and The Great Turtle Race, online coverage of the migration of leatherbacks turtles from Costa Rica to the Galapagos Islands, named a 2007 female entrant “Stephanie Colburtle the Turtle”.

This grassroots internet culture, so responsible for Colbert’s success, is the basis for some of his most notable parody. Colbert coined the term “wikiality” during one of his “The Word” segments, approvingly noting that “any user can change any entry, and if enough users agree with them, it becomes true.” When a report surfaced that Microsoft had been paying people to alter their Wikipedia entry in more favourable terms, Colbert coined the term “wikilobbying”, to note that “when money determines Wikipedia entries, reality has become a commodity.”¹⁴⁰ So while Colbert’s launching point may have been a clever mockery of right-wing journalist/pundit hybrids, with time it seems his show has graduated beyond specific mockery to tackle a broader range of targets.

¹⁴⁰ When Colbert interviewed the founder of Wikipedia, he approvingly noted the site brought “democracy to information,” and moved away from the views of the “elite who study things” (Colbert Report 2007j).

Each episode of *The Colbert Report* begins with an introduction akin to that of the cable personalities he mocks. With the first shot and dialogue of the show – a front-on view of Colbert at the anchor desk staring into the camera as he intones with grave seriousness “Tonight” – it is obvious the focus is squarely on Colbert.¹⁴¹ Mocking the emotively worded, opinion-laden teasers that lead into many news shows, he gives a rundown of the show, before offering a final metaphor, and rolling the opening montage. With each headline, Colbert turns to different cameras in studio, a comedic relay between his expression, the banner headline, and the accompanying explanation (cf. Barthes 1977). These types of teasers: “Hippocratic for the People” (“My brand new segment on health. Missing it, could kill you”); and “Tree Plugger” (An interviewee promoting a book protecting California’s redwoods, “When he falls, everyone’s gonna hear”), are emblematic (Colbert Report 2007a). In the first three months of the show, the verbal metaphor that followed these teasers always contained the word truth, or some derivative. Some of the more creative phrases, always followed by: “This, is *The Colbert Report*.”, then the opening montage, include: “Strike up the klezmer and start acting like a man. You’re about to have a Truth Mitzvah.”; and “You want the Truth? You can’t handle the Truth! But, I’ve got oven mitts.”¹⁴² This ‘truthy’ constant has since been relaxed, though truth-derivatives still leave an indelible mark throughout all elements of the show.

The show then delves into its opening montage, and similar to *The Daily Show*, Colbert’s is an imitation of that which he parodies. In an out-of-character interview, Colbert explained how something as basic as the set was designed to satirise the self-importance of cable journo-pundits.

¹⁴¹ As we saw in the last chapter, this is precisely the same way Bill O’Reilly begins each episode of *The Factor*.

¹⁴² For a complete list of opening lines, see:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_The_Colbert_Report_episodes.

Status is always ripe for satire, status is always good for comedy. And they have the highest possible status – and that’s what we’ve tried to amplify with everything on the show. Everything on the show has my name on it, every bit of the set. One of the things I said to the set designer – who has done everything, I mean even *Meet The Press*, he does that level of news design – was “One of your inspirations should be *The Last Supper*. All the architecture of that room points at Jesus’ head, the entire room is a halo, and he doesn’t have a halo.” And I said, “On the set, I’d like the lines of the set to converge on my head.” And so if you look at the design, it all does, it all points at my head. And even radial lines on the floor, and on my podium, and watermarks in the images behind me, and all the vertices, are right behind my head. So there’s a sort of sun-god burst quality about the set around me (Rabin 2006).

Bakhtin’s thoughts on the carnivalesque attend to this sort of parody, which feeds off the popular energies of the carnival, the crowd debunking official seriousness and celebrating its mockery (Dentith 2000). Colbert’s persona relates to Bakhtin’s (1984: 45) observations on the metaphor of “The Mask” which relates “to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life.” Colbert himself notes, “I get to hide behind a character face, so I get away with a lot that maybe Jon [on *The Daily Show*] wouldn’t because they would judge Jon and I have the layer, I have the protective mask” (Charlie Rose 2006).

The opening is consistent with this rationale. A synthesised trumpet plays a few attention-grabbing notes before a computerised bald eagle swoops into dive. Colbert’s advice to Cheap Trick, who wrote the rock-and-roll theme song, was to replicate the grandeur most newscasts try to fashion with their openings, to “put majesty on top” (Edwards 2005). The eagle, which appears throughout the opening, performs two functions. As an icon of patriotism, it helps establish the overriding mood of the show (cf. Barthes 1957; 1977). It is also a technical device, acting as a screen wipe between the numerous graphical switches that mark the 30-second opening (as a reinforcement of the patriotic fervour, it is superfluous). As the eagle swoops down from the sky it emerges over a background reminiscent of the ‘Stars and Stripes’, symbolic words such as patriotic, actionable, valiant, gripping, and

critically acclaimed appear over the background, written in white capital letters and separated by stars. Colbert then makes his first appearance, superimposed over the background – the bottom third of which is a graphic of Mt. Rushmore – whilst waving a large American flag. Further images of Colbert are interspersed throughout the opening, including a shot of him looking serious and removing his glasses, and a pan over of him as he stands on a computerised map of the United States, colour-filled with the American flag. Words such as relentless, powerful, courageous, and flagaphile appear in the background at various moments. The montage is a pastiche of Americana, from the red-white-and-blue colour scheme, to the eagle, iconic monuments and symbolic word choice. This strategic use of visuals not only calls up cultural recollections but set the overall mood of the broadcast (Erikson 2000). Yet this opening, like most of the graphical packages within the show, is consciously over-the-top. For the initiated viewer this visual irony is evident, for while the images draw upon a set of naturalised images, the meaning intended is incongruous (cf. Scott 2004). The overall visual mood of the show, from the opening montage, to the studio set up and graphics for various segments, is a theatre of the patriotic absurd; right-wing cable punditry taken to a ridiculous extreme (see figure 6.2).



Figure 6.2. *Patriotic Punditry to the Absurd.*

The format of *The Colbert Report* is less structured than *The Daily Show*, in that, while also divided into three consistent portions, the content and segments are more open to adaptation, much the same as the recurring cable news segments examined in the previous chapter. The first segment is similar to Stewart, though Colbert typically addresses more stories, applying right-wing punditry to the *SNL* model of news headlines followed by short commentaries. From time-to-time, a story that leaves Colbert particularly outraged will lead to him threaten retribution if he could be put into contact with the main protagonist. This aggressive policing posture, as we saw in Chapter 5, is a tactic borrowed from O'Reilly, and seems to be a trait Colbert takes especial delight in mocking. For after declaring his anger and desire for vengeance, the camera often pans to his left, revealing the person in question. The first segment always ends with Colbert's famed, "The Wørd" segment – its initial entry of "Truthiness" lending itself to the title of this project – an obvious send-up of O'Reilly's "Talking Points' Memo" (see figure 6.3), which leads each episode of *The O'Reilly Factor*.

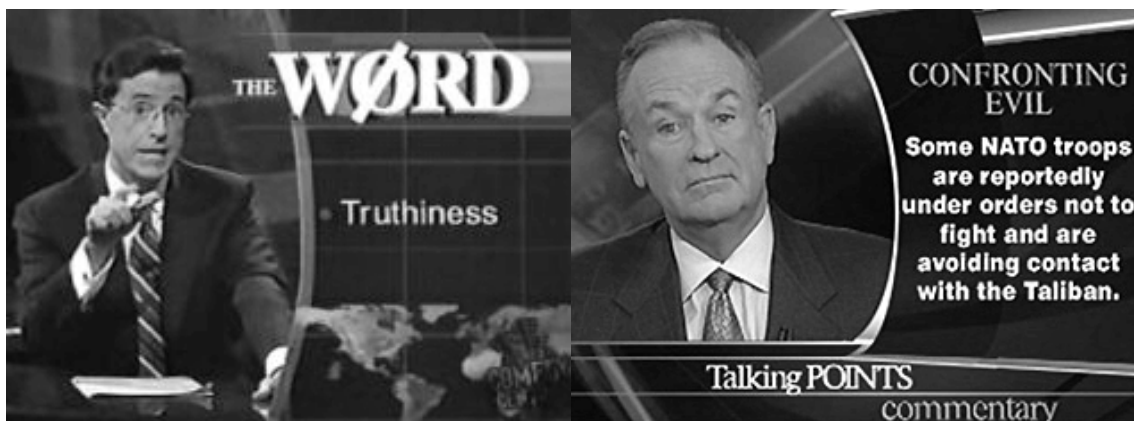


Figure 6.3. Similarities between Colbert's "The Wørd" and O'Reilly's "Talking Points".

This close before the first commercial is an effective change of gears into the second portion of the show. As Colbert notes of O'Reilly, "I watch the way he talks and I just think I wish I could capture some of that self-assurance. ... He can talk about *anything* and it's important because he's talking about it" (Gross 2005). In this sense, "The Wørd" ushers in the endless

parody of right-wing punditry that takes over as the show switches from daily headlines. As the double entendre of the title would indicate, while Colbert analyses a subject through a single word, he simultaneously provides us with the definitive word.

The second segment is a diverse compilation of sketches and recurring segments. And it is during this section where it becomes apparent that what Stewart is to network news, Colbert is to cable. While satirical subject matter and the news cycle drive *The Daily Show*, the thrust of *The Colbert Report* is pure parody provided by Colbert himself. All segments involve him, pontificating and bloviating on whatever story he is telling. In this way, he is more akin to the correspondents who drive the second segment of *The Daily Show*, the only portion of the show where Stewart is notably absent. Where Stewart is the anchor, introducing stories, interacting with correspondents and interviewing prominent figures, Colbert disdains this master of ceremonies role, instead placing himself at the heart of all aspects of the show. The titles of many long-recurring segments point to the difference. Colbert has “Threat Down” (a near-weekly segment where he outlines his top-five threats to national security, his declared nemesis, bears, frequently topping the list); “Tip of the Hat/Wag of the Finger” (a similar segment to “Threat Down” where Colbert admonishes and celebrates counterpoised newsmakers); “Formidable Opponent” (where he debates himself); and “I Called It!” (which, as the title suggests, is Colbert celebrating his own predictions from previous shows, complete with confetti). While Stewart’s titles are puns reminiscent of network news segments, Colbert taps into the activism-oriented segment titles donned by the cable magazines.

The final portion of *The Colbert Report*, like *The Daily Show*, is the interview. Almost exclusively, the guests on *The Colbert Report* come from the world of politics, journalism and current affairs, rather than film and television. While the origin of guests may be similar, the

difference in style between the two interviewers is markedly different. Guests on *The Daily Show* are introduced while offstage and walk out to meet Stewart at his anchor's desk (a form shared with late-night talk shows). Colbert, on the other hand, introduces his guests by leaving his anchor desk then bounding around his studio, sometimes superimposing Polaroid-like snap shots of him onto the screen, before heading over to the interview desk where the guest is already seated. This appears a backhanded swipe at journalists who consider themselves, not the source, the focal point of an interview.¹⁴³ The interview, like the rest of the show, involves Colbert ingratiating himself with people who share his world view, while haranguing and badgering those with whom he disagrees. As he admitted in a 2006 story, Colbert often warns his guests "Just understand, I'm going to be a jerk out there" (Dowd 2006). The entire effect of this segment is more theatre of the absurd. For instance, when he interviewed Lou Dobbs on January 24, 2007, Colbert parodied Dobbs' relentless flogging of illegal immigration by having a barbed-wire fence installed around the interview area.

To mock effectively, these shows make the target recognisable, largely by paralleling that which they satirise. This is a crucial distinction to which one needs to be attentive if we want to understand the rationale underlying each show's presentation and the manifestation of this in a consistent style. Because each show has a different target as the foundation of its satire, the similarities and divergences discussed in the subsequent sections are not necessarily the same for both shows. For instance, while Stewart has been critiqued for being too soft on guests, a critique which speaks to the expectations placed on him from without, Colbert would never be subject to this critique. Because while Stewart's interviews have the feel of a

¹⁴³ Interestingly, the only time this self-aggrandising introduction has not occurred was when Colbert interviewed O'Reilly, in 2007. For the event, Colbert hung a "Mission Accomplished" banner in studio; a replica of the one from President Bush's infamous speech to declare the end of the Iraq War (Sklar 2007).

serious, yet light-hearted interview, Colbert's are openly antagonistic, confrontational to such a degree as to be preposterous. Stewart's more impersonal and less weighty demeanour ironically places higher expectations of professionalism and seriousness than Colbert would ever incur. The difference between the two is well-summed by the 'democratic' encyclopaedia that is the internet's Wikipedia. While both of the personalities and shows have substantial entries, the most obvious difference is that Jon Stewart's bio is indistinguishable from his current status as host of *The Daily Show*, whereas Colbert's bio has two entries, one for Stephen Colbert and one for "Stephen Colbert (character)".

Comedy Central's News Headquarters – Similarities to Network and Cable News

I sort of function the same way as you would expect the anchor, as a managing editor.

Jon Stewart, Fresh Air Interview (2005) – explaining the writing and news selection process of *The Daily Show*.

There's a little bit of Lou Dobbs, where he rides the same story over and over again, the attention to sartorial detail like Anderson Cooper, absolutely bullheaded holding onto an idea, no matter how shallowly considered, like Hannity, and almost a physical aggressiveness that O'Reilly has. O'Reilly's the easiest one to reference, because he's the most popular. He's the one everyone's gonna understand. And he also does it best. He's an incredibly aggressive performer. We try to include a little bit of all of them.

Stephen Colbert, AV Interview (2006) – explaining the specific influences he channels into the Stephen Colbert caricature.

A central discrepancy that any researcher considering *The Daily Show* needs to resolve is the inherent tension between Stewart's oft-sung contention that what he produces is just 'fake' news, and popular sentiment that *The Daily Show* actually informs. As was previously discussed, the growing academic literature on the program addresses this question at least indirectly. From the guest list of prominent politicians, to the previously mentioned Pew Research Study (AP 2004), the increasing academic literature on the program (see Baym

2005; Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Young and Tisinger 2006; Fox *et al.*, 2007; Brewer and Marquardt 2007), and the substance of magazine and op-ed coverage of both Stewart and Colbert (see Kurtz 2004; Young 2004; Dowd 2006), the discursive trend seems to run counter to this claim of fakery. Of course, much of this is because the assumed opposite of ‘fake’ is ‘real’. And fake is easily equated to that which is an imitation of lesser value, as in fake Rolex watches or Prada handbags, or worse, misleading, as in Welles’ *War of the Worlds* hoax. So if we concede Stewart’s assertion that he is only a fake news anchor, this puts him both beneath, and in opposition to, traditional news sources.

A more accurate description of *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* seems to be that they produce ‘faux’ news. Faux, in this usage, has a different sense than its direct English translation of ‘false’, as we see in terms such as faux fur or faux leather – an imitation based on a dissatisfaction with the killing of animals; or in the sense of a painting in the trompe l’oeil style – a faux front which blurs the real and its representation;¹⁴⁴ or in the sense of faux amis in foreign languages – words which look similar but have very different meanings. It may indeed be better to disavow all senses of fake, faux, and falsity, as I think it a disingenuous description of the ‘newsiness’ of *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report*. Yet one cannot skirt this issue, as the claim by Stewart that he reports ‘fake’ news is an oft-refuted contention, ironically, by both supporters and detractors alike.

An evident example of this tension manifested itself in a prominent 2004 encounter, when Stewart appeared on the CNN political debate show *Crossfire*. Stewart and *The Daily Show*’s writing staff had recently published the bestselling, *America (The Book): A Citizen’s*

¹⁴⁴ While I do not examine Baudrillard’s (1993: 138) work on hyperreality, there is a certain affinity with his contention that in modernity it becomes difficult to distinguish the real from its representation. It is interesting to ponder the difficulty of classifying satirical news in relation to his idea that, “Objective irony is precisely the irony whereby one is able to turn the system, to make it work against itself, to play against itself. This creates an ironic effect within the text, since its position is bound to be ambiguous.”

Guide to Democracy Inaction, which devoted an entire chapter to the media. It was assumed Stewart's appearance was designed to push his book; however, the conversation was quickly steered, by Stewart, towards a critique of how *Crossfire* presents politics.¹⁴⁵ Responding to the assertion by host Paul Begala, that *Crossfire* need take its point-counterpoint form because it is a debate show, Stewart retorted,

STEWART: But the thing is that this – you're doing theatre, when you should be doing debate, which would be great.

BEGALA: We do, do...

[CROSSTALK]

STEWART: It's not honest. What you do is not honest. What you do is partisan hackery (CNN Crossfire 2004).

This excerpt was part of an increasingly fractious disagreement between Carlson and Stewart.

CARLSON: When politicians come on...

STEWART: Yes.

CARLSON: It's nice to get them to try and answer the question. And in order to do that, we try and ask them pointed questions. I want to contrast our questions with some questions you asked John Kerry recently.

[CROSSTALK]

CARLSON: ... up on the screen.

STEWART: If you want to compare your show to a comedy show, you're more than welcome to.

...

STEWART: You know, it's interesting to hear you talk about my responsibility.

CARLSON: I felt the sparks between you.

STEWART: I didn't realize that -- and maybe this explains quite a bit.

CARLSON: No, the opportunity to. ...

[CROSSTALK]

STEWART: ... is that the news organizations look to Comedy Central for their cues on integrity (ibid.).

At its heart, the disagreement between Carlson and Stewart revolved around the responsibility of the media in a democracy. As Stewart explains of *The Daily Show's* mission, "We don't have an agenda to change the political system. We have a more selfish agenda, to

¹⁴⁵ The confrontation was mostly between Tucker Carlson the host, 'from the right' although Stewart also confronted Begala, the host 'from the left'. Upon cancelling the show in 2005, CNN president Jonathan Klein noted: "I agree wholeheartedly with Jon Stewart's overall premise" (Brewer and Marquardt 2007).

entertain ourselves. We feel a frustration with the way politics are handled and the way politics are handled within the media” (Kurtz 2004). And while Stewart’s taking-to-task of *Crossfire* appeared justified because of its status on a dedicated news network, Carlson’s counter that Stewart was equally guilty of ducking responsibility is not a unique criticism. A number of academics and popular commentators (see Colapinto 2004b; Kurtz 2004, Larris 2005: 60-6; Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Harris 2006) have commented that Stewart at times falls prey to that which he mocks, avoiding the tough questions during the interview segment of *The Daily Show*. He admits his standard response, that it’s ‘fake’ news, is

always an unfair out. But ultimately I’m judged on whether or not the show is funny. If people get a certain insight from the comedy, that’s wonderful, because we’re trying to do jokes about things we care about and certainly our point of view is inherent in it. But the idea that somehow we fail when we don’t live up to journalistic expectations is a misreading of what it is we’re doing (Colapinto 2004b).

Whether this is an accurate description is certainly a debatable point, but what is more intriguing is that despite protestations to the contrary, and notwithstanding attempts to place himself outside of the media, Stewart is held to the standards of that which he critiques. In this respect, while format may be the most evident similarity to traditional news, accountability is far-and-away a more telling comparison in terms of *The Daily Show*’s relevance and legitimacy as ‘news’.

The Colbert Report is an evident parody of cable news magazines, shows which are already recipients of charges of sensationalism and improper journalistic conduct, as we saw in Chapters 2, 3, and 5. In this sense, this is the first substantial area where the similarities to mainstream journalism demand that we treat *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* as notably different forms of satire, especially in terms of their targets. As Colbert noted, in a rare out-of-character interview,

Jon on *The Daily Show* is more news. I mean they're really tied to the daily news cycle, and while we are to a certain extent, our goal is to eventually to have the kind of viewership or weight that we can actually lead the news cycle the way O'Reilly does. He determines what's going to be talked about on that show. This is what's bugging him today. And in a way that's more satire about what the media does than what's happening in the news (Gross 2005).

As he noted at the top of his May 7th broadcast to quiet the studio audience, "Pace yourself; we've got a lot of rage to get through" (Colbert Report 2007a). If network news claims to give the meat-and-potatoes facts, cable magazines like *The O'Reilly Factor*, *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, and *Hannity and Colmes*¹⁴⁶ take these facts and douse them in a thick layer of saucy opinion. So while there is a responsibility to ensure some matter of substance lies beneath, people are ordering the dish not for its poignant factual base but for the appetite raised by its rich and oftentimes spicy presentation. As such, the expectations for Colbert, in terms of factuality, hard questioning and responsible journalism, are almost non-existent. His act is to take the confrontational tendencies of these journo-pundits to the extreme; to be accountable for ensuring the accuracy of his facts would be counterintuitive to the character he portrays. In this regard, the expectations over performance, professionalism and conduct are thoroughly different for the two comedians.

Stewart, as we saw above, is expected to attempt to address the 'truth' and strive to give a clearer depiction of reality. In essence, despite being part of a broader news of feeling, Stewart is held to similar standards of accuracy as a mainstream news of fact, be it network newscasts, cable magazines or the Sunday morning talk shows. As Colbert notes, the sets reflect the differences in standards between the two 'fake' newscasts:

At certain angles, there are monitors behind Jon that have the world going on, which implies that that's where the news is, and that's where the information is, and the person in front of it is the conduit through which this information is given to you. But on my set, I said, "I don't want anything

¹⁴⁶ The personality-driven nature of these shows, exemplified by the name of the presenter in all show titles, is more than a telling coincidence, as discussed in the previous chapter.

behind me, because I am the sun. It all comes from me. I'm not channelling anything. I *am* the source." (Rabin 2006)

The gist of this is that Colbert's unerring likeness to cable magazines, "personality shows" as he puts it, where "It doesn't matter what they're saying. Doesn't matter what the news is, it's how this person feels about the news, and how you should feel about the news," (ibid.) exempts him from many of the critiques that Stewart faces.

In this respect there are greater expectations of responsibility foisted upon Stewart, who satirises a form of news that takes itself seriously and hinges its reputation on accurate and comprehensive reportage, than on Colbert, who parodies journalists that are brazen in their contempt for expertise when it clashes with their preconceived worldview. The bread-and-butter of *The Daily Show* is counterpoising media clips to show the idiosyncrasies, inconsistencies, and immateriality of politicians and the press which covers them.¹⁴⁷ Thus, the day-to-day craft of journalism, which rarely warrants mention in-and-of itself in the mainstream press (Frank 2003), is placed directly in the gaze of *The Daily Show's* news update.¹⁴⁸ The irony is that, perhaps unwittingly, this opens Stewart to critique for factual inaccuracies, misrepresenting information or refusing to ask pointed questions of his interviewees (critiques that derive from the rules of truth for journalism). He conceded this point to Kurtz (2004) on the heels of his *Crossfire* interview, when he acquiesced that, "It's not fake news. We are not newsmen, but it's jokes about real news. We don't make anything up, other than the fact we're not actually standing in Baghdad." As was discussed in Chapter

¹⁴⁷ Probably the most substantial technological development that aids the success of the news update segment of *The Daily Show* is its ability to contrast news footage. Twenty years ago, it would have been impossible for a cable-based show to search thousands of clips, stretching back years, to find material that helped satirise. These unnoticed advances have a dramatic impact on the potentialities of news (Federman 2004).

¹⁴⁸ An occasional segment on *The Daily Show* is "Slow News Day", a series of clips from 24-hour news networks, showing the passing of time, as anchors exhaustively cover a seemingly inane or anticlimactic story.

3, there are certain implicit rules of truth that lie beneath journalism's objectivity regime; tacit guidelines to achieve an appearance of reality being represented, as well as integrity in day-to-day professional practices (Tuchman 1978; Hackett and Zhao 1998). While Stewart and Colbert reject many of these conventions, there still appears to be an underlying assumption, especially for *The Daily Show*, that its satire is built on a solid foundation of fact. In the case of *The Colbert Report*, the factual basis is overwhelmed by the continual presence of Colbert's truthiness spin, but this does not erase the obvious parallels for both shows, in terms of the use of news clips and footage from C-SPAN as well as the fact that both shows rely on official sources.

Yet the similarities to a news of fact go beyond covering the same stories with the same video footage and sources. As the illustrations in the previous section allude, much of the visual composition of the two programs is highly reminiscent of a network newsroom (in the case of Stewart) or a cable news magazine (in the case of Colbert). In this respect both programs rely on the culturally-specific grammar of what 'news' should look like (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 1992; cf. Holsanova *et al.* 2006). In a 2007 interview on *The Daily Show*, Brian Williams, current anchor of the *NBC Nightly News*, jokingly chastised Stewart that his new set design was identical to that of NBC's flagship news program (Daily Show 2007i). Of course, for anyone who has seen *The Daily Show*, the visual and stylistic similarities do not end there. The news update segment of the show (see figure 6.4) frequently features 'on-the-spot' reports (actually done in studio, in front of a green screen) from *The Daily Show* correspondents (a term mirroring that of news bureaus around the world).



Figure 6.4. *Daily Show* Correspondents in Action.

Even though the correspondents may not actually travel to these exotic locales to file their reports, the geographical reach of these shows often does.¹⁴⁹ One fascinating place where *The Daily Show* pops up is on CNN International (CNNI). Despite displaying an advisory before each program which states, “The show you are about to watch is a news parody. Its stories are not fact checked. Its reporters are not journalists. And its opinions are not fully thought through.” its appearance on a global news network is further indication that the line between journalism and satirical programming based upon it is evermore blurred. In an interesting parallel, in 2007 Fox News purchased 13 episodes of *The Half-Hour News Hour*, a show that branded itself as a “*Daily Show* for conservatives”, its creator noting, “You can turn on any show and see Bush being bashed. There really is nothing out there for those who want satire that tilts right” (Learmonth 2007). CNNI’s decision to display the rechristened *The Daily Show: Global Edition*, seems an interesting programming choice for a network that brands itself

¹⁴⁹ Currently, *The Daily Show* is available in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Ireland, Scandinavia, Australia, Germany, Netherlands, Israel, and in countries serviced by CNNI. The *Colbert Report* is available in the U.S., Canada, and Australia. My sense is that *The Report* will never have the same reach because satirising a certain right-wing media format is likely to resonate only in places with similar shows. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) note, context determines who can recognise when communicative regularities are contravened.

“The Most Trusted Name in News.”¹⁵⁰ While this advisory that leads the show reflects a gatekeeping mentality, attempting to segregate ‘serious’ journalism from entertainment programming, these decisions by Fox News and CNNI reflect the tenuous line between shows like *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report*, and that which they satirise.

While Stewart and Colbert have both interviewed many prominent journalists, *The Daily Show* has taken it a step further over the last year, involving mainstream journalists within the show. After the most recent studio update, Stewart began a bit, the ‘Giant Head’ phenomenon, where the head of Brian Williams would appear on the video screen behind him. By watching, Big Brother-like, over Stewart and admonishing his journalistic failings, the big heads of Brian Williams, and more recently Ted Koppel, seem a tacit endorsement of his fake news shtick, serving to further legitimize his show as a valid, yet evidently alternative, crafting of the news (see figure 6.5). For the 2006 hour-long “Midterm Midtacular”, joint coverage by *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* of the U.S. midterm elections, Dan Rather, recent of *CBS Evening News*, appeared as a guest commentator. And while *The Colbert Report* has not had this level of involvement from his satirical targets, Colbert was part of one of the more anticipated moments in cable over the past year. (see figure 6.5)

¹⁵⁰ In 1997, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation was refused permission by the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission to show *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* on its 24-hour news service, the decision noting, “[We are] not convinced that such programs are a suitable component of a news specialty service ... their inclusion in the service could have unwelcome implications” (CRTC 1997).



Figure 6.5. *Appearing with their Inspirations*

A watershed moment in the short history of *The Colbert Report* occurred on January 18, 2007, when Colbert encountered his muse, Bill O'Reilly. The meeting of O'Reilly and his doppelgänger occurred twice on the same evening, with Colbert first appearing, in character, on *The O'Reilly Factor* and O'Reilly making the return visit to *The Colbert Report* later that evening. The appearance of O'Reilly on Colbert was a coup of sorts, similar to instances of impressionists being invited to perform for the Presidents they imitate. For his part, Colbert, or more accurately his Stephen Colbert character, frequently lauds O'Reilly on his show. Referring to him reverentially as “Papa Bear” (an interesting choice of titles considering that bears frequently top his “Threat Down” segment, listing the top five threats to America), Colbert once replaced a portrait of JFK hanging at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard with a portrait he had commissioned of O'Reilly, a graduate of the program (Nemerenko 2007). Thus while Colbert is widely cited as a blatant send-up of O'Reilly, his *Colbert Report* persona describes him with wide-eyed reverence. As such, much anticipation prefaced the crossover interviews. Just as punditry has degrees of intensity so too does parody, which can take a hostile form or a lighter mocking quality (cf. Dentith 2000). Would Colbert bitingly lambaste O'Reilly with glowing praise, a similar style to his White House

Correspondents' Dinner appearance in 2006,¹⁵¹ or would he temper his critical satire? On the flip side, would the no-nonsense, no-spin O'Reilly cut through Colbert's persona to demand he speak as the 'real' Stephen Colbert or would he play along with the joke? The result was fairly nondescript interviews, despite high ratings – Colbert garnered his largest ever audience and O'Reilly experienced a 46 per cent bump – with both personalities doing post-mortems in subsequent shows (Lafsky 2007). More significantly, as with Stewart's seeming acceptance by mainstream anchors, was that this crossover of O'Reilly and Colbert served to further intertwine satire with its inspiration.

Thus while it may be a complicated one, a relationship exists between these 'fake' satirical products and the 'real' network and cable news shows which provide their foundations. When one considers that the two most prominent cable news networks have both responded to the growing influence of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* – launching a conservative program to combat the influence of left-leaning satire (Fox News), and purchasing *The Daily Show: Global Edition* as a part of its line-up (CNNI) – it seems disingenuous to classify these programs as something separate from news. Add to this that Colbert parodies O'Reilly but appears in character on *The O'Reilly Factor*, his act left unchallenged; and Stewart seems a tangential member of the anchors club by having current NBC anchor Williams and former ABC and CBS anchors Koppel and Rather being occasional contributors to his broadcast. Moreover, in the build-up to the retirement of Dan

¹⁵¹ Colbert's damning praise of the President, his administration, and the Washington press corps was considered somewhat of an anomaly at the event, which generally involves light-hearted pokes at the President. A telling passage was: "I stand by this man. I stand by this man because he stands for things. Not only for things, he stands on things. Things like aircraft carriers and rubble and recently flooded city squares. And that sends a strong message, that no matter what happens to America, she will always rebound – with the most powerfully staged photo-ops in the world." Audio of the event became the top selling album on iTunes; and before they were forced to remove it, Colbert's video climbed to #1, 2, and 3 on YouTube's most viewed list, viewed 2.7 million times in less than 48 hours.

Rather, Les Moonves, the CBS President, noted Stewart among a list of possible replacements (CBC Arts 2005). Consequently, despite claims of fakery, there exists a somewhat incestuous relationship between Colbert, Stewart and the journalists they implicitly critique. And while these similarities may help these shows be taken as serious satire – an oxymoron though accurate description – it is the divergences from that which they are based, where much of their success and influence likely derive.

'Fake' News Anchors – Divergences from Broadcast and Cable News

These political parties – it's very interesting – but they are basically dedicated to figuring out how to gain the system, and they have found, I think, the real vulnerability in our media. And they are exploiting that loophole. And that vulnerability is twofold. One is the pace at which the 24-hour networks have [sic], so it's sort of their deadline pressure, and the other is that their anchors are not versed in an expertise of news; they are TV people. And so, those two together form sort-of a conspiracy, a non-aggression pact, if you will.

Jon Stewart, Fresh Air Interview (2005) – outlining the co-option of the press.

What the right-wing in the United States tries to do is undermine the press. They call the press "liberal," they call the press "biased," not necessarily because it is or because they have problems with the facts of the left – or even because of the bias for the left, because it's hard not to be biased in some way, everyone is always going to enter their editorial opinion – but because a press that has validity is a press that has authority.

Stephen Colbert, AV Interview (2006) – commenting on the current power and relative authority of the press in the United States.

For all the noble sentiments that underlie the notion of the fourth estate, the press is frequently charged with failing in its task – caving to sensationalism, economic imperatives or political leanings (see Sparks 1991; Bennett *et al.* 2007). The state of journalism in the United States since 9/11 is no stranger to this critique. Whether it be the seeming right-wing bent of Fox News, now the most popular of the cable news networks (McChesney 2003; Morris 2005); the lack of critical distance across the press in the lead up to the second Iraq War

(Cunningham 2003; Bennett *et al.* 2007); or the lack of context, in general, offered by broadcast news organisations attempting to compete in a “warp speed” culture (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999), there is a widespread sense that the media is falling short in its democratic duty more now than ever before.

In this environment, *The Daily Show*’s rise is an interesting phenomenon. If we are to accept the contention of Baym (2005: 269), this program on Comedy Central is better conceptualised not as ‘fake’ news but as an “experiment in journalism”, borrowing upon “techniques drawn from genres of news, comedy, and television talk to revive a journalism of critical inquiry and advance a model of deliberative democracy.” Indeed there can be no doubt that for all its stylistic similarities to traditional news, *The Daily Show* bends the techniques of journalism to simultaneously entertain as well as critique both the political process and the way the media covers it. In what seems a contemporary echo of Bakhtin’s (1984: 439) observations on the effect of 15th century satirist, François Rabelais:

[the] basic goal was to destroy the official picture of events. He strove to take a new look at them, to interpret the tragedy or comedy they represented from the point of view of the laughing chorus of the marketplace. He summoned all the resources of sober popular imagery in order to break up official lies and the narrow seriousness dictated by the ruling classes. ... Rabelais did not seek, of course, to submit them to a scholarly analysis. He did not speak in the conceptual language but in the tongue of popular comic images. While breaking up false seriousness, fake historic pathos, he prepared the soil for a new seriousness and for a new historic pathos.

This is part of what makes it difficult to pigeonhole the broadcast, a show that will interview a figure on the level of a Bill Clinton or Pervez Musharraf in the second half of the show after unabashedly opening with a segment it has entitled “Clusterf@#k [sic] To The White House”. This propriety, or lack thereof, is in line with the youthful demographic of the show. Indeed, one of the contentions made by multiple commentators (see Larris 2005: 61-3) is that politicians appear on the show not necessarily because of its large number of

viewers but because of its concentration of, and influence over, hard-to-reach youth voters. An additional benefit of appearing on the show, by association, is that it implies a sense of humour, a trait frequently cited in political surveys about desirable traits in a politician (Baum 2005). This may simply be part of a broader trend of ‘informalisation’ or ‘conversationalisation’ in the political sphere which is intended to reduce the distance between speaker and audience (Cameron 2004).

Interestingly, it appears that Colbert, the host who comes across the least sincerely of the two (by nature of being an evident parody) is considered the more threatening within political circles. As Colbert explained in a 2005 interview, the birth of his ongoing “Better Know a District” segment was a case of necessity being the mother of all inventions. His booking producer informed him that a number of senators were intimidated to appear on the program, afraid they would end up on the receiving end of an “Ali-G like” trapping.¹⁵² The only politicians who consented to appear were the far-lesser known congresspeople (Gross 2005). There is a big difference between the interviews Colbert conducts with writers, pundits and the like, versus elected members of Congress in this segment.¹⁵³ While angry, righteous Colbert, pontificating to the point of intellectual exhaustion, confronts non- or former-political guests who appear in studio, current politicians are treated to a much more serious and subdued Colbert.¹⁵⁴ In some ways, this is a more threatening Colbert in terms of critical questioning, relying more evidently upon research and prepared questions than he

¹⁵² The Ali-G character, a parody of urban-street youth, was a mainstay of BBC’s *The 11 O’clock Show*, who ambushed many famous politicians and celebrities with a wildly ignorant, at times brash, form of questioning.

¹⁵³ There is a spatial difference that plays into this as well. The congresspeople who appear on “Better Know a District” are generally interviewed at their office. Guests from outside the political realm, or those no longer in politics, are generally interviewed in studio where Colbert is more inclined to play to his live audience.

¹⁵⁴ Interestingly this parallels O’Reilly.

does during his improvisational-feeling studio chats.¹⁵⁵ Baym (2007) argues that this segment, while providing underreported institutional and issue exposure, injects it with a sense of play that simultaneously critiques political posturing, and as such, the notion of representation itself. Typically Colbert will attempt to highlight an element of ignorance about their district, point out an inconsistency in their voting record, and try to trap (rather than bully) them into making a contentious statement. One of the more famed instances of this occurring was when he interviewed Rep. Lynn Westmoreland (Rep.), asking the Congressman to explain his support of a bill he co-sponsored that would have by mandated the display of the Ten Commandments in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Westmoreland argued that, “The Ten Commandments is, is not a bad thing for people to understand and respect, where better place [sic] to have them than in a judicial building or a courthouse?” Colbert’s follow-up question: “What are the Ten Commandments?” caused the interviewee to respond in what might best be described as disbelief. As Colbert held up his two fists to count off the ten, Westmoreland struggled to name but three. In fact, such is Colbert’s effectiveness at this less-confrontational form of interview that in 2007, Democratic Caucus Chairman Rahm Emanuel advised freshman congresspeople against appearing on Colbert’s show, specifically his “Better Know a District” segment, noting it was “a risk and it’s probably safer not to do it” (Kaplan 2007). While an increasing number of senators and congresspeople will appear on *The Colbert Report*, no doubt a response to its increasing popularity, there still seems to be a greater hesitancy than for *The Daily Show*. This is partially attributable to the fact that while Stewart may have become more comfortable expressing his opinion or openly disagreeing with a guest since *The Daily Show* established itself within political circles; he rarely crosses a line which makes a guest look foolish or uninformed.

¹⁵⁵ Before his time as a *Daily Show* correspondent, Colbert studied performance at Northwestern University, practicing long-form improvisation.

That being said, the “Better Know a District” segment is somewhat of an anomaly on *The Colbert Report*, for throughout most of the program, it is Colbert’s foolishness and lack of information that rules the day.

This relates directly back to the personae of the two ‘fake’ anchors. As Colbert (Charlie Rose 2006) notes,

Jon deconstructs the news and he’s ironic and detached. I falsely construct the news and am ironically *attached*. ... Jon may point out the hypocrisy of a particular thing happening in a news story ... I illustrate the hypocrisy, as a character. That’s Jon being Jon. And that’s not me being me.

Just as the similarities to that which they satirise are different for *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, so too are the methods by which they diverge from their inspirations. While Stewart diverges from network anchors by *playing down* their dominant tendencies of distance and seriousness, Colbert diverges from the cable journo-pundits by *playing up* their tendencies to the n^{th} degree. Stewart is not a parody so much as a backstage version of the network anchor (cf. Goffman 1959). One can imagine that, once the cameras are off, a Koppel, Rather or Jennings may critique, ridicule or voice their scepticism. But on camera, this cannot be expressed. Contrast this to Stewart’s coverage of the highly publicized Alberto Gonzales hearing in Congress about politically-motivated dismissals, after the Attorney-General seemingly eluded or tried to obfuscate every question asked of him.

GONZALES: It would be pretty difficult, if not impossible, to make a decision for political reasons and expect to get away with it. You’d probably hear about it, we’d probably read about it in the papers.

[Back to studio, Stewart with an incredulous look, pausing while audience laughs].

STEWART: Yes, it probably would be in the newspapers. [Pauses] You might even [shrugs and smiles] be called before some governmental committee. Perhaps, uh, even mocked by some piss-ant faux newscaster (Daily Show 2007e).

And while this is a critique of Gonzales, Stewart goes further to mock the partisan nature of political debate. Stewart's choice of clips helps code this path of interpretation for the viewer (cf. Jacobs 1996), setting the stage for the commentary that follows.

[Clip of Rep. Mike Pence (Rep.), addressing Gonzales at the hearings].

PENCE: I also wanna thank you for, uh, the admissions, the candour, and the humility you've reflected today.

[Back to Stewart in studio, a disapproving look on his face].

STEWART: By the way, that's Mike Pence, the same gentleman who after visiting an Iraqi market compared it favourably to a summertime market in Indiana. [Pauses, then states matter-of-factly] *He*, is a fucking idiot. (ibid.)

Bakhtin (1984: 7) notes that profanities are generally considered outside the norm of official behaviour, interpreted as aggressive or vulgar, but within the sphere of the carnival, a "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order," such profanities acquire the nature of laughter and are rendered ambivalent. Perhaps this is one reason that Stewart has such access to present and former network anchors. In essence, they are in on the joke. While a principle of 20th-century objective reportage is that reporters are to stay 'outside' the narrative, both contextually and emotionally (Schudson 1999; 2001; Aday *et al.* 2005), Stewart's comedic format eschews this, allowing him to express and interject the opinions that many anchors may possess privately, a point Peter Jennings conceded when he noted that Stewart "says in public what many of us say privately in the newsroom" (McKain 2005: 415). A well-placed 'Whaaaa?' in response to a seemingly counter-intuitive government statement is the type of personal response inappropriate for mainstream news anchors, a glib yet effective intervention that diverges strongly from professional journalism-speak.

Stewart's droll and glib tendencies are far too modest for the likes of Colbert. If one is smug, the other is righteous. As Colbert notes of his character, "He cares, deeply, about what happens in this country and he just doesn't know a lot about what happens in this

country. And so he gets little glimpses of things, he has little snatches of information and then he makes broad generalisations based upon that” (Gross 2005). This divergence by playful and stylised exaggeration can be traced to the fact that Colbert’s entire show is a parody, a rejoinder to the rise of highly opinionated news personalities.¹⁵⁶ And Colbert delivers these rejoinders with an almost Oscar-Wilde like appreciation for doublespeak. Consider the following excerpt, where Colbert outlines the concern of evangelicals about extending hate crimes protection to sexual orientation.

The pro-tolerance crowd is so hypocritical; they’re always going on about how Americans should be more accepting, but as soon as they’re asked to accept intolerance they’re surprisingly intolerant. And you know who suffers? The intolerant. Once again the intolerant have to sit on the back of the tolerant’s bus (Colbert Report 2007a).

Yet these right-wing diatribes, which also include unflagging support for the Bush administration, are only a fragment of his pseudo-Republican sympathies. Colbert steadfastly believes in the infallibility of free-market economics, exemplified by his recurring statement that global warming became reality to him, not through science, but when the market supported Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*. Other prominent characteristics are his über-patriotism and populism. From the show’s opening moment – a pastiche of American symbolism – Colbert is ever the conservative patriot.¹⁵⁷ Of course, his most obvious exaggeration of the cable news characteristics discussed in Chapter 5 is a steadfast refusal to capitulate to the factual when it clashes with his preconceived opinions or ideology. As has

¹⁵⁶ A former recurring segment on *The Daily Show*, “Great Moments of Punditry as Read by Children”, was another effective riposte to cable news. In the segment, children would be given transcripts of shows such as *Hannity & Colmes* or *Crossfire*. Heflin (2006) notes, “This practice points to the absurdity of the pundits’ words. This absurdity is reinforced when the children laugh at the ridiculousness of the script they have to read.”

¹⁵⁷ In 2007 Colbert ‘inherited’ the shield of Marvel Comics’ Captain America upon the superhero’s ‘death’. The letter from Marvel’s editor-in-chief read in part that Captain America bequeathed his most valuable asset “to the only man, he believed, had the red-white-and-blue balls to carry the mantle.”

been documented, O'Reilly consistently denies or dismisses evidence that goes against, or worse, disproves a point he is trying to make (see Hart 2003). Yet from time-to-time, O'Reilly will concede he is uninformed or incorrect. Colbert takes this bullheadedness to its logical extreme, the effect being mimicry of unwavering certainty, or as he dubs it, truthiness.

This broader constant between the two 'fake' anchors – distinguishing themselves from the journalists they satirise by altering the expression of definitive presentational traits – means that while the foundation of performance may be that which they imitate, the manifestation of satire comes from its divergence. By playing with the cultural expectations of communication, these shows contravene the regularities of professional journalism to establish their autonomy from it. This divergence means there is a certain informality (not to be confused with triviality) to these shows, in that neither show takes itself as seriously as the journalistic products they emulate. If one were to rank their purposes, a plausible summary would be entertainment, then critique, and finally information, though this order is by no means static. This is why, while I have no hesitation in calling what they produce news, I shy away from equating them with the profession of journalism.

This variance oftentimes means that comedy's contrary mask, tragedy, is denied coverage in these broadcasts. Neither *The Daily Show* nor *The Colbert Report* seems anxious to cover obvious tragedy, at least directly. Certain stories that lead most national newscasts, including the cable magazines that were the focus of the previous chapter, are rarely discussed in the news updates of these satirical reports, be it an incident that leads to a large number of casualties in Iraq, a major natural disaster, or some other event that induces a substantial loss of life. In drama, tragedy and comedy are mirror images, the main difference being that tragedy summons pity, suffering, breakdown, and despair while comedy invokes sympathy, optimism, reconciliation, and celebration (Johnston 1999). So while there is

something too raw, and frankly unfunny, about immediate tragedy, humorous commentary is offered sometimes by changing the structure of its telling. The quote by Walpole, “Comedy is for those who think, tragedy for those who feel.” gives a fairly accurate impression of how these satirical products handle the tragic. Instead of confronting tragedy directly, the technique employed is to allude to it in conjunction with government policy, news coverage or some other seemingly ‘rational’ treatment. The tragedy is then marshalled with a satirical awareness that points to the incongruous, inept, or insincere.

This is yet another example of *The Daily Show* distinguishing itself from a news of fact not by what it covers, but how it covers it. For instance, many of the parody segments from the second part of the show ‘look’ like something we might see on a network broadcast. And while the angle taken on these stories is a clue that it is neither a traditional news segment, nor even a light-hearted ‘kicker’, there are a number of technical elements that clearly mark it as parody from the outset. For instance, a technique used in network news interviews is the reaction shot, a cutaway from the subject which shows the reporter asking their questions or interacting with the interviewee. This is a contrived, yet eminently practical technique used by reporters to cover jump cuts (cobbling together quotes or cutting out needless pauses and run-ons by the source) and is generally filmed after the interview is complete. This is just one of many ‘invisible’ techniques used to construct visually-coherent stories. Another device relied on by journalists is the establishing shot, the purpose of which is to introduce the interviewee and establish their credibility. We are all no doubt familiar with the opening videos of doctors doing something recognisably doctor-y, such as reading X-Rays or entering a hospital, generally while sporting a spotless white coat.

The Daily Show plays with such journalistic conventions, stripping bare the techniques used to construct the typical interview. The reporter in a typical network shot will look

intrigued, attentive or concerned, helping construct a controlled and professional persona. Contrast this with the typical *Daily Show* reaction shot, where reporters yawn, roll their eyes, eat a snack, or mouth potential answers to the interviewee. If the story has a sexual overtone, invariably the correspondent will wink, leer, or act in a suggestive manner. This ability to create visual irony, a subversive imaging, relies on the cultural expectations we have of a news story (cf. Scott 2004). For instance, establishing shots on *The Daily Show* will sometimes show the subject interacting with the camera asking 'is this okay', or will focus on the reporter skipping or slinking into the source's place of business. These technical variations have threefold effect, the most obvious of which is humour. Another effect is decreasing the distance between the interviewer and interviewee, almost an active rebellion against professional distance, either placing the subject at ease or on edge (depending on the effect the correspondent intends). After all, one would never see a Mike Wallace-type enthusiastically high-fiving a source who provides an exciting answer. *Daily Show* correspondents are no strangers to the high five, often using it as a technique to support particularly outrageous or wacky interviewees, encouraging them to further espouse what is often a bizarre, extreme, or politically incorrect viewpoint.¹⁵⁸ Less evident, but perhaps most relevant to this project, is that such variations strip bare the contrived techniques of news, helping to illustrate the manipulation that often goes unseen in traditional newscasts. By showing that the techniques of journalism can be bent to generate the absurd or ridiculous, *The Daily Show* correspondents expose the fragile hold the techniques of journalism have in crafting objective representations of reality. This effect is also frequently achieved in the news update segments, when *The Daily Show* refuses to edit out the pauses, stutters, and

¹⁵⁸ The 2006 satirical film, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, also employs the high five, an 'Americanism' that Borat uses to connect with his sources.

silences that exist in most political speeches, testimonies, and so forth. This remediation of the cuts typically made in journalism has the effect of exposing its techniques which, by implication, makes *The Daily Show's* coverage appear more 'real' (McKain 2005).

Colbert's satirising of the technical comes from his overuse of computerised graphics, sound effects and other modern flourishes embraced by the cable networks (see figure 6.6). Each segment on *The Colbert Report* has its own graphical package, even if it only appears once. The graphics and sound are always over-the-top, as in his "Four Horsemen of the A-Pop-Calypse" which opens with an image of an atomic explosion, while the 'horsemen' (i.e. a cartoon white horse whose rider brandishes a satellite dish as his lance and 1950's television for a body) ride across the screen. This computerised montage, done in a blood-red colour scheme, is accompanied by foreboding music. As if this intro is not enough, when each portion (film, television, music, books) is introduced, a galloping horseman pulls a banner title across the bottom of the screen, disappearing with a whinnying neigh. This movement is a further degree of kinetic complexity (Hillner 2005), to compound the sense of technical excess. Interestingly, while Colbert is fairly consistent in his persona, it is these completely absurd openings that seem to cause him to briefly break character, often giggling as he looks away to compose himself. This corresponds to another element of parody – for all his bluster; there is a playful quality to Colbert (cf. Dentith 2000).



Figure 6.6. *Colbert's Graphical Excess: Seats Shifting to the Democrats, and the "Threat Down".*

Of course, both shows also take more subtle digs at tendencies within the news. One of the more evident of these is *The Daily Show's* introduction of on-the-spot correspondents during its opening news update. In a network or cable broadcast, the role of the correspondent is frequently to act as the expert for a region or particular subject, there to offer broader contextualisation and inside knowledge by relying upon an assumed expertise that outweighs that of the general or beat reporter. *The Daily Show* satirises these titles bestowed by networks, invariably dubbing their correspondents with highly specific 'senior reporter' or 'bureau chief' titles. This plays on the posture by news organisations that reporters understand the minutia of each and every subject. Also evident in these segments is critique of the false sense of immediacy created by news organisations. These segments, performed in-studio in front of a blue screen, problematise the spatial logic that equates proximity to understanding. As McKain (2005: 418) notes, "the satiric payoff is that calling attention to – *defamiliarizing* in Bakhtin's parlance, *enstranging* in Shklovsky's – the clichéd use of "on the scene" reporters demonstrates how ludicrous they are as gestures of immediacy."

A final divergence which merits a mention is the evident eschewing of balance as it relates to objectivity. One of the core tenets of the objectivity regime or ethic is the appearance of balance (Ward 2005); a point-counterpoint technique relied upon to give an

impression that a spectrum of voices is considered on each given issue.¹⁵⁹ As we saw in Chapter 5, even magazine shows such as Dobbs and O'Reilly, who offer unapologetic slant or opinion on most stories, adhere to this convention. As Stewart's disagreement with the *Crossfire* hosts indicates, such 'balance' can often obfuscate reportage into political theatre rather than achieving an objective perspective in terms of a more accurate and nuanced description of the subject at hand.¹⁶⁰ The Associated Press (2001: 28) notes in its *Broadcast News Handbook* that,

If a reporter includes those facts that support a given viewpoint and leaves out those facts which support a competing viewpoint, that's bias. If, however, the story reports each relevant viewpoint (there may be more than two), giving each the weight it had in the events being covered, that's what newspeople call objective. In both cases, judgments are made. But in the first example, a point of view is the yardstick against which each fact is measured. In the latter case, balance and accuracy are the criteria.

This obligatory response from the supposed other side, endemic within both network and cable news, is not sought out by either Stewart or Colbert. As Stewart notes, "We need a news organization that puts country over partisanship – that doesn't define truth through that bi-chromatic prism that is right and left" (Colapinto 2004b). This refusal to adhere to balance seems a tacit rejection of the idea that more accurate and complete reportage is necessarily achieved by looking to both sides of the political aisle. Balancing the rhetoric of politicians, especially in what many commentators have called one of the more divisive political climates in U.S. history (Young 2004), is not necessarily conducive to crafting an objective representation of the facts. Stewart does 'balance' the statements and assertions of

¹⁵⁹ While this may not be possible for all stories, there is a sense that one should be able to 'see' cumulative balance from the totality of stories over time.

¹⁶⁰ It is important not to discount the impact of the two-party U.S. system. As Stewart notes, "In the marketplace of ideas, from what I understand, there aren't only two products available" (Davies 2005).

politicians but more often than not he does this by juxtaposing politicians against their own, or their colleagues', historical claims.

For all their similarities to journalistic products, it seems the success of *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* is largely attributable to their innovative style of coverage. At a time when newspaper readership is declining, along with the ratings of network news, these shows have established themselves not necessarily as a substitute but as a complementary form of news that augments consumption of traditional journalism (Baym 2005). Additionally, as Feldman (2007) and Borden and Tew (2007) assert, such programs also act as media criticism, not only covering issues but holding the media accountable for its journalistic assumptions and failings. Nonetheless, both attempt to convey the impression that they remain 'outside' the mainstream press they satirise. In this sense, both shows unwittingly replicate the typical posture of news media, in terms of commenting on subject matter while claiming to remain 'above the fray'. This is a fallacious proposition as the differences which have made both shows successful, have ironically placed both within the news media system. Whether it be in terms of the newsworthiness of their commentary, as when Colbert appeared at the White House Correspondents' Dinner or Stewart appeared on *Crossfire*, or whether it be in terms of the guests they are able to draw to their shows, the double-edged sword of their satirical success is that it places them within the field they satirise (cf. Bourdieu 1993). In this sense, both shows are almost a form of reflexive journalism, in terms of covering the news with an awareness of the press. This form of media critique, largely absent throughout the mainstream press (see Berkowitz 2000; Bishop 2001; Frank 2003), lends an authority, validity, and influence to their commentary while humour is a mechanism that helps attempt to make the experience of involvement in being informed simultaneously pleasurable. This is why trying to classify these products under some taxonomy of soft news, hard news, or

infotainment, is near to impossible. For the arrangement of these programs, in terms of information and entertainment, opinion and fact, rationality and emotion, lends itself to a newsiness hybrid – a news where fact is presented; yet presented with feeling.

The Newsiness of Satire – The Role of Humour

The beautiful thing about faking a news show is the topicality is delayed. The truth is, it helps us more to have saturation of a news story cause then everybody's very familiar with the parameters of it. ... Things that are inherently amusing are not as interesting to us.

Jon Stewart, Fresh Air Interview (2005) – noting that satire comes from the everyday, not the unique or absurd.

Truthiness is “What I say is right, and nothing anyone else says could possibly be true.” It's not only that I *feel* it to be true, but that *I* feel it to be true. There's not only an emotional quality, but there's a selfish quality.

Stephen Colbert, AV Interview (2006) – explaining the rationale behind personality-driven news.

Modern marketing has become slave to the mixing of seemingly disparate dualisms. Food and beverage manufacturers lower their caloric content while at the same time promising to provide superior flavour (‘tastes great, less filling’); the military-industrial complex provides destruction but claims to meld this with precision (‘smart bombs’); travel companies promote trips to exotic locales complete with all the modern amenities (‘five star wilderness’); and innumerable products promise luxurious benefits at discount prices. And if *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are any indication, a news of feeling is a part of this trend, promising not just to inform, but to entertain. Of course, such sentiments underlie the charges of sensationalism that have beleaguered journalism since its inception (Sparks 2000; Tulloch 2000). If the purpose of the news is to provide citizens with the information they need to participate in a healthy democracy, there is no guarantee it will necessarily be entertaining. However, as was noted in Chapter 3, the logical overextension of this relation assumes that

serious is journalism's pre-eminent form; a construction that easily morphs into a tautology – either journalism is sombre or it is not journalism – that rests on a problematic Enlightenment binary of emotion/reason (cf. Dixon 2003). Just because the Walter Cronkite template of network news is serious, this does not mean it is unemotional. Similarly, the Jon Stewart model of satirical news is irreverent, not necessarily irrational. The opacity that comes from relying on oversimplified cataloguing is that it forces us to speak of programs as journalism *or* entertainment *or* infotainment, a dissatisfying and static spectrum. It makes it difficult to situate, and accordingly evaluate, news options that diverge from the typical. However, if we think of each news product not in terms of its position on a spectrum, but as a configuration within a broader field of information-related programming, we have the potential to avoid such reductionist classifications. Put otherwise, these products are framed in such a way that they are recognisable as part of a broader theme of news-related communication (Cottle and Rai 2006). And as Buckingham (2000) noted in his investigation of the positive audience response to *Nick News*, a half-hour newscast produced by the children's network Nickelodeon, such alternative approaches to news that simultaneously entertain and inform have the ability to strike a chord with audiences that feel disconnected from traditional news presentations.

Satirical news is accordingly recognisable as a relative of professional journalism as it contains elements that we find within this communicative field – a focus on factuality, reliance on official sources and stylistic similarities. Yet its posture of involvement relates to a different sector, being more willing to offer an active emotive display (humour, anger, fear, shock) as opposed to relying on passive emotions (control, gravitas, calmness) (cf. Shilling 2002). A simple series of graphs illustrates why the relationship is far more complex than a simple hard-soft news binary. Consider figure 6.7a. In it we have two axes, event-individual

and active-passive. Event-individual can be thought of as shorthand for content decisions; how much does the broadcast rely on the news cycle and how much is dependent on the whims of the host? For instance, Bill O'Reilly may follow the news cycle but he has a great deal of leeway in determining the composition of each broadcast. The *CBS Evening News*, on the other hand, is inexorably linked to the news cycle. By this measure, *The Daily Show* is more closely aligned to Cronkite and the *CBS Evening News* than to O'Reilly, despite one's position on a comedy network and one's on a dedicated news network. The other axis, active-passive, describes the crafted experience of involvement woven into the presentation; are 'hot' emotions part of the posture or is the preference towards a 'cool' emotive style? Being cool means finding a balance of disengagement and nonchalance, while being hot harnesses emotion in an outward display (Stearns 1994). On this axis, O'Reilly and Colbert's programmes are nearly identical. Like cable news anchors, Colbert's character is passionate. "He is, closely attached and invested in the stories he's talking about and in the themes that he's talking about" (Gross 2005).

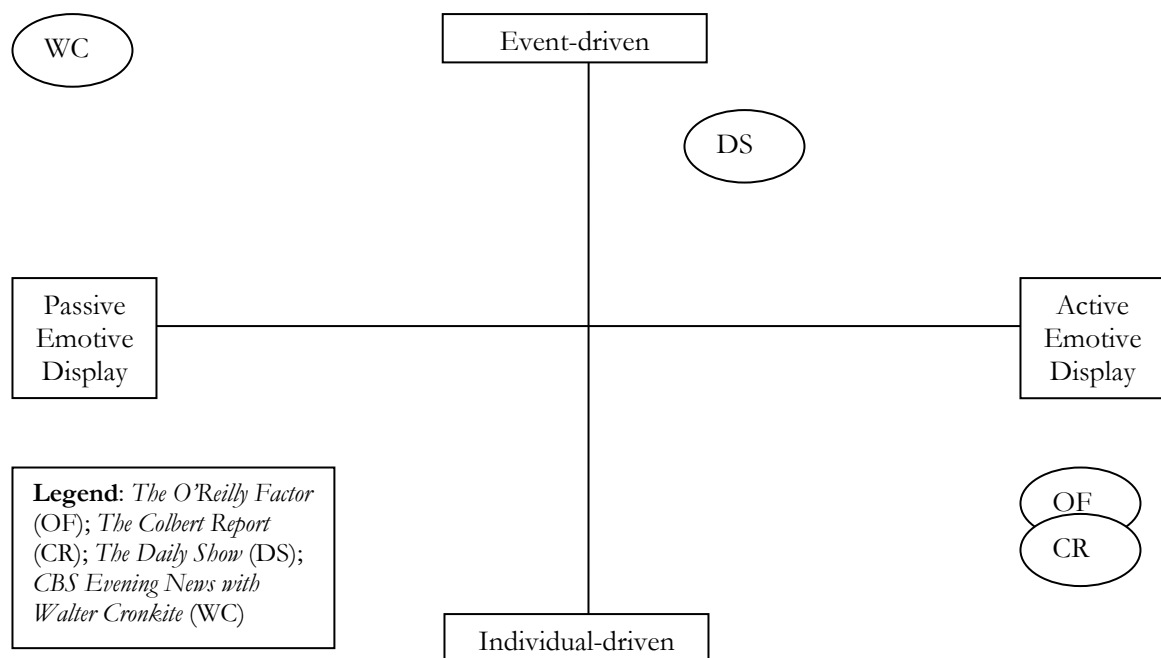


Figure 6.7a. *Styles of News Programming*

Yet this is an oversimplified image of the relations in the field. For while we have accounted for emotive display and content dependence, we have not distinguished between the dramatic narrative posture, in terms of the thematic involvement conveyed through the program. For this, let us substitute the event-individual axis with a comedy-tragedy axis, remembering that tragedy summons pity, suffering, breakdown, and despair while comedy invokes sympathy, optimism, reconciliation, and celebration. The accompanying performative style of the talent, in terms of the facial and vocal cues that accompany each segment, is largely tied to this overriding narrative archetype (Jacobs 1996). As we see (figure 6.7b), Colbert and Cronkite do not move – unsurprising when we think that Colbert is almost the epitome of an ‘optimistic’ news of feeling (comedic, active emotion, and personality-driven) while Cronkite is emblematic of a ‘pessimistic’ news of fact (tragic, passive emotion, and fact-driven). But notice the shifts for Stewart and O’Reilly; Stewart moves alongside Colbert while O’Reilly moves in the quadrant beside Cronkite.

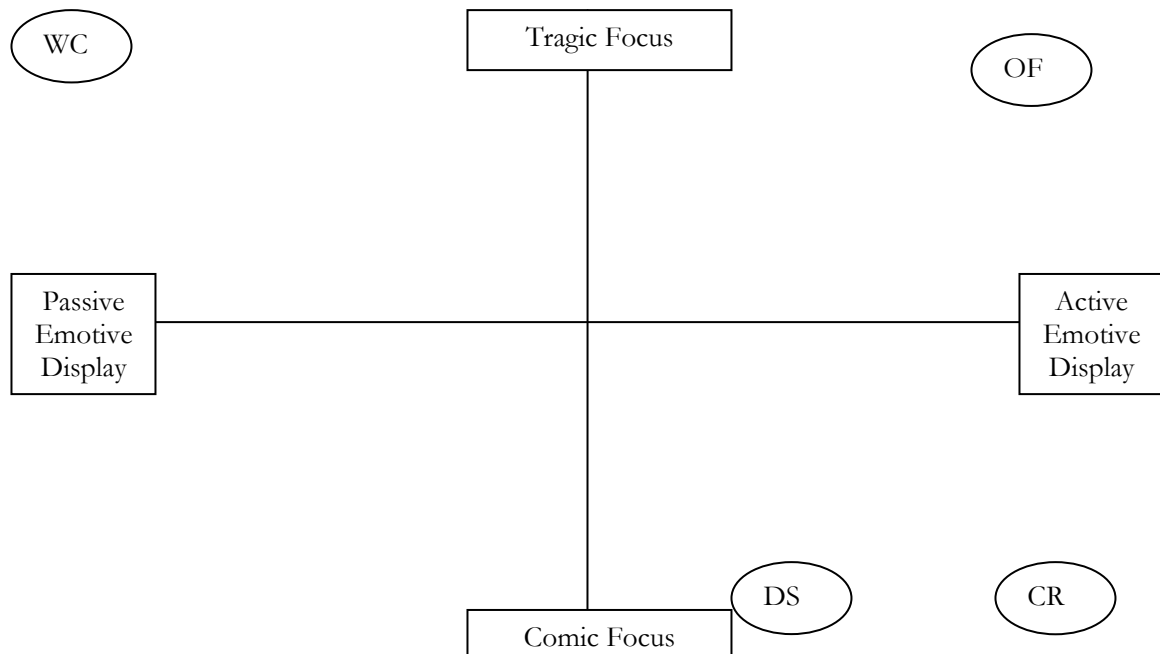


Figure 6.7b. *Styles of News Programming: Event/Individual Axis replaced by Comic/Tragic Axis.*

Now consider the movement when we allow for the final configuration possible with these three axes (see figure 6.7c). For the first time, all four quadrants contain one type of news program. Colbert and Cronkite again maintain position, while *The Daily Show* and *O'Reilly Factor* shift again.

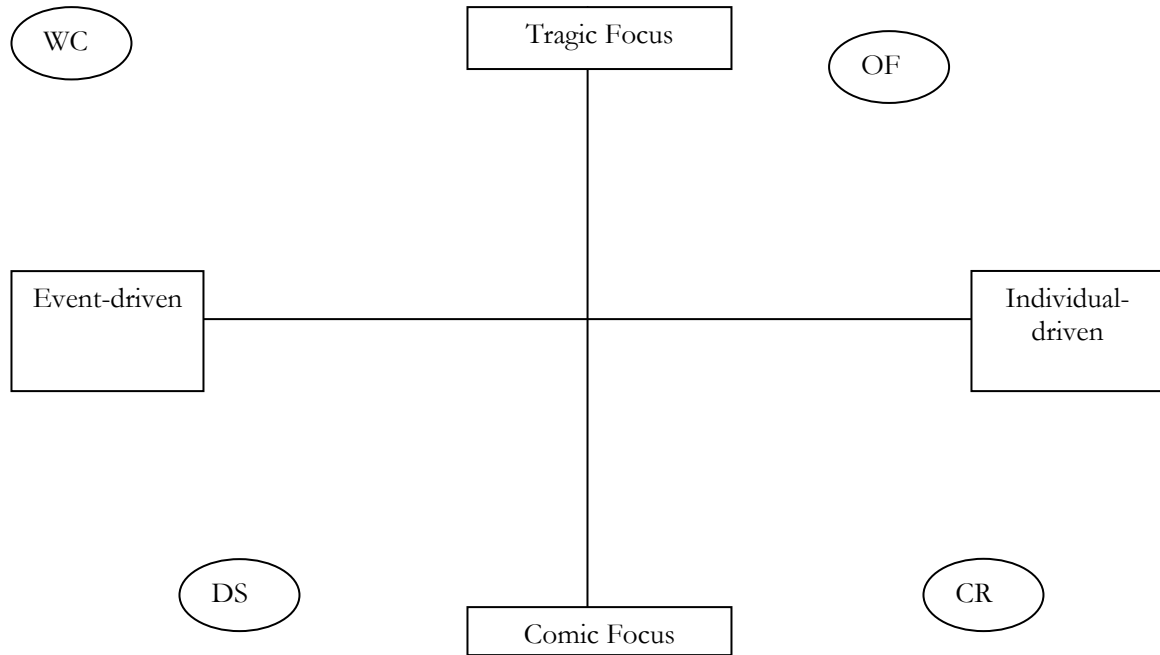


Figure 6.7c. *Styles of News Programming: Passive/Active Axis replaced by Event/Individual Axis.*

The implication of these oversimplified graphs is that the current state of news challenges any simple classificatory scheme (cf. Bowker and Star 1999). As Baym notes of *The Daily Show* (2005: 263), “Its hybrid combinations defy simple generic taxonomies as well as reductionist labels such as “fake news.” It undoubtedly is comedy – often entertaining and at times absurd – but it is also an informative examination of politics and media practices, as well as a forum for the discussion of substantive public affairs.” Presenting news in an ironic or satirical style effectively utilises the ‘emotive’ posture of humour to pursue alternative readings of ‘rational’ accounts. This blurring of fact and feeling, activity and passivity, and information and entertainment means we could extend these series of graphs with even more

axes – visual-discursive, in terms of the focus on visual versus verbal storytelling; grassroots-government, in terms of assumed purpose of journalism within the democratic process; or modern-traditional, in terms of stylistic choices of computerised graphics, musical montages and other modern accoutrements – to explicate further the regions of similarity, indeterminacy, and divergence. This chapter has attempted to address some of these, as it pertains to satirical news, but this gets us only so far in terms of understanding its emergence and success.

One of the more telling insights we can gain into this is hinted at by the observation that emotion, or its preferable conceptualisation as the instance when we have an “experience of involvement”, is often the cue for the mood and feeling we ascribe to a situation, event, interaction, or in the case of this project, news text (see Barbalet 1998; 2002). Such experiences can be ‘crafted’, as when we plan out a dialogue before a conversation, or when a sports team selects music and chants for key moments of a game, or when a journalistic product goes about setting its presentation and broader tone. For instance, Colbert feels the active display of satirical news has the effect of reducing distance.

One of the unintentional puns of our show is that it’s called *The Colbert Report* [pronounced Cole-Bare Rah-Pore] and it unintentionally plays on the word ‘rapport’ ... which is a sense of understanding between the speaker and the listener. You know? We’re the same people, you and me. We get it. The rest of those people out there, they don’t understand things the way we understand. The show is like an invitation to the audience to be part of the club (Gross 2005).

It is not only the audience who are part of the club, but previous guests. When Colbert refers to interviewees that have played along, he is always quick to affix the honorary title, “Friend of the Show” (Colbert Report 2007e). One can surmise that such shows, more active in terms of attempting to liaise with its audience, have the potential to generate greater involvement than traditional passive newscasts. Colbert’s highly activist ‘Nation’ is one of

the most evident examples of this attachment in practice. Humour acts as a sporadic catalyst of attention by drawing in the viewer. Variation, in terms of a lack of monotony, is consequently not determined by the content of satirical news but by the energetic humour of its presentational style.

In this respect, it seems the answer to whether ratiocination is encumbered by this emotive involvement is more complex than first appears. While Baum (2003) and Baym (2005) have identified potential political benefits from viewing *The Daily Show*, Baumgartner and Morris (2006) note mixed findings, highlighting a lowered trust in media and an oversimplified view of politics as potential downsides from watching. Certainly the number of stories and factual context in a traditional news of fact seem more in tune with contemplative reflection about the issues of the day. However, the ability of satirical news to continually engage its audience may be one reason why it succeeds in informing a hard-to-reach youth demographic typically disinterested in news (AP 2004; Larris 2005). Those who analyse the benefits of ‘soft’ or ‘tabloid’ news assert that involvement is key to engaging those who might be otherwise disinterested (MacDonald 2000; Zelizer 2000; van Zoonen 2005). Yet this picture of tabloid may not jibe with these satirical newscasts, as some surveys point out that *Daily Show* viewers are more knowledgeable and politically active than those who rely on cable or network news as their primary source of information (Long 2004). While some of this is no doubt attributable to viewer demographics (higher level of education, political involvement, and income than the general populace [Young and Tisinger 2006]) it seems that bringing the funny is not anathema to being informed, despite what typical criticisms of ‘sensationalist’ programming suggest.

As has been mentioned throughout this chapter, Stewart is far more of a news substitute than Colbert, engaging in civilised dialogue with guests, offering a lengthy news

update, and frequently placing events in historical context. It has been commented on by a number of influential guests, as well as academics, that Stewart's rise in popularity may indeed be attributable to dissatisfaction with the conduct of the American news media (see Young 2004; Baym 2005). When asked if he is engaged in the same critical craft as reporters, Stewart responds,

Isn't that the issue, that journalists don't do that, that basically, and I'm not talking about print, but on television those sorts of operatives for both political parties go on the air and say, 'John Kerry's the first most liberal', or, 'the new jobs created are nine thousand dollars less' and nobody ever says, 'I'm sorry, I don't mean to stop you but what? Where do you come up with these numbers?' ... And it allows these talking-point robots, operatives from various political parties, to go on these shows and basically lay it out there without question. And it's done to influence people through repetition (Davies 2005).

Lichtenberg (1991) points out that such critiques are not upset with the ideal of objectivity but are more generally dissatisfied with some element of its method. Commentators like Hackett and Zhao (1998: 130) have called for precisely the type of journalistic involvement advocated for by Stewart, to help mediate between "truer" and 'falsier' depictions of reality." But the demise of ritualised detachment is no guarantee that 'better' depictions of reality will arise. Rather, what may result is a plurality of truthiness, seen in the fact that both cable magazines and satirical news utilise intervention but to markedly different effect.

As such, one must differentiate the embrace of involvement seen in satirical news from its embrace in cable news, witnessed in Chapter 5. Accordingly, we need to be somewhat rigorous when we look at variations in the assemblage of presentational style, content, contextualisation, emotive embrace, and narrative style between these two genres. As Young (2004) notes,

Most talk-show pundits, right and left, interrupt their guests when they're not in sync with their view, which turns off half the audience. A satirist doesn't try to win the interview. ... Instead of ripping into the person, he exposes the absurdity of the remark. Entertainingly. Intelligently. Not with a hammer, but

with a surgeon's scalpel. Even if you disagree with the point, you have a hard time turning it off if you're laughing.

Young's analysis of satire seems a rosy depiction of the political neutrality of *The Daily Show* or *Colbert Report*. However, his assertion that the combination of a comedic narrative style and active involvement is less likely than cable magazines to turn off an audience seems accurate. Many of the scathing analyses offered up by *The Daily Show* or *Colbert Report* would sound preachy if it were not for their comedic delivery (Heflin 2006). A question often asked of satire is why it is consumed, "what is *pleasing* about a form that has often been regarded as displeasing, harsh, obscure, splenetic, malignant, too mired in historical particulars, or even unpoetic" (Griffin 1994: 161)? The typical response is to tie pleasure with the wit of satire. Pushing this analysis further leads to a number of plausible answers, among the more widely discussed: intellectual satisfaction, moral assuagement, or physiological release placed under the control of the conscious, contemplative mind.

If we are to adapt this thinking to Young's contention, while cable magazines get at the 'truth' through an impassioned approach based on belief (*I am telling you this is important and threatening, fearful, etcetera*); network news gives an appearance of 'truth' through a logical accumulation of fact (experts, studies, data, etcetera). Satirical news is somewhat an amalgam of both, approaching the 'truth' through humorous deconstruction (juxtaposition, irony, logical inconsistencies, etcetera). This simple intellectual pleasure of satire is often gained from the delight of decoding (Griffin 1994). In what is admittedly an overgeneralisation, cable news magazines craft a presentation that imbues a sort of moral superiority, network news with a behavioural superiority, and satirical news with an

intellectual superiority.¹⁶¹ Of course, such relations are fluid and mutable. What links these three is trust. In an increasingly fragmented market, the level of trust in mainstream media has declined (Jones 2004), and products such as cable magazines and satirical news have branded themselves as alternative yet trustworthy avenues for information. The fact that comedy shows can inspire such headlines as ‘America’s Anchors’, ‘The Most Trusted Name in News’, ‘In Jon We Trust’ and ‘The 1974 Cronkite’ is simultaneously a potential indictment of traditional journalism as well as a mark of respect to an emergent news of feeling.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored what has caused the satirical newscasts of *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* in recent years to go beyond a pure ‘entertainment’ function to be frequently cited and critically acclaimed as valid, if alternative, forms of news. While growing academic attention to *The Daily Show* generally focuses upon its similarities in terms of content with traditional journalism, what is widely neglected are the stylistic and presentational considerations which lend it authenticity as news. From its use of similar footage and layout, expectations surrounding factual reportage and questioning, and interviewing of prominent political guests, this chapter has demonstrated how *The Daily Show* contains much we would expect from a traditional newscast. Yet a key observation highlighted in this chapter is how the program strips away the professional detachment we are used to seeing displayed in network newscasts in a manner that facilitates humorous engagement and critique. The interaction of Stewart with anchors such as Williams, Koppel, and Rather, and the

¹⁶¹ To expand slightly, moral superiority in terms of ‘watching this makes me a better person’; behavioural in terms of ‘watching this is part of being an informed citizen’, and intellectual in terms of ‘watching this means I am a smarter person’. This is partially why a news of fact need not have an active involved posture – being a good citizen has a sense of personal responsibility at its core.

syndication of the program on CNNI, indicates a broader journalistic acceptance of this alternative approach to making news. His injection of humour takes the news and, in the words of Bakhtin (1984: 34), “liberate[s] from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted.” As this chapter has illustrated, such an approach attempts to craft an experience of involvement that offers a pleasurable engagement with otherwise serious, and oftentimes tragic, events.

Similarly, the Stephen Colbert character deconstructs the sense of gloom and fear often crafted by cable news hosts, as was illustrated throughout this chapter. His parody of highly involved news-making likely resonates less for its news content than for its role as a form of media and political criticism. While this shares a similarity with the *Daily Show*, pointing out the hypocrisies and inconsistencies of both news sources and the journalistic organisations that cover them (Feldman 2007), *The Colbert Report* is even a more acerbic critique, his parody taking aim at an entire style of communication as opposed to at individual incidents. The potential appeal of reflexive journalism, discussed in Chapter 3, is thus brought to the fore within these programs. In an era that has seen trust in mainstream media decline, and the rise of cable newscasts which are often seen as trivial or sensational, *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* have carved out a unique niche that simultaneously covers the news while taking aim at the manner in which ‘professional’ journalistic outlets cover it.

If the argument of this chapter was merely that Colbert and Stewart are influential, then it might be misleading to label what they do as ‘news’, a moniker not typically bestowed upon Oprah, Dr. Phil or various right-wing radio pundits. So while it is important to explain how Stewart and Colbert diverge from mainstream broadcast news it is equally important to discuss what discerns them from other powerful opinion-shapers that discuss factual events.

It seems authority is not a reliable separator, as the subject-matter that appears on an episode of *Oprah* is certainly persuasive and relied upon by more people than likely watch Stewart and Colbert in a single week. It cannot be a monopoly on the facts or the validity of the information it serves, for if the James Frey controversy proved anything, it is that Oprah, like the out-of-character Colbert, is riled by accounts less ‘truth’ than ‘truthiness’.

The most basic answer seems to be that there is an inescapable relation between satirical news, journalistic coverage, and the news cycle, a somewhat Frankenstein-esque creation that is simultaneously determined by, yet drives, the events which create it (see Dayan and Katz 1992). In this respect, *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* diverge from many current-affairs type shows in terms of immediacy, focussing on events, their impact, and coverage in the mainstream media, before considering broader social issues, or human interest. As the Peabody Award (2007) for “Indecision 2004” noted,

Through the momentous weeks of the 2004 Presidential Campaigns, Jon Stewart and cohorts provided the kind of cathartic satire that deflates pomposity on an equal opportunity basis. Somehow this sharp commentary made the real issues more important than ever. Much has been made of the fact that growing numbers of viewers, old as well as young, turn to *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart for “news.” Mr. Stewart, however, repeatedly reminds those viewers that his program is “fake news.” Nevertheless, the program applies its satirical, sometimes caustic perspective on the issues of the day, on those engaged with the issues, and on the everyday experiences that will be affected by them.

This engagement through comedy is nothing new in journalism, for political cartoons have taken a satirical look at issues for some time. However, the reach of these programs is quite novel, and they appear to be part of a broader cultural trend towards informative communication that is crafted to be pleasurable to consume.

For some time, there has been speculation that presentation is beginning to outstrip content in the so-called ‘serious’ press; the result being a merging of the supposed bifurcation of the serious from the popular press (Sparks 1991). The irony of this with respect to *The*

Daily Show and *Colbert Report* is that despite benefitting from this trend, both hosts, as we have seen throughout this chapter, appear quite cynical towards this development in professional journalism. Perhaps, as Dowd (2006) asserts, Stewart and Colbert are, “the Cronkite and Murrow for an ironic millennium.” Part of this is the fearlessness with which they satirise the media, exemplified by *The Daily Show*’s post-9/11 coverage, which was entitled “America Freaks Out”, adding a rolling news ticker to the bottom of the screen that parodied the media frenzy. It simply read, “Oh God Oh God Oh God...” (Colapinto 2004b). Amidst a shifting journalistic field, a ‘critical’ news of feeling – as we get with the truthy Colbert or the faux Stewart – appears a dependable and suitable avenue for reasoning with the facts of the day and their coverage in the mainstream press.

Chapter 7: That's The Way it Was – The Transitions in Broadcast News

With the death of Peter Jennings, the anchor for the ABC News evening program, America officially moved beyond the days when three men and three networks dominated television news. After Walter Cronkite's reign as the premier voice of news in the 1960's and 1970's, the star power was divided among Dan Rather of CBS News, Tom Brokaw of NBC News and Mr. Jennings. With all three now off the air, that power to present the news divides and subdivides again, almost geometrically, into an army of new voices and an array of less-famous faces. At this point, the three nightly network news programs still draw many more people each night than even the noisiest cable programs. And that number goes up in emergencies. But the audience of people who routinely stop and sit down around dinnertime to see the news is steadily shrinking and swiftly aging. The next generation seems ready to taste the huge buffet of news and mock-news in print and on radio, television and the Internet.

New York Times, 'The Last Anchor' (2005) – editorial on the future of network news following the death of Peter Jennings.

When one considers the history of American journalism, a few prominent names spring to mind. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein will always hold places of prominence for Watergate, which brought the specialty of investigative journalism to the fore. Walter Lippmann continues to hold sway in historical accounts for his early philosophical writings on the craft and role in establishing journalism as a distinct profession. Among those famous writers whose celebrity is tied to their fiction, ideas, or controversial persona, we find many with roots in journalism; whether it be Ernest Hemingway and his war reportage, H.L. Mencken's editorials and columns for the *Baltimore Sun* or literary journalism authors such as Truman Capote and Hunter S. Thompson.¹⁶² However, for the most part, when journalists are considered in popular culture, the names that spring to mind are from broadcast, especially over the past few decades. From early stalwarts of the medium, like Edward R. Murrow, to reporters such as Barbara Walters or Diane Sawyer, whose exclusive interviews

¹⁶² Literary journalism, also referred to as new journalism, creative non-fiction, or in Thompson's case, gonzo journalism, has at its core a highly subjective style, placing the journalism in the centre of the story she covers.

are among some of the most watched pieces of journalism, it seems that broadcast is more likely than print to generate celebrity status. Much of this is likely attributable to the visual nature of broadcast news, it being easier to become established within popular culture when one is seen on a nightly or weekly basis, as opposed to simply read. And at the head of this journalism hierarchy is arguably the network news anchor, a role that began in earnest with Walter Cronkite in the 1960s and reached its zenith with the ‘big three’ anchors of Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather and Peter Jennings who were the faces of network news for most of the 1980s and 90s.

The anchor, it has been argued, occupies, “a strange position in the American scheme of status. Not quite movie stars, not quite officialdom, they are more famous than most movie stars and more powerful than most politicians” (Rich 2002). As such, studying what, if any, changes have occurred over the past 25 years in network news becomes important if for no other fact than when one considers the state of the media as a whole, these newscasts are still, far-and-away, the most consumed individual news products within the American journalism industry (PEJ 2007). While a greater total number of Americans subscribe to a daily newspaper or watch local news, when it comes to a single news program these three newscasts still bring in the largest audience, even if their cumulative viewership has dropped some 50 per cent over the past 25 years, from an average of 52 million viewers per evening in 1980, to 26 million in 2006 – a consistent decline of about 1 million viewers per year (*ibid*).¹⁶³

As television journalism’s traditional news of fact, network news is significant for this

¹⁶³ A telling statistic comes when we consider ratings – the number of televisions tuned into a given program at a given time – and share – the percentage of televisions in use tuned into a specific program – for the past 5, 25, and nearly 40 years. As PEJ (2007) notes: “In 1969, the three network newscasts had a combined 50 rating and an 85 share. In 1980, the year that CNN was launched, they had a 37 rating and a 75 share. As of November 2006, ratings had fallen 64% since 1969, 51% since 1980, and 23% since 2000 [to 18.2]. Share, meanwhile, had fallen 60% since 1969, 55% since 1980, and 23% since 2000 [to 34].”

dissertation in that by its consideration, we can attempt to gauge what changes the transformation discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 have had on the nightly newscasts and what relationship, if any, this bears to the emergence of a news of feeling.

Demographics are an element of the drop-off in the audience levels for network news, as the median age of viewers is roughly 60 years. While it is not clear to what extent younger viewers have ever comprised the nightly news audience, it is widely acknowledged that demographics for the evening news skew higher than for all other forms of journalism (PEJ 2006). The problems with having such an elderly demographic are twofold. First, as audience members age and die off, younger viewers need to replace them to maintain ratings. Although the exact numbers are imprecise, it is accepted wisdom among network executives that this is not occurring (PEJ 2007).¹⁶⁴ Many of the changes discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, especially fragmentation and the decline in trust in mainstream media, are significant in terms of this trying to explain this decline, but whatever the confluence of factors, what seems obvious is that a replacement generation of viewers, who were expected to begin a relationship with the evening news once they settled down and started families, are either tuning into other alternatives or not tuning in at all (PEJ 2006). The second issue, which dovetails with the first, is that advertising revenue is primarily centred on the 25-54 age range, which means that network newscasts face pressure not only in terms of population dynamics but in terms of commercial imperatives to appeal younger. Evidence of this can be seen in the revenue shift to breakfast news programming, which draws a younger median audience closer to 50 (PEJ 2004). The balance, as CBS *Evening News* found in the initial months after Katie Couric started, is a tenuous one, as trying to appeal to a younger audience can

¹⁶⁴ While audience demographics have not been consistently collected, MagnaGlobal USA, a television research firm, has noted no significant change in the median age of network news viewers since 2002 (PEJ 2007).

simultaneously antagonise core viewers (see Hagan 2007). One tactic has seen the networks try to attract younger viewers through different media, such as podcasts or online content (New York Times 2005; CBS Evening News 2006b; PEJ 2007). As we see throughout this chapter, what is ubiquitous in the dialogue surrounding the evening news is that the networks are willing to change to try to stem the flow of viewers.

By considering the changes in network news over the past 25 years, this chapter acts almost as a constant against which the emergent news of feeling products discussed in the previous two chapters can be compared. These chapters examined two genres of news, the cable magazine and satirical news, to outline some of the more successful and evident examples of what I contend is an emergent news of feeling. While in and of itself these developments are interesting, in terms of their evident popularity, influence, and prominence within the larger journalistic field, their emergence begs an obvious question: to what extent has a news of fact taken onboard elements from a news of feeling? Put otherwise, is there a broader trend across the entire spectrum of American broadcast journalism towards a news of feeling, and if so to what extent, or do programs like *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Daily Show* simply augment a journalistic field where a news of fact remains relatively unchanged? As we have seen in previous chapters, commentators such as Kovach and Rosenstiel (1999), Macdonald (2000), and Cameron (2004) would likely assert the former, speaking of a more generalised infotaining, personalising, or conversationalising tendency, respectively, effecting change in the tone and style of the entire journalism industry. More broadly, Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) and Fairclough (1995) note that this trend towards informalisation is widespread, being increasingly evident in politics and other civic walks of life. In a more polemical tone, Franklin (1997) advances a theory of tabloidization, derisively referring to what he terms “newzak”, while Bourdieu’s *On Television* (1998), offers a fairly scathing

assessment of the trivialisation of broadcast news. As was noted in the Introduction and Chapter 2, a full-scale shift is empirically difficult to demonstrate and the assertions of tabloidization like those advanced by Franklin often rely upon a dichotomous view of news. Tendencies, such as conversationalisation, are more easily demonstrated and consequently one effect of this chapter is to act as a sort of bookend to this dissertation; to consider these different assertions outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 by exploring the specifics of change vis-à-vis a traditional news of fact.

Accordingly, this chapter takes a closer look at a journalist and newscast that bears close affinity to an 'ideal' news of fact, Walter Cronkite and the *CBS Evening News*, and compares this archetype with the *Evening News* and its current anchor, Katie Couric. In the introduction, when the differences between a news of fact and a news of feeling were outlined, *CBS Evening News*, when anchored by Cronkite, was held up as a prototypical example of what we have come to expect from a news of fact in terms of presentation, tone, emotive posture and so forth. Couric, as mentioned in Chapter 2, is the first female to permanently occupy a solo-anchor desk on one of the three network newscasts. While this is only one moment in the increasing feminization of the workforce, Couric's ascension to the anchor desk was widely considered a crucial moment in the process, for it was taken as a sign by many that a female could be taken 'seriously' enough to hold down one of the most prestigious positions in an industry which still values 'masculine' traits such as gravitas and authority (see Hagan 2007; cf. Carter *et al.* 1998). However, a change in gender is only one of many developments to be witnessed in how this mainstay of American broadcast news goes about its craft. By counterpoising *CBS Evening News* under Cronkite with the same broadcast under Couric a few decades later, one can get a better sense as to whether this traditional news of fact has indeed begun to incorporate elements of a news of feeling, and if so, to what

extent. As we will see, while still resembling a news of fact, though not to the degree witnessed during Cronkite's tenure, the current manifestation of the *CBS Evening News* also incorporates elements that would more aptly be described as a news of feeling. In this regard, this newscast is further evidence not necessarily of the death of objectivity in journalism but rather, as we saw in Chapter 3, its ongoing reconfiguration in multiple and often novel news formats (Hackett and Zhao 1998; Frank 2003; Ward 2005).

This chapter supplements the general observations outlined in Chapters 2 and 3. By getting a specific sense of exactly how the *CBS Evening News* has dealt with the developments impacting the industry, we can get a better idea how more 'traditional' broadcast journalism goes about making the news in an increasingly mediated, technological, fragmented and commercialised landscape that helps define the state of the media in the 21st century. Despite potentially evidencing a broader trend towards informalisation across the news industry, it does not appear that a news of feeling has usurped a news of fact. Similarly, while we may be witnessing a sort of creeping of the informal, it seems like a knee-jerk response to automatically equate this to a broader trivialisation of journalism.

A Traditional News of Fact – CBS News Under Cronkite

That is part of our training. We learn to put our personal feelings behind us and try to write the facts as nearly as we can come to them as honestly as we can report them.

Walter Cronkite, Time (2003) – responding to the question: “was there ever a time when you were anchoring that it was difficult for you to hold in your feelings?”

The irony of the quote that leads this dissertation is that a defining moment of one of the pillars of American journalism is so notable not for personifying his career but for its incongruity to it. When Walter Cronkite announced the death of John F. Kennedy in 1963,

the anchor was visibly shaken, removing the glasses he was wearing to read the incoming copy as tears formed at the edges of his eyes, briefly clearing his throat as he regained his poise before continuing with the bulletin.¹⁶⁵ As CBS news remembers it: “On that most frantic of days, the voice delivering the horrifying news was calm, measured. CBS newsman Walter Cronkite’s composure wavered only once: at the moment when the unthinkable was confirmed” (Early Show 2003). This moment became etched in American journalistic lore not just for the magnitude of the event, but because it so evidently transcended the naturalised image Cronkite had crafted for the American public. Put otherwise, Cronkite’s ‘emotion’ momentarily shattered the myth of the professional journalist (cf. Barthes 1957). His degree of involvement in reading the news was fleetingly ‘hot’, a deviation from the traditional ‘cool’ posture one expected from the news (cf. Stearns 1994; cf. Barbalet 1998). But just how did Cronkite go about crafting this persona, and what role did this persona play in the overall success of *CBS Evening News* during his reign? To answer this, one needs to consider not only his performance but the role of the anchor in the broader journalism field of his day.

In 1963, Cronkite’s *CBS Evening News* was the first nightly newscast to move from 15 to 30 minutes. It took four years for him to pass the top-rated *Huntley-Brinkley Report* on NBC as the nation’s most-watched newscast, and although there are various theories as to why this happened,¹⁶⁶ it is generally agreed that during his tenure, Cronkite established the level of celebrity and status since afforded to the television news anchor (Socolow 2003). As Rich (2002) notes, “It was in 1963 that the network anchors as we define them today were born: a

¹⁶⁵ The video is available online as part of the CBS news archives.

¹⁶⁶ Some of the more noted include: the aftermath of a union strike which damaged Huntley and Brinkley’s relationship, CBS’s position at the forefront of satellite and visual technology, consistency arising from Cronkite’s appointment as the first anchor/managing editor, and Cronkite’s demeanour, which some have said was well-suited to calm the ‘average’ American during turbulent times (Socolow 2003).

man (and still almost always a man) who is at once an authoritative reporter, a cool news reader and the nation's emotional proxy at history's events." In this light, Couric's appointment is even more telling in terms of the feminization of the workforce discussed in Chapter 2, and the complexity of this relationship vis-à-vis objectivity and what are deemed 'appropriate' techniques for crafting the news and who is fit to do this. Cronkite is credited with being the first newsreader to don the title of "anchor", a moniker given to him by CBS news executives when he hosted the 1952 political conventions (ibid.; Ashton 2004). This term, interestingly, bears close affinity to the sense of anchorage employed by Barthes (1977) in Chapter 4, in that Cronkite served to stabilise the floating meanings which swirl around news stories. Cronkite thus stands as the first of his kind, a sort of trusted 'father figure' Americans tuned into, especially during crises, to understand how events would impact the nation.¹⁶⁷

Although he stepped down from *CBS Evening News* in 1981, Cronkite's eminence is well-established within the industry. He has garnered Peabody and Polk awards, and a Presidential Medal of Honour. The journalism school at the University of Arizona is named in his honour, while his name also adorns the yearly USC Annenberg School of Communication "Awards for Excellence in Broadcast Journalism." He was the second journalist (after Edward R. Murrow) inducted by the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences into its "Hall of Fame". Retrospectives invariably refer to him by his enduring legacy as "the most trusted man in America," a title which came to prominence during his tenure as anchor of the *CBS Evening News*. But it is instructive to see how Cronkite forged this valued reputation; for if there is one constant in journalism, as noted in Chapter 3, it is

¹⁶⁷ As Rich (2002) notes, further evidence that this was the case was offered up again on September 11th. In the face of ongoing prognostications of the death of the network anchor, Americans tuned overwhelming into coverage being hosted by the 'big three', who were widely credited as taking a more calm and reasoned approach to the day's events than their cable counterparts.

that trust is arguably the currency of the industry. However, as we saw in Chapters 5 and 6, today's news of feeling alternatives take a far more involved approach than Cronkite ever did to generate this sense.

What is immediately evident from watching a Cronkite broadcast is the near unwavering constancy of his pace, delivery and tone.¹⁶⁸ That is why rare instances like the Kennedy assassination, his awe in watching the moon landing in 1969, and an atypical moment of editorialising – clearly labelled as such by *CBS Evening News* – an anti-Vietnam war piece appearing at the end of the broadcast which prompted President Johnson to declare, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost middle America,” are frequently held up when discussing his legacy (Ashton 2004). These instances are so notable in a career that spans the last half century because, especially during the 19 years Cronkite anchored the *CBS Evening News*, he so rarely broke from his measured and detached delivery that when he did, it became a newsworthy event in and of itself. As viewers, these moments stand out because they are clear instances of a violation of the journalistic ‘rules of truth’ embodied within Cronkite’s persona – by contravening the communicative regularities of the profession, these moments demand greater involvement on behalf of the audience as we can recognise that something ‘unnatural’ is occurring (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 2002; cf. Scott 2004). And the fact that only a few circumstances witnessed this shift in character illustrates that such moments could only be brought about by the truly exceptional.

However, it can generally be said that from night-to-night, segment-to-segment, Cronkite and the *CBS Evening News* during his tenure was remarkably consistent. Each

¹⁶⁸ A claim with some prevalence on the internet is that Cronkite trained himself to speak at 124 words per minute, significantly below the average speed of most Americans, to facilitate an understanding of the news. While it is difficult to verify this, there is little doubt when watching the *CBS Evening News* that the pace of Cronkite’s delivery is constant, measured, and notably slower than everyday conversation.

episode examined for this project begins with a male voice simply intoning: “This is the *CBS Evening News* with Walter Cronkite,” as a shot of the newsroom from the side comes into view, showing Cronkite at his desk and other reporters in the background. A simple graphical overlay of the show title with the CBS logo merged with a globe appears, gradually shrinking until it borders the image of Cronkite at the anchor desk (see figure 7.1). At this point, Cronkite simply declares, “Good Evening,” and delves straight into the top news story of the day with no fanfare. Whether the story and words are sensational, Cronkite’s delivery could best be described as a sort of matter-of-fact gravitas (Dahlgren 1981). For instance, a fairly dull story which led the news on March 2, 1979, about a non-confidence vote dissolving the James Callaghan government in the United Kingdom (CBS 1979a), is introduced with the exact same pitch, tone and intonation as a “horror story” in the Central African Republic two months later where, “several hundred students were rounded up by the Emperor’s imperial guard, and as many as a hundred of the young people, aged 8 to 16 years old, were killed with bayonets, clubs, and stones” (CBS 1979b). Tragedy with a greater impact on Americans is similarly delivered, even if the phrasing is not conducive to a sense of calm. The first death in the Iranian hostage crisis was stated matter-of-factly in November of that year, even if the language – “The United States now is beset by a crisis that goes beyond the borders of Iran. It is a crisis that has today claimed its first American life,” – that followed Cronkite’s perfunctory “Good evening,” or the lead in to the report which followed – “And the United States was the victim of violent anti-Americanism in neighbouring Pakistan where thousands of enraged Moslems [sic] stormed the U.S. embassy in Islamabad,” – is seemingly inimical to Cronkite’s sense of calm (CBS 1979d). As Dahlgren (1981: 294, 293) notes, Cronkite in this sense acts as the “Prime Knower,” who is “different from most other people – he appears as a wise, urbane, and stoic father figure;” a persona which

encapsulates the fact that he is able to marshal the vast resources of the news division and cover the world for us, shedding light on seemingly any event in a calm and collected manner.



Figure 7.1. Opening Moments of the CBS Evening News.

While Cronkite's trademark delivery and steady persona is arguably the constant that led to his status as the "most trusted man in America", and accordingly the *CBS Evening News'* supremacy over his competitors during his tenure, the rest of the show format augments this sense of calmness, gravitas, and predictability. Every time we return in studio after a piece filed by a correspondent, there is a brief pause before Cronkite returns his gaze to us, from what we naturally assume is a monitor to his right that we do not see on-screen. This visual cue gives the appearance that Cronkite is engaged with all facets of the newscast (cf. Helmers and Hill 2004). Consistency of performance is mirrored in the consistency of timing. Each episode of his *CBS Evening News* is interspersed with five 1-minute commercial breaks, each composed of two 30-second spots. The first break occurs at different points in the broadcast but generally follows a lead set of stories that are arranged thematically.¹⁶⁹ The

¹⁶⁹ For the 'fast' news days involving the Iranian hostage crisis in November, the break occurred later in the broadcast after all stories relating to the developments were aired (CBS 1979c; d). On the two 'slower' news days examined, the break came much earlier in the broadcast, after the story about Margaret Thatcher's successful non-confidence vote in the United Kingdom (CBS 1979a), and after a summary of the weekend activities of the assumed frontrunners for the Democratic ticket in the 1980 Presidential race (CBS 1979b).

second commercial break follows the next round of stories, which are generally field reports introduced by Cronkite. The third follows a sequence of shorter stories, often 10-30 second updates simply read by the anchor, while the fourth break often precedes a longer human interest or special report segment. The fifth break separates Cronkite's sign off from the credits. As we saw in previous chapters, consistency of format is a primary technique that helps establish the grammar of journalistic communication and the process through which we consume news (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; 2002; Holsanova *et al.* 2006).

There is no verbal segue into any of these interruptions, simply a side shot of Cronkite and the studio which replicates the opening to the show. The only time this format shifts is for the third or fourth break, a graphic of the stock market activity, with the trends succinctly summarized by Cronkite: "the stock market today: down in heavy trading" (CBS 1979a). The implication behind these transitions to commercial interruption is likely not lost on the audience. First, the absence of seguing, teasing, or 'happy talk', either going into the commercial break or returning from it, implies that air time is a limited resource not to be wasted. It also suggests a direct contradiction to the banality of the advertisements; re-establishing the newscast's sense of substance. The shot of the studio invariably shows the journalists 'hard at work', from Cronkite examining or altering copy, to people typing away and moving hurriedly in the background. One of Cronkite's first directives as managing editor of the nightly newscast was to turn the newsroom into the studio (Ashton 2004). The desired effect, he said, was to show that that CBS team was collecting and updating the news directly until the end of the broadcast.

When one considers this sense of ongoing work against what became Cronkite's trademark sign off, the transition is quite remarkable. Despite appearing to update the news until the last instance of the broadcast, Cronkite's nightly signoff – "And that's the way it is,"

followed by the date and “This is Walter Cronkite, CBS News. Good night.” – provides a sense of closure to the newscast. The effect of this closing is twofold. Most evidently, it implies that the viewer is caught up on the events of the day. There is no sense of incompleteness or need to go beyond the purview of the broadcast; this sort of definitive statement leaves little ambiguity or doubt. His final words are another subtle reinforcement of this stance. “Good night,” is decisive, being tied to a cultural understanding of finality that is associated with going to bed (cf. Barthes 1957). While it is obvious that few people go to bed at 7:00 pm, this closing salutation implies that, at least when it comes to the news of the day, Cronkite’s audience can rest easy. The combination of these two sign-offs is even more intriguing when one compares it to the opening; for the first words Cronkite greets us with, a mere half hour earlier, are “Good evening,” a salutation associated with transition – a return from work, arriving at a restaurant for dinner, and so forth – a culture referent that is not connected to conclusiveness and satiation but to beginnings and anticipation.

For the duration of his role of host of the *CBS Evening News*, Cronkite crafted a style of journalism that was the embodiment of what the ideal type of objectivity would demand from a broadcast anchor. He was engaged but neutral, detached but not indifferent, delivering the facts of the day in a style that was unflappable, steady and predictable (cf. Stearns 1994; cf. Ward 2005). Such was the success of his delivery that his style was replicated quite closely by the anchors who followed him in the 1980s and 90s. While Brokaw, Jennings, and Rather allowed ‘personality’ to come through with slightly greater regularity (Rich 2002), the effect of their nightly broadcast was similarly ‘cool’. Although Cronkite’s term at CBS has been called the halcyon age of broadcast news, and the end of the reign of big three has been heralded by many media analysts as the death of the evening news, some argue there is still a place in journalism for a product that is relies on its

“Authority. Gravitas. Solemnity. A reliable, calm anchorperson on whom you can depend. Every weeknight” (O’Brien 2006). And as we see in the following section, many of the conventions forged by Cronkite live on today. However, a balancing act is simultaneously evident, as the *CBS Evening News* endeavours to remodel its style, not just in terms of technology, but in terms of its tone.

A Current News of Fact – CBS News Under Couric

I think the one thing that I realized, looking back at it and analyzing it, is people are very unforgiving and very resistant to change. The biggest mistake we made is we tried new things.

Katie Couric, New York Magazine (2007) – explaining falling ratings after she took over the *CBS Evening News* and her subsequent more formal approach to anchoring.

When the big three network anchors stepped down from their broadcasts in 2005, there was talk in the industry that this presented a moment to potentially re-brand the evening news, to attempt to shore up ratings, which had been steadily deteriorating since the 1980s. While the death of the network news division and star anchors had been predicted by various media critics for much of the 1990s, the replacement of all three stalwarts was seen by many media critics as the final nail in the coffin of the evening news:

Talking heads are dead. Forget the Internet sucking away younger viewers – they don’t watch network news in any great number and haven’t for years. Network news watchers are older. Much older ...There’s no real allure to the nightly network news without the comforting attraction of the iconic anchors (Brokaw, Jennings, Rather). Without them, you’ve got 22 minutes of storytelling that the bulk of the available demographic has already either read online or will check out later in the night on cable. Let’s recap: Outdated delivery system. Airs too early. Appeals to declining, elderly audience (Tim Goodman *San Francisco Chronicle* 2005, quoted in O’Brien 2006).

This sort of doomsday prognostication was perhaps not echoed by network news executives, who pointed to the superior ratings still experienced by the evening news in comparison to

other broadcast alternatives. However, there was a general acknowledgement that the networks needed to do something to update the evening news for the new millennium, to halt the downward progression that had plagued them for the past 25 years (ibid.; PEJ 2007).

When CBS announced the hiring of Couric to become the new permanent anchor of their evening newscast, a sense of revitalisation was evident in its press release. Couric was the popular host of NBC's *Today* breakfast newscast, noted for her friendly demeanour and ability to connect with interviewees (Hagan 2007). The executive producer noted: "In the past year, the *CBS Evening News* has begun to build a broadcast with a fresh, accessible approach, and viewers have responded. ... Katie is the perfect person to complete that process" (CBS 2006a). This use of terminology such as "fresh" and "accessible" has echoes of the gendered descriptions of 'skills' ascribed to female reporters in Chapter 2. Further press releases heralded shifts that were to complement Couric's inaugural broadcast, among them a simulcast of the program on the internet, for those unable to be in front of their television; a "Couric and Company" blog where, "Couric and the Evening News team will create a transparent, two-way, continuing dialogue with viewers and readers that encourages online comments and questions"; "Katie Couric's Notebook", where Couric would offer a sort of video blog on top stories that caught her attention; and a "First Look" segment where a video preview of potential news stories for the evening newscast would be available mid-afternoon on the CBS news website (CBS 2006b). But for all these shifts and changes, the 'fresh' new *CBS Evening News* remains faithful to many of the traditions and techniques that stretch back to Cronkite's tenure as anchor.

Similarities with Cronkite

When we consider a product like the *CBS Evening News*, it is important to remember what parts of the objectivity regime still live in on journalism, as discussed in Chapter 3. Accuracy, balance, factuality and a desire to generate trustworthy accounts are some of the hallmarks of 20th century American journalism that are still widely witnessed in the rhetoric emanating from newsrooms, industry publications and academic investigations of the industry (Ericson *et al* 1987; Schudson 2001; Ward 2005). It would be reasonable to expect that remnants from the ‘rules of truth’ manifested in journalistic practice during Cronkite’s heyday are more likely to be witnessed by today’s news of fact alternatives as opposed to the emergent news of feeling products that have risen since his time. And a quick glance at an episode of the *CBS Evening News* under Couric quickly confirms this supposition. Many of the standardised frames and techniques that were deployed under Cronkite to ensure consistency in the way broadcasts journalists make the news are still widely employed (cf. Pan and Kosicki 1993; cf. Knight 2001).

Many typical stories from an episode of *CBS Evening News* in 1979 have seen little change over the past 25 years in terms of their basic format of storytelling. There is still a host of techniques that can be witnessed, from relying on official sources, attribution, statistics, and other positivist indicators that do work in creating what Tuchman (1978) calls a “web of facticity”; approaches employed by journalists to make ‘objective’ reportage apparent to themselves and visible to the audience (Erikson *et al* 1987; 1989). A comparison of two similar instances covered by the *CBS Evening News*, despite occurring some 28 years apart, quickly illustrates this. Consider the telling of the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979. After the basic facts concerning the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and resultant hostages is briefly set up by Cronkite, he introduces the reporter for the story, the State Department

correspondent for CBS, Marvin Kalb. Kalb first offers background, before interviewing the U.S. Secretary of State, counterpoising these comments against the Iranian Chargé d'affaires, then stating the captors' demands and the U.S. State Department's plan of action. These narratives are woven together before ending the story with a stand-up in front of the State Department press room, noting what to expect from the days ahead (CBS 1979c). The 2007 Iraqi equivalent, a hostage taking of U.S. soldiers, is told in a near identical fashion. Couric gives the basic facts of the case before handing over to Mark Strassmann, a Baghdad correspondent. Strassman gives the background and details of the hostage taking before interviewing a high-ranking U.S. army spokesman. An Arabic language newspaper editor is called upon to offer a prediction about what might happen, which is counterpoised against the U.S. army commander's summary of the actions the army is taking to recover the hostages. The piece ends with Strassmann detailing the hostage-takers' demands while performing a stand-up from Baghdad, looking forward to what might happen next (CBS 2007f). While the copy of the reports alters slightly, this is one of many examples of how the basic frame, journalistic credentials, progression, sources, and format relied upon to convey common narratives remains relatively unchanged (see figure 7.2).





Figure 7.2. *A Report on Hostage Taking in Iran, 1979, and its 2007 Iraqi Equivalent.*

A few more similarities outside of format are worth noting. From 1979 to 2007, we see the same type of expert sources in the crafting of this story, something that is common across the ongoing stories and beat reports that provide the glut of day-to-day coverage (Fishman 1980; Dayan and Katz 1992). This is a fact not lost on critical theorists in the tradition of Herman and Chomsky (1988) who note that elite-engineered accounts are still overwhelmingly relied upon, which potentially co-opts journalism (see Altheide 2002, McChesney 1999; 2002). Additionally, graphics such as maps and charts, which aid in summarising the factual elements of a story, are utilised frequently by both broadcasts. Similarly, the types of shots one sees are often unchanged: the flyover of the Three Mile Island nuclear plant when it suffered a near-meltdown in 1979 (CBS 1979a) is emblematic of the sweeping panoramas used to set the scene for ‘disaster’ stories (cf. Lule 2001). The 2007 equivalent, a segment on “Nature’s Fury”, a series of damaging wildfires, floods, and tornadoes, is nearly identical (CBS 2007c). The difference in modern broadcast news is thus not a desire for eye-catching graphics and highly visualized material (see figure 7.3). Rather what has shifted is the ease of generating such graphics and the sophistication not just of them, but of their integration into the broader newscast (see Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999). There is a smoothness in their assimilation, not evident in earlier footage, which better uses

them to help set the ‘tone’ for an individual story or entire broadcast (cf. Helmers and Hill 2004). For instance, the summary of the stock market is no longer a somewhat jarring full-screen graphic but now appears, quite sleekly, on the large video screen that adorns the front of Couric’s desk. So while it is evident that the quality and complexity of these visuals is vastly superior in 2007, the desire to intersperse them is relatively unchanged. Other conventions that aid a sense of verisimilitude and immediacy, such as the reporter stand-up in front of a location directly referenced in the story (Seib 2001), are prominent in both newscasts. The association with the ‘global’ – both Cronkite and Couric’s introduction feature an overlaid graphic of the world – and the over-the-shoulder visual cues that introduces each story, are further constants that span the decades separating these newscasts.



Figure 7.3. *Common Stories, Common Images: Discussion on Fuel Prices and Auto Layoffs from 1979 and 2007.*

The basic point is that while style and tone may have changed over the past few decades, narrative formats and visual techniques used to tell stories have remained fairly constant. The basic frame of the type of story, for example tragedy or disaster (see Lule 2001; Cottle and Rai 2006), is consistent as is the manner in which it is told. In this sense, the basics which underlie how a news of fact is produced makes *CBS Evening News* under Couric an obvious descendant of the same program under Cronkite. At a sort of genetic level, these are related products, having the same fundamental building blocks in terms of how they go about making news. However, while the genetics of the *CBS Evening News* under Couric are relatively unchanged, the style has certainly changed. For in terms of how the news is presented, *CBS Evening News* shares some stylistic similarities to the news of feeling alternatives that have come to prominence over the past decade.

Divergences from Cronkite

Despite no longer being its anchor, Walter Cronkite is still a part of every broadcast of the *CBS Evening News*, though ironically his participation is now part of one of the more evident divergences we see across the years. While in 1979 the introduction to each evening was a relatively short introduction stating the name of the show over an image of Cronkite at the desk, its 2007 counterpart is a much longer, and more complex beginning. Each evening of Couric's broadcast begins with a fast three-note "sounder", "notes that function as a subliminal come-to-attention signal to viewers" (Barnes 2006). From a wide-angle shot of Couric in studio at the anchor desk, the camera quickly zooms in while she announces, "I'm Katie Couric, tonight," before delving into a series of teasers for the stories to follow, similar in style and presentation to the introduction described in Chapter 5 for *Lou Dobbs Tonight*. Brief, often emotive-laden descriptions of the main stories of the evening are quickly

described by Couric as related images flash across the screen. Each teaser has a title, often a play-on-words similar to those utilised in the *Daily Show* discussed in the previous chapter – as in a report on Barack Obama’s potential Irish roots, ‘Barack O’Bama’ (CBS 2007h) – but without the same degree of tongue-in-cheek satire. As Couric reads these short previews, the music is lowered in the background, being brought up again as the title sequence is launched upon the completion of the trailers. This graphical compilation relies on a stately dark blue and gold colour palette to intersperse the name of the broadcast with the sort of global graphic that has come to be a leitmotif of broadcast news (see figure 7.4). As we return to a wide-angled shot of Couric in studio, the history of the *CBS Evening News*, and all associations this brings forth, are harnessed as Walter Cronkite intones, “This is the *CBS Evening News*, with Katie Couric” (CBS 2007a-j).



Figure 7.4. *New, Longer Opening of CBS Evening News in 2007.*

This altered opening is telling for number of reasons. First is that the existence of teasers, as the industry term suggests, implies that an increasingly fickle audience needs to be wooed into staying tuned for an entire broadcast (Moore 1997). This change, and many of those which I will subsequently describe, are fairly telling indicators of the impact of the triumvirate of fragmentation, declining trust in mainstream news, and commercialisation of the industry detailed in Chapter 2. The fact that teasers for upcoming segments of the

newscast are usually offered by Couric before each commercial break is further evidence that the modern viewer is assumed to need encouragement to ‘stay tuned’ (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999). The second implication, as evidenced in the language employed in these openings, is that news content, in-and-of-itself, is insufficient incentive to watch – the content needs to be dressed up in language that oftentimes implies some personal relevance for the viewer or, alternatively, amuses or begets suspense. So an upcoming story on global warming, is previewed to us as “Forecast: HOT!” noting, “If you think summers are hot now, you ain’t seen nothing yet. A report that will really make you sweat” (CBS 2007d). A report on the declining bee population, “Mystery Killer” is introduced by noting, “Something is bringing the bees to their knees. Why that is a threat to our food supply” (CBS 2007a). And a rather innocuous story on “Wayward Whales” harnesses patriotic metaphors to announce, “Fighting for freedom and keeping hope alive. Saving a couple of whales named Freedom and Hope who have lost their way” (CBS 2007j). This trend is also mirrored in the headlines – such as “Toxic trailers” (CBS 2007h) or “Terror plot” (CBS 2007b) – which now adorn the over-the-shoulder graphics that announce each story.

These teasers, both at the start and throughout the show, can be seen as part of a broader effort to ‘involve’ the audience from the outset and throughout each broadcast using a variety of techniques rather than chancing this to content. When CBS commissioned James Horner, a Hollywood composer best known for creating the score for *Titanic*, to create a new theme song to accompany Couric’s debut as anchor, the executive producer noted the theme “must be urgent and serious, yet light. Flexible, yet memorable. Regal and encompassing the grand history of CBS News, yet moving forward” (Barnes 2006). Horner noted that he did not want to replicate the Romanesque fanfares of NBC and ABC and wanted to respect Couric’s desire to have music that invoked “wheat fields blowing rather than Manhattan

skyline.” Furthermore, Horner created slight variations on the theme which could reflect the type of news day it was – more drums to reflect anxiety-producing stories leading the news cycle or a more notable trumpet solo to set the tone for introspective news days (ibid.). Music was considered by network executives one of the most important elements in remodelling the tone of the show (see also Bull 2001), news consultants noting that many people often listen rather than watch the news. Another consideration with an eye to inclusion was altering the colours in the studio to be ‘warmer’ on camera (Barnes 2006). These aesthetic considerations point to a re-branding designed to comfort the viewer by harnessing traits associated with the ‘feminine’, as discussed in Chapter 2 (cf. Van Zoonen 1998); gaining trust not through the paternalistic style personified by Cronkite (Dahlgren 1981, Rich 2002) but in a maternal style associated with protecting the viewer.

There are a few other clues that the *CBS Evening News* is seeking to address a hold over an audience that is far more tenuous today than it was during Cronkite’s era. One of the more evident examples of this is the timing of commercials. Under Cronkite, the first break occurred at variable points in the broadcast, whenever the first set of thematic stories had been completed, sometimes as early as two-and-a-half minutes into the broadcast. In the 2007 version of the broadcast, the first commercial is consistently aired eleven-and-a-half minutes into the program, with the frequency of commercial breaks increasing as the news nears its conclusion. This timing is frequently seen in entertainment-based programming, the purpose of which, one imagines, is to ‘hook’ the viewer into the program. Teasing the audience before each commercial break reinforces this loyalty, giving further incentive to return. This parallels the blurring of entertainment and information-based programming discussed extensively in Chapter 3.

Further trends discussed in that chapter, such as personalisation, conversationalisation, and informalisation can also be witnessed in the *CBS Evening News*, for instance, in how the telling of stories appears to have seen a subtle shift that sees an effort to contextualise broader themes in a manner that relates them to the individual viewer. For example in 2007, when Daimler sold off Chrysler corporation, “the divorce of the year in the corporate world,” (CBS 2007f), the two-way conversation that followed spoke of what impact it would have on consumers who owned Chrysler vehicles or had vehicles under lease. Similarly, an immigration deal proposed by the United States Senate was described as having “enormous changes in this country’s immigration laws, changes that will affect the millions of people who are here illegally and all of us eventually one way or another” (CBS 2007h). A four-day special, “Gotta Have It! The Hard Sell To Kids.”, offered advice and websites to help families resolve issues such as credit card debt and cell-phone misuse among young people (CBS 2007f-i). Couric notes that when she joined CBS the goal was to make the show, “more personable, more accessible, a little less formal, a little more approachable” (Hagan 2007). Her decision to switch the opening greeting, initially to “Hi everybody” from “Good evening”, was a conscious effort on the part of CBS news to give the viewer a greater sense of involvement and more ‘welcoming’ news watching experience (cf. MacDonald 2000).

COLBERT: You added a real touch of, a little casual touch at the top of the news; you say ‘Hi everybody.’

COURIC: Well now it’s a little formal; it’s ‘Hello everyone.’

COLBERT: But it’s inviting right?

COURIC: ‘Well I thought about it and you know the only people who say ‘good evening’ are doormen and maître d’s ... But I found it to be, just to be, a little pretentious and portentous so I thought something a little more relaxed and casual would be more accessible. (Colbert Report 2007k).

This move seems to be an evident informalisation of the news, making the discourse more in line with ‘everyday’ speech, a recent logic in vogue among political and media consultants

who believe that bureaucratic and official discourse comes across as more stilted, less empathetic, and accordingly more distancing (Fairclough 1995; Delli Carpini and Williams 2001). This trend is infused throughout each broadcast and creeps into individual segments. Questions like Couric asking a congressman if he was “mad as heck right now” over proposed immigration reform (CBS 2007i) is just part of a more extensive shift in language that works to treat an audience as equals. In this regard, there appears to be an effort in the national newscasts to engage more directly with audiences, a style pioneered by local and cable news. However, as the *CBS Evening News*’ continued difficulty with ratings indicates, there are significant challenges a traditional news of fact faces when it tries to update its look by incorporating elements of a news of feeling.

Incorporating Elements of a News of Feeling

I didn’t think I was going to take the evening news world by storm, and if I gave anyone that impression, I’m embarrassed. I thought I had done something for a while, this genre could use a little shot in the arm, maybe I could revitalize it somewhat.

Katie Couric, New York Magazine (2007) – noting the challenges of trying to simultaneously reinvigorate the evening newscast while not losing its original appeal as the broadcast news of record.

Some media commentators assert that the day of the ‘trusted father figure’ is coming to be replaced by the knowledgeable older brother (or perhaps in Couric’s case sister) – a less paternal connection that is nonetheless “looked-up-to” for advice and knowledge (Rich 2002). This is only one of many personae that we now witness on news programs, from the intelligent witty friend, Jon Stewart, to the righteous beat-cop, O’Reilly, the full-throated populist, Lou Dobbs, and the jovial conversationalists who are most morning news anchors. Even the supposedly disappearing fatherly types, such as Jim Lehrer, still hold a place on various programs. As was discussed in Chapter 5, the field of journalism increasingly

comprises a diverse range of emotional spaces, accepted styles of journalistic involvement that mark a departure from the cool style that defined most broadcast newscasts in the time of Cronkite. When one looks at the *CBS Evening News* under Couric, it seems that while much of the reportage has stayed true to form in terms of the authoritative ‘distance’ a news of fact demands from both anchor and correspondent, there is evidence that one of the crucial elements seen under a news of feeling – the need to generate a more accessible form of involvement – has crept into the newscast. From making a conscientious effort to personalise broad stories, to informalising some elements of discourse, and increasing the avenues for interaction, this broadcast manages to convey a sense that it is not only covering the news, but covering the news for you.

Technology has certainly played a role in facilitating this sense of involvement and CBS is quite candid in its desire to shift its broadcast in this direction. Part of the somewhat ingratiating explanation for “Couric & Co.”, the online interactive blog of *CBS Evening News*, states:

In fact, we’ll try to make ourselves of some mild use by steering you to material on CBS shows, on CBSNews.com, in the newspapers or around the Web that we find intriguing, unexpected, important and funny. Especially funny. We like funny.

And we consider you — the people on the other side of the computer screen, our viewers and readers — a big part of the “Co.” of “Couric & Co.,” too. This is important — it’s not a gimmick, it’s not marketing. The “Evening News” has never really been able to talk back to you; and you really haven’t been able to talk back to us. We really want to change that, and this blog is a big start. We hope you’ll drop us a line, leave a comment and offer your feedback. Get into arguments with us. Send story ideas. Tell us what we’re ignoring (CBS 2008).

As Hallin (1992: 22) notes, by the early 1990s, the network newscasts began, to a much lesser extent, adopting a practice more often associated with local news, of “dropping neutrality and presenting the journalist as a “regular person” who shares and champions the emotions of the audience.” This is not to say that Couric has strayed too far from the cool demeanour

which demands a sort of detachment from the story matter being conveyed. She does not bemoan, yell, or pontificate in the manner that we have come to expect from cable anchors, nor does she act in a manner that could be defined as anything other than ‘serious’ throughout the bulk of her broadcast. Yet in certain segments, those which have the potential to have an immediate impact on the audience, she adopts a conversational tone that stands in marked contrast to the professorial-like imparting of information seen under Cronkite. She will often push her correspondents to instruct people where they can find further help and information, as in a segment on the declining use of mammogram screening (CBS 2007f). In short, while it is difficult for content like Mideast violence or economic summits, when possible, Couric interacts with or on behalf of her audience, rather than just talking at it.

Two formats where this is often evident are the two-way conversations with correspondents and in-studio discussions that follow specific segments. As Cameron (2004: 125) notes, these moments are “less formal in tone and style than the preceding parts of the item. It is essentially an informalising or conversationalising device for presenting news stories: instead of being on the receiving end of an impersonal, mass public announcement, viewers or listeners are repositioned as eavesdroppers on an apparently ‘natural’ exchange between two specific individuals.” The effect is, again, a somewhat contrived sense of involvement. It is not that Couric adopts a different persona for these moments – she is still the concerned anchor – however with this format she is able to display the less formal approach she popularised as host of the *Today Show*, NBC’s morning news.

Another place where we witness a change is in the greetings and sign-offs used by Cronkite versus those employed by Couric. As noted above, Couric went through two greetings, “Hi Everybody”, now “Hello Everyone” which is a less formal beginning to the

news than Cronkite's "Good evening". The sign-off is similarly toned down. No longer are we told, "And that's the way it is," instead Couric refers to us directly, noting, "And that's the *CBS Evening News* for tonight. I'm Katie Couric. Thanks for watching. I'll see you tomorrow. Good night."¹⁷⁰ Again, this appears more attentive toward trying to forge a personal connection with an audience and build a relationship as opposed to a just a ritual (cf. Cameron 2004).

Working to encourage involvement, of course, can be generated not only by shifts in tone but in shifts in the types of stories being told. While the beginning of the newscast still covers the similar sort of serious fare – wars, disasters, political developments and the like – that was seen during Cronkite the latter segments of the *CBS Evening News* now appear to be a place where stories with a more human interest or 'feel good' narrative come to the fore, and to a greater extent than its NBC or ABC equivalents (PEJ 2007). An attention to narrative is nothing new; as Graber (1994: 483) notes, in 1963, the executive producer for NBC's *Huntley-Brinkley Report* instructed his staff that,

Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have a structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle and an end. These are not only the essentials of drama; they are the essentials of narrative.

The *CBS Evening News* seems to increasingly echo this thinking. A shift which is no doubt apparent to critics who argue that television news is becoming trivialised is an overall

¹⁷⁰ On Friday evenings this is altered slightly, with Couric noting, "Thank you for watching again this week. I'll see you again Monday, until then, have a great weekend" (CBS 2007e; j).

reduction in time devoted to the newscast¹⁷¹ magnified by the parallel introduction of a near nightly ‘kicker’. While the final segment under Cronkite was often an in-depth consideration of a specific story¹⁷², the typical final segment in 2007 is primarily human interest stories or features on prominent Americans, such as excerpts from Ronald Reagan’s posthumous diary (CBS 2007i). Financial imperatives should not be ignored as part of this shift. Whereas in 1991 the budget for the *CBS Evening News* was about \$65 million a year, by 2000 this number had fallen to \$35 million (Hagan 2007).

The *CBS Evening News* has even institutionalised a Friday-evening kicker. In 2006 CBS launched “American Stories”, a recurring segment with viewers encouraged to send in story ideas to CBS for a report that would occur at end of the newscast, every Friday. After the report, usually about a unique individual living up to some element of the American dream, correspondent Steve Hartman sits down with Couric in studio, in an atmosphere reminiscent of the morning news shows, to update previous stories and to offer a preview on three potential story ideas for the upcoming week. Based upon audience response on the *CBS Evening News* website, Hartman files whichever story garners the most votes. The news-

¹⁷¹ In terms of the total time each broadcast devotes to news, *CBS Evening News* now airs approximately three minutes less coverage in a single broadcast than it did during Cronkite’s time. Accounting for the five 1-minute commercial breaks that occurred each broadcast, and discounting the credits which roll at the end of each newscast, the time devoted to news under Cronkite was approximately 23.5 minutes. Under Couric, this same calculation drops to 21 minutes – commercial time has risen by 2.5 minutes. If we subtract the teasers before each commercial break, much longer introduction, and cross-promotion (largely irrelevant in terms of the duration of the ‘news’), this figure drops to approximately 20 minutes. When critics factor in the vacuous nature of many of the nightly ‘kickers’, which often last two to three minutes, it gives some legitimacy to the contention that nightly newscasts are diminishing their content.

¹⁷² In the four episodes examined of the *CBS Evening News* under Cronkite, only one of the final segments could be termed a conventional kicker (the death of Emmett Kelly – CBS 1979a); whereas the others were similarly serious fare as the stories which preceded it (early parole release of kidnapper; Kentucky gubernatorial race, Islam in turmoil – CBS 1979b-d). A look over one year worth of Vanderbilt television archives, which details every story filed on the nightly newscasts, seems to confirm this. The bulk of the final segments under Cronkite in 1979 are longer pieces (often 3 or 4 minutes) similar to stories from news magazines like *60 Minutes*: investigative journalism, international affairs, broad social issues, and so forth.

value of these reports is unclear, and certainly brings one in mind of Colbert's quip to "feel the news, at you." The segment is also an example of the news of feeling tendency to rely on convergence to communicate with audiences; to change the news from exclusively a one-way form of exchange, to an (albeit minimal) mutually-constituted dialogue.

Yet while such stories are heavily laced with pathos, adversity and triumph, themes with a fictionalised quality, when it comes to the first portion of the *CBS Evening News*, the tone is relatively unchanged. Some of the dialogue, such as referring to the Sunni triangle in Iraq as the "triangle of death" (CBS 2007f) may seem like emotively-infused language creeping into a news of fact, but as we saw, such discourse was also present during Cronkite's tenure. Similarly, the pitch and cadence for stories such as troubles in the Middle East, manufacturing job losses and the like may be slightly more varied under Couric, but generally speaking, it could be said that her overall tone and delivery is akin to Cronkite. As Chouliaraki (2006) notes, for television news to credibly claim to serve the broader public, stories of suffering and emotion must be contemplated at a distance. These types of 'objective' accounts, what we have come to expect from network news, still dominate the majority of the *CBS Evening News*, lending to a news of fact style.

Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, on the whole, the 2007 *CBS Evening News* simply appears like a more technologically-advanced, and slightly more welcoming and interactive version of its 1979 counterpart. In this respect, CBS still remains one of the places viewers who want a 'serious' summary of the day's events are likely to turn. However, as this chapter has also illustrated, the overall uniformity of the program has been altered in terms of incorporating 'on-your-side' investigative pieces; faithfully airing a nightly kicker that acts to soften the

more depressing fare that overwhelms the early part of each newscast; adopting a more conversational and personal tone, when possible; and adding teasers that juxtapose the sombre tone of many of the stories, either by attempting to amuse, entice or concern.

Thus, while at its core *CBS Evening News* still resembles a news of fact under Couric, as we have seen throughout this chapter, it has incorporated some elements of a news of feeling similar to those described in Chapters 5 and 6 on cable and satirical news. While the crafted experience of involvement is still very much a recounting of the day's events to an 'average' audience, rather than an utterance in an ongoing relationship and dialogue (cf. Knox 2007), there is a notable effort towards making the broadcast more interactive and more accessible. Unlike Cronkite's tenure, it is seemingly no longer enough just to inform – the contemporary version of the *CBS Evening News* also appears to try to appeal and involve. Whether it is using technology to facilitate interaction, making a greater effort to bring the personal relevance of broader themes evident, speaking from time-to-time in a more colloquial style, or adopting a stance of being 'on the side' of the audience, this chapter has shown how the *CBS Evening News* has incorporated a number of shifts discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 to craft a form of news that aims to generate a greater sense of involvement on behalf of its viewers.

One should not underestimate how much the degree of transition witnessed under Couric's tenure reflects gender stereotypes (cf. van Zoonen 1998). As explored in Chapter 2, not only is there a cultural notion that potentially devalues the assumed capability of female journalists to deliver 'serious' news, there is a reinforcing tendency to associate them with greater empathy and ability to craft stories of human interest. In Couric's case, this is potentially compounded by the fact that the 'type' of role with which she previously associated – chatty, funny, relaxed morning news host – dovetails with this conception. As

CBS adjusted to its new anchor and style, both Couric and CBS executives note that at first they swung the pendulum too far in this direction. As one correspondent notes, “[CBS CEO] Moonves said people don’t want to listen to the ‘voice of God’ anymore. And it’s exactly what they want” (Hagan 2007).

When one considers this in relation to the über-consistent tone that defined Cronkite’s *Evening News*, from day-to-day, segment-to-segment, it seems the newscast no longer represents itself as a homogeneous, stand-alone broadcast but as part of a news division that adopts a variety of tones. It is still the sober flagship of the division, but it now has hints of the light-hearted fare that its early morning relative, *The Early Show*, specialises in producing, and also incorporates investigative segments and lengthy one-on-one interviews more the purview of *60 Minutes*. One such parallel led to what is arguably Couric’s most successful moment since beginning at CBS, her interview with Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin in 2008. In the midst of a media environment where press access to the relatively unknown Alaskan Governor was tightly controlled, Couric’s serious yet involved interview appeared to be viewed as the most instructive into Palin’s relative experience, or lack thereof, for the office. By being decisive yet conversational in her questioning, Couric’s seemed to generate a bond with Palin, whose relaxed demeanour helped illustrate the scripted nature of many of her responses and lack of familiarity with matters of serious national policy. The resonance of this interview was indicative of the potential strength of Couric’s contemporary interpretation of the role of the news anchor. Remediation of the interview, discussion in other news outlets and in popular culture, and apparent impact on polling figures made it perhaps the most widely discussed and analysed moment of the 2008 election campaign.

Such moments are a coup for network newscasts, and CBS quickly ensured there was no shortage of convergence in terms of publicizing the interview via various CBS news products, from webcasts, to blogs, and televised advertisements during prime time. This sort of cross-promotion also typically occurs during the *CBS Evening News* for other CBS news products. This sense of branding, a critical part of the commercialisation of news divisions discussed in Chapter 2, is reinforced by a number of recurring segments, 'Eye on Crime', 'Eye on America', and so forth that play on CBS's famed eye logo. One could look at this as yet another example of a growing emphasis on media convergence (van Cuilenburg and McQuail 2003; Jenkins 2004). This use of the show as a sort of cross-promotional vehicle as well as an evening newscast is a strategy perhaps aided by a more empathetic relation with its host, for this anchor not only informs us, she 'helps' us by directing our attention to other issues. By involving us, or at least offering the appearance of greater accessibility, the current adaptation of the *CBS Evening News* does not exactly feel the news at us, but aims to be more attentive to what its audience feels about news.

Conclusions: The Present and Future of Broadcast News – Towards a News of Feeling?

Where all the news comes second-hand, where all the testimony is uncertain, men cease to respond to truths and respond simply to opinions. The environment in which they act is not the realities themselves, but the pseudo-environment of reports, rumors and guesses. The whole reference of thought comes to be what somebody asserts, not what actually is. ... Since they are deprived of any trustworthy means of knowing what is really going on, since everything is on the plane of assertion and propaganda, they believe whatever fits more comfortably with their prepossessions.

Walter Lippmann, Liberty and the News (1920) – a prescient warning by one of journalism's earliest scholars, paralleling contemporary concerns over the fragmentation of the news and the 'involvement' of journalists.

This was the high modernism of American journalism, an era when the historically troubled role of the journalist seemed fully rationalized, when it seemed possible for the journalist to be powerful and prosperous and at the same time independent, disinterested, public-spirited, and trusted and beloved by everyone, from the corridors of power around the world to the ordinary citizen and consumer.

Daniel Hallin, The Passing of the "High Modernism" of American Journalism (1992) – summarising the somewhat antiquated rhetoric of the 1960s, which is definitive of the expected role of the journalist under the objectivity regime.

The present distinction between, for instance, press and television journalism or the news and magazine sector signifies mainly an acceptance of a hierarchy of journalisms rather than a useful division between truly different kinds of journalism, especially with the increasingly blurred genre division and the way audiences use an intertextual mix of genres to make sense of the world.

Liesbet van Zoonen, One of the Girls? Or the Changing Gender of Journalism (1998) – problematising both the hierarchy of news and the assumptions of its clear distinctions.

This dissertation has explored the 'blurring' of news styles and emergence of new forms within American television journalism over the past 25 years, with a focus on how the roles of emotion and 'objectivity' have been reconfigured in a climate of unprecedented technological, commercial and demographic shifts. As audiences have fragmented, there has been a parallel tendency that has seen the trust in mainstream media decline. At the same time, we have witnessed the emergence of a host of news alternatives that I have termed a 'news of feeling', which attempt to engage with audiences on a more direct level and often

‘feel’ and ‘pre-digest’ the news. I argue that a confluence of factors, including the decline or questioning of the notion of objectivity in media work as elsewhere, the rapid proliferation of news outlets, increasing sophistication of news presentation, and the fragmentation of audiences has provided a fertile climate for these alternatives to flourish. However, it is not simply enough to note that avenues have opened which allow different genres to succeed. Rather, as this dissertation has demonstrated throughout its empirical chapters, some of the more prominent examples of emerging programs are a polished amalgamation of traditional journalism and innovative techniques. In this respect, this dissertation is unique in that it investigates two emerging forms of broadcast journalism, satirical news and cable magazines, not just in terms of their content but in terms of how they attempt to craft a more ‘involved’ presentational style than network newscasts while simultaneously adhering to many conventional journalistic ‘rules of truth’.

This trend can also be seen to be operating in the opposite direction. As the final chapter indicates, one of the stalwarts of broadcast journalism, the *CBS Evening News*, is starting to adopt some of the techniques witnessed in these programs, especially as it pertains to constructing a more informal, conversational, and personalised posture with its audience. While maintaining a fairly consistent tone for typical lead stories, which corresponds to established conventions of professional journalism established at the beginning of the 20th century; the textual analysis conducted in Chapter 7 indicates that, when possible, traditional newscasts are also altering how they present the news to encourage further involvement.

Emerging news products often adopt a style that satirist Stephen Colbert terms ‘truthiness’, wherein tone and style become more central in attempting to generate certainty, fidelity, and trust. Journalists and academics alike are often quick to point out the shortcomings of such emerging products (Zelizer 2000), but this dissertation has taken a

different analytic point-of-departure. By trying to understand in a rich and textured way the elements of each program that seem to help provide legitimacy, the dissertation has pushed towards evaluation of the complexity of such programs, in short, taking them seriously, rather than following what seems a more frequently trod, though less productive, avenue: briefly pointing out their flaws in broad strokes, or simply ignoring them as alternatives altogether. Accordingly, this dissertation can be situated in an emerging stream of research that stresses the sociological significance and cultural importance of traditionally non-valorized news forms. These emerging news forms were thus located as part of a broader social shift described by other researchers towards conversationalisation, personalisation, and informalisation. This also indicated that journalism may be following in the path of other traditionally 'rationalised' fields, such as medicine or law, in terms of becoming more amenable to discourses which stressed emotional involvement rather than objective dispassion.

As we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, over the past few decades many academics and media critics have commented that the distinction, however arbitrary or false it may be, between information and entertainment is increasingly breaking down. Examples of this trend are not hard to uncover. Whether we consider an audience shift discussed in this dissertation, which indicates that a satirical news show is now the primary source of political information for many younger viewers; look to instances such as *NBC Nightly News* anchor Brian Williams hosting *Saturday Night Live* or MSNBC's Chris Matthews interviewing a fictional presidential candidate on *The West Wing*; or examine the practice of rating remastered news segments on internet sites like YouTube, it seems no longer viable to persist with a dichotomy that tries to treat news and entertainment as separate functions, no matter how laudable the sentiment behind such a position.

The urge to separate informational content out from style when considering the news neglects how content is shaped by entertainment values, in terms of attempting to generate a sense of involvement (Curran and Sparks 1991). Such thinking also seems beholden to a misguided dichotomy, because, as Delli Carpini and Williams (2001: 162) observe: “The opposite of *news* is not *entertainment*, as the news is often diversionary or amusing (the definition of entertainment¹⁷³) and what is called ‘entertainment’ is often neither.” In today’s mediascape, news products battle not only against each other, but against a swath of media products for each viewer’s attention. When we come to this realisation, it seems more fruitful not to lament the ‘loss’ of some supposed halcyon age of serious journalism but to look at how emerging forms go about making news in a manner that engages a progressively fragmented and time-strapped public. Of course, such claims must be qualified. As this dissertation noted in Chapter 4, it is very difficult to demonstrate with empirical consistency how audiences will take up different news texts. While the popularity and reach of these shows has been fairly easy to demonstrate, the number of potential reasons why each program is viewed is vast and very difficult to investigate empirically with any certainty. As such, and given the evident popularity and success of these programs with audiences, this project has chosen to focus on a meticulous textual analysis of each program, in order to discern at a nuanced level the similarities and differences with conventional television news. I have supplemented this textual analysis by drawing on numerous interviews, taken from secondary sources, with those involved in producing the programs, as evidence of what they are trying to do. I argue that the difficulty of obtaining in-depth empirical evidence regarding how audiences make sense of these programs does not preclude us from producing informed hypotheses about why such programs have found success, and what their potential

¹⁷³ While I agree with the sentiment, this definition characterises entertainment in a somewhat narrow way.

advantages and disadvantages might be for their audiences vis-à-vis traditional ‘objective’ journalism. The dissertation strove to do this in a more in-depth and methodical manner than studies which simply offer sweeping dismissive critiques of such programs based on broad contentions of ‘tabloidization’ or ‘sensationalism’.

Concerns that often surround the emergence and success of news products that clearly depart from an objective paradigm seem to be related to the entwined notions of journalism appealing to the lowest common denominator while simultaneously abandoning its fourth-estate aspirations (cf. Schudson 1997). A commonality that runs through many of the academic discussions in Chapters 2 and 3, and the outlooks on journalism offered by O’Reilly, Dobbs, Stewart, Colbert, and Couric in the empirical portions of this dissertation, is that the myriad of commercial, political, technological and lifestyle developments over the past few decades have further muddled the waters in terms of whether the democratic role of journalism is to educate the public (a civil responsibility), protect the public (a ‘watchdog’ function), or represent it (a combination of grassroots journalism and neoliberal theory) and how best to do this.¹⁷⁴ What should be obvious, but is often neglected, as Curran (2005: 139) points out, is that “different media should be viewed as having different functions within the democratic system, calling for different kinds of structures and styles of journalism.” This dissertation builds on this idea to avoid treating journalism as a homogenous industry with a uniform purpose. The correlate that derives from this is one of the primary academic contributions made in this project: by taking the emerging news of feeling projects examined within it seriously (cf. Zelizer 2004), even though they do not conform to more traditional notions of journalism, this dissertation produces a comprehensive accounting of the purpose they fulfill, how they position themselves in the broader media system, and how this

¹⁷⁴ As we saw in Chapters 5 through 7, comments on the purpose of journalism generally amalgamate aspects of all three perspectives.

integrates with the rationales their producers feel underlie their success. The result is a more complete picture of the development, current state, and possible future trends in broadcast media within the United States.

The specific conclusions reached in Chapters 5 and 6 echo this: cable news magazines and satirical news have risen to prominence during the past 25 years, as have satellite news channels, vox populi current affairs programming like *Oprah* or *The View*, breakfast news and other forms of broadcast often dismissed as ‘infotainment’, precisely because they perform a function that traditional network news was not accomplishing. Put otherwise, they work to craft an *experience of involvement* that fills a void or satisfies a desire for engaged yet still informative styles of communication. I come back to this terminology, brought up in the introduction and emphasised throughout, because the content of such programming is not especially novel – tabloid, human interest, satire, and punditry have a history closely intertwined with the development of mass media (Sampson 1999; Gripsrud 2000; Tulloch 2000). In other words, content is not the primary element that demarcates a *Daily Show* or *O’Reilly Factor* from traditional journalism, nor is it many of the ‘rules of truth’ that govern their production. Rather, it is their tone, shaped and made explicit through their style and presentation, which appears to have struck a chord.

Such successes must be placed in the context of tangible developments outlined in Chapter 2, and the tonal shifts discussed in Chapter 3. To understand the disquiet many commentators feel about the current state of the news media requires recognition of the place of cable news magazines or satirical news within a much broader American media system. A challenge specific to American journalism is that it is predominantly a market-based system. If we are to accept the proposal of Curran (2005), the core of any media system that benefits the democratic process should probably be some form of public

broadcaster, which reaches a large portion of the population and is not beholden to commercial imperatives. Other sectors, focussing on grassroots, niche, global, and commercial forms of journalism in turn would augment this nucleus to facilitate a nationally-functional media system. A problem for the American media is that no such public core exists,¹⁷⁵ and while grassroots and niche journalism have grown over the past few decades, the commercial press is undoubtedly still the entrenched centre of U.S. journalism. While this dissertation has focussed on developments within the television portion of the craft, many of the familiar criticisms over fragmentation, commercialisation, viewer apathy, politicisation, and frivolousness can be linked to this lack of a strong public broadcaster (Carey 1995). A public-service corporatist model, the norm in many other Western countries, seems to more closely resemble the methodical, proportional, pluralistic, balanced, public affairs form of news that critics, interspersed throughout this dissertation, argue is increasingly lacking within the United States. While the introduction of cable news magazines and satirical news may increase the diversity of privatised journalism, in a system that is primarily market-driven, as Curran (2005: 142) notes, it should come as no surprise that “Journalists working for market media are increasingly entertainers.” A conclusion reached in Chapter 2 regarding the influence of commercial pressures vis-à-vis the news, substantiated throughout the empirical chapters, seems to sustain this. The financial dynamics and market forces at the core of American journalism may not determine how the news is made, but it certainly sets the environment in which it is crafted.

While a public service model of journalism is probably not likely or perhaps even feasible in the United States, if we understand what makes people tune into news of feeling products it helps us to understand potential changes in the core of the entire media system.

¹⁷⁵ The only notable public broadcaster, PBS, more aptly fits within the niche news sector.

If the observations made in Chapter 7 are any indication, network news is consistently losing viewers, which makes living up to its public responsibilities increasingly complex. The pursuit of profit and the association of ratings with prestige can cloud the goals of professional journalism and the techniques to achieve them. A solid guiding principle seems to be that the attempt to draw in viewers should not sacrifice a sort of “pragmatic objectivity”, to borrow Ward’s (2005: 22) phrase, for as we saw with the cable news magazines in Chapter 5, many elements of a news of feeling serve to chase ratings at the expense of responsible reportage. Ward argues that while traditional standards of objectivity, such as factuality, fairness, non-bias, and independence should be vigorously defended, strict application of the objective tenets of non-interpretation, neutrality, and detachment are outmoded. Accordingly, as academics, when we analyse how effectively the craft of journalism is adapting to the developments discussed in Chapter 2 and 3, perhaps this means being more open to experimentation and reconfigurations of the form. As Gripsrud (2000), Sparks (2000), and Zelizer (2000) quite instructively note, this means looking at different dimensions of journalism; accepting a diversity of journalistic styles and avoiding negative, knee-jerk responses to emerging genres that deviate from a ‘journal of record’.

This is another significant contribution made by this dissertation. The investigations in Chapters 5 and 6 not only illustrate what cable news magazines and satirical news believe they are doing to draw in viewers, they also potentially help illuminate the flip side of the coin: why network news is seeing a steady decrease. Kovach and Rosenstiel (1999: 8) have a fairly negative view of the cable news revolution, noting “These new characteristics of the Mixed Media Culture are creating what we call a new journalism of assertion, which is less interested in substantiating whether something is true and more interested in getting it into the public discussion.” While this criticism has merit, we should not be so quick to dismiss

novel forms of journalism that have the capability to generate public discussion. Not all discussions will be valuable, as when cable news offers saturated coverage of the death of Anna Nicole Smith, nor will some developments be without ethical dilemma, as was witnessed with the embedding of reporters in the second Iraq War. However, as we saw in Chapters 5 and 6, the political issues brought to public attention via *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, or the awakening of political interest in young adults who watch *The Daily Show*, is the type of public engagement that professional journalism longs for, and this catalyzing potential is a common forte of types of journalism that bear close affinity to a news of feeling. Crucially, what this illustrates is that innovative forms of news need not be equated with poor journalism. If we consider the past 25 years, a period which has witnessed traditional print and broadcast outlets haemorrhaging audience, there is much to be gained from an academic standpoint in terms of more comprehensive examinations of news of feeling alternatives.

As we saw in Chapter 2, while ‘hard news’ is thoroughly examined in academic circles, ‘soft news’, by comparison, appears by and large “unworthy” of scholarly attention (Carter *et al.* 1998: 7). In this sense, this dissertation builds on the observations by authors such as MacDonald (2000; 2003) or van Zoonen (2005), who are interested in what “personal” and “entertaining” forms of news are ‘doing right’, in terms of engaging audiences. Taking a more specific look at the nature of involvement, be it the role of humour in satirical news or the significance of belief for cable products, allows one to distinguish what is unique about these products and comprehensively analyse how such elements of their crafting contribute to their success. As such, the programs examined in this dissertation, the *O’Reilly Factor*, *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, *Daily Show*, and *Colbert Report*, and others like them, should not be decried as the death knell for journalism but viewed in terms of potential avenues of resurrection.

As van Zoonen (2005: 2) notes, there is no shortage of books and articles that decry the linking of politics with entertainment, calling for a politics that is purely informative, deliberative, rationalised, and detached. And while such desires may be commendable, as she points out, they seem “rather limited and remarkably out of touch with current political challenges. Notwithstanding the continuous lamentation over the role of entertainment in politics, its presence and relevance have only intensified. This is not a surprise: most people have to “do” politics in their leisure time, and leisure is a highly competitive sector.” As such, the progressively blurring distinction between politics, journalism, and entertainment should come as no surprise. For instance, consider the coverage generated from the example discussed in Chapter 7, the interview of Sarah Palin by Katie Couric during the 2008 U.S. Presidential election campaign. Segments of the interview, which seemed to illustrate Palin’s inappropriateness for the position, were parodied by comedian Tina Fey on *Saturday Night Live*, repeating the Alaskan Governor’s responses near verbatim. Palin responded to Fey’s disarmingly precise impersonation a couple of weeks later, appearing on *SNL* in a sketch where she was ‘mistaken’ for Fey. From the original interview, to journalistic commentary upon it, the *SNL* parody, and Palin’s response, remediated video clips became ‘viral’ internet phenomena. Discussed extensively in media outlets from *BBC World* to *The View*, the degree of saturation made it near impossible to make a coherent distinction between news, entertainment, and politics. Trying to analyse such moments with traditional journalistic dichotomies is woefully inadequate.

This complexity illustrates the sentiment I put forth in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 about the problematic nature of the persistence of dualisms in the analysis of journalism. In a journalistic field which has seen an increasing number of products find a place by practicing a far more involved news of feeling, understanding how they find success, and what makes

them recognisable as legitimate forms of news, seems a beneficial first step before we engage in normative judgements of their effect. Doing this may prove beneficial to appreciate trends in journalism and how this interweaves with trends in civil society.

Additionally, while comparing emergent forms against idealised, static, time-honoured conventions of objectivity may provide vivid contrasts, it places such transformations in a vacuum. The analysis of news is regularly caught up in this anachronistic quagmire, comparing emergent products against preceding expectations. And if this dissertation has illustrated anything, it is that these past 25 years, while a mere blip in the history of journalism, are disproportionately influential in terms of the evolution of the industry. There seems to be general consensus that with the rise of internet news, handheld updates on BlackBerrys and cell phones, and the expansion of the alternative press and satellite news, there is much cause for optimism in terms of the breadth of communicative channels over which journalism is now transmitted. However, there is not a similar level of accord in terms of the expansion of journalistic styles that have accompanied this proliferation of news outlets.

The sort of detached news of fact as practiced by Walter Cronkite may indeed draw in viewers who favour a contemplative style of news, and may still be the superior style of presentation for involving a certain audience. But as we saw in Chapter 7, this is no longer paramount for the *CBS Evening News*. To put it another way, what has become journalistically 'thinkable' has changed dramatically over the past few decades as shifts in journalism have impacted what can be represented and plausibly accepted as news. One potential interpretation of this is to decry the possibility for maintaining any useful distinction between journalism and related industries like public relations, politics and entertainment. What such doomsdaying ignores is that these fields have always overlapped with one another

and the relations that exist between them at any given moment are highly complex and variable. To assume that journalism will not be able to ‘defend’ itself against this rash of seemingly more ‘entertaining’ products is to ignore moments from its past, such as the Grub Street, gutter press scare of the late-18th century and yellow press panic of the late-19th, which did not destroy journalism but rather forced a re-conceptualisation of its mandate and practices (cf. Tulloch 2000). Adapting the analytic in the previously discussed media system model (Curran 2005), if network news and traditional national print media form the nucleus of the America’s commercial core, cable news and satirical news augment it. Still parts of the core, the vitality of these sorts of atypical, yet still market-driven forms of news, have the potential to complement the functioning of this nucleus. Yet as I remarked in Chapter 2, there is also the prospect that such niche-based programming, while increasing the heterogeneity of news options in the aggregate, may impede specific communities of interest from encountering viewpoints or presentational styles that challenge their previously held beliefs (Turow 1997; Webster 2005). In this sense, the observation by Bourdieu that leads off Chapter 4 is crucial to keep in mind. While the emergence of a news of feeling certainly impacts, both positively and negatively, how journalism is practiced within the United States, this may reconfigure journalism but it is not journalism reborn.

While this commercial core sets the environment in which the American media system operates, the challenges faced by 21st century journalism are also largely linked to speed and time. Technology has ‘sped up’ the movement of everyday life at the same time that employment demands have diminished the amount of time one has to spend (Virilio 1999). Americans live in a period where an increasing number of leisure alternatives vie for a decreasing amount of leisure time. As such, it should come as no shock that the news alternatives which have risen in this environment are those which are more flexible (24-hour

and internet news) and more involved (a news of feeling) than the traditional 6:30 pm broadcasts.

In terms of the tone of these new forms of news, just as the form of discourse and rhetorical style of the 18th century press would seem antiquated by 20th century standards, the broader informalisation witnessed by authors such as Fairclough (1995), MacDonald (2000), Delli Carpini and Williams (2001), and Cameron (2004) may simply mean the preferred form of communicative action is changing. To equate this to a necessary trivialisation seems more frequently than not a rhetorical posture, based on opinion, with little tangible evidence or analytical rigour to support such claims (van Zoonen 2005; 2007).

This project has tried to avoid such a trap by considering what the producers of such newscasts feel their audience ‘gets’ from their program, how prominent secondary sources adjudge their success, to then scrutinise how, and to what extent, these rationales are manifested in their actual presentation of the news. To do this as concisely as possible, I have tried to make normative judgements about the political efficacy of such shifts a secondary consideration. I do this by advancing a framework for analysing news, the primary focus of which considers it in not in terms of its positives and negatives but in terms of its persuasive aspects of communication. Yet this should not be misconstrued as an absence of normative judgements. To wit, the overall media system should be an integral mechanism for informed civil society, which, in ‘ideal’ form, conveys proportionate, reflective, timely, verified, and pluralistic information.

The natural extension of this project would be to undertake more specific audience measurement, preferably by gauging popular response to the programs via newsgroups, message boards, and so forth, to get a better sense of the degree and sophistication of political engagement associated with various emergent forms of a news of feeling. Of course,

from here it would be difficult to determine to what extent political engagement led to political knowledge and more significantly, political action. Such a project could be strengthened by some type of historical comparison to determine not only how current newscasts are being utilised, but how this compares to previous forms of news. Put otherwise, have the relations between journalistic consumption, knowledge and political action shifted in this new mediascape?

The scope of such an undertaking is far beyond the limitations of this project and accordingly, its contribution has been to get a better understanding of what developments have impacted journalism over the past 25 years, and how these developments are related and manifested in an emergent news of feeling. By at the same time trying to reconfigure the discussion of how we talk about news to get away from categorical rigidities that seem misleading or restrictive at best, the hope is this project will contribute to a more inclusive consideration of news products that deviate from the ideal hard news archetype. And though it is important not to trivialise these emergent products, at the same time it is important while analysing them to keep in mind the journalistic responsibility “to take what’s important and make it interesting,” as opposed to “merely taking what’s interesting and making it more interesting” (Jurkowitz 2000: 110).

While offering prognostications is a sure recipe to look foolish, I think we will see more emergent products that blur the lines between politics, entertainment, journalism appear over the next few decades. As I perform the final edits on this dissertation, CNN (2008) has just announced it is launching a comedy show, *D.L. Hughley Breaks the News*, its president noting, “D.L. is a news junkie who is bursting with things to say about what is going on in the world – most of them funny, all of them thoughtful, none of them predictable.” In response to the pressures discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the network

newscasts will probably do what any profitable commodity with a history has to do to survive, namely adapt. For instance, while blogs were initially decried by most ‘serious’ journalists, Couric and Brian Williams now operate news blogs where they interact with their audiences, while ABC’s *World News* operates a staff-run blog. However, while these more involved approaches transpire and augment the news, there will still likely be a market for thoroughly researched and substantial news delivered in a relatively neutral format. There is still likely to be a thirst for international news with a decidedly national orientation. And there will still likely be those who prefer to make ‘appointment’ viewing to be informed. The 30-minute network newscasts occupy a highly advantageous position to deliver this product. They have become naturalised and familiar, to borrow Barthes’ (1957) terms from Chapter 4, and thus occupy a space in the cultural landscape that is difficult to supplant. We can glimpse their future by developments already present. Shows can now be ‘time shifted’, as well as recorded digitally and then watched, paused, and fast-forwarded at the viewer’s discretion. It seems likely that newscasts will take into account the longer working hours and commute times experienced by Americans in the 21st century and may move their time slot back to adjust, airing at 7:00 or 7:30 pm, for instance. This is where issues of commercialisation and profitability, discussed extensively in Chapter 2, will likely factor in, as the celebrity shows like *Entertainment Tonight* that currently precede the 8:00 – 11:00 pm peak-viewing period are cheap alternatives that often segue smoothly into the heart of the prime-time line-up. A more likely outcome may be the relocation of the local news broadcast to the 6:30 pm timeslot and the replacement of the second local newscast at 11:00 pm with its national network equivalent.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ It should be noted that ABC already airs *Nightline* at 11:30 pm, a half-hour news summary that is a mix of longer journalism pieces, investigative and ‘human interest’ stories.

As Dahlgren (1981) notes, there has always been an implicitly attractive bargain built into broadcast news, for the implication is that by watching this half-hour program, one is fully informed about the events of the world today. When one also considers its style versus that of cable news, where “you’re told that the world is about to end, over and over into the night,” one could conclude that “In our new, information-saturated century, there may be less need than ever for the news in the evening news. But there may be just as big a market as ever, if not more so, for its illusion of peace” (Rich 2002). The irony is that while the ‘requirements’ of membership for a network news audience are so minimal – the disconnected, inverted-pyramid presentation of lead stories, each night, facilitates sporadic engagement – it is the more demanding temporal requirement of a news of feeling – relying on inside jokes, jargon, and a high-level of inter- and hypertextual references – which has found success in a epoch that witnesses a more time-conscious public. When we consider this relationship it seems that a subjective payoff based around loyalty is a crucial factor which is more evident in these emergent programs than in a traditional news of fact. To neglect the fact that the news conscious consumer probably already knows the news of the day by the time the evening newscast airs is to ignore that while a summary of the day’s events may be comforting, it is no longer obligatory to stay up-to-date and informed. As such the analysis of news benefits from considering how newscasts go about generating a status as appointment or necessary viewing. And in this respect, the emergent genres considered in this dissertation have appeared at a timely juncture. By making involvement such an integral element of style, not only do these news products communicate facts, they also serve to feel the news, at you.

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