



That's The Way It Was

Transitions in CBS Evening News from Cronkite to Couric

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Retelling Journalism

Conveying Stories in a Digital Age

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THAT'S THE WAY IT WAS

TRANSITIONS IN *CBS EVENING NEWS* FROM CRONKITE TO COURIC

Chris Peters

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 journalism standards through their threatened momentary breach.

When journalists are considered in popular culture, the names that most often 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 are among some of the most watched pieces of journalism, it seems that broadcast is more likely than print to generate celebrity status. 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'.¹

However, 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 formats are influential.² Accordingly, this chapter examines to what ex-

¹ Rich, F., 'The Weight of an Anchor', *New York Times*, available from: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C06E5DC1439F93AA25756C0A9649C8B63#> (May 19, 2002).

² Peters, C., 'No-Spin Zones: The Rise of the American Cable News Magazine and Bill O'Reilly', *Journalism Studies* 11 (2010), no. 6, pp. 832-51; Peters, C., 'Emotion Aside or Emotional Side?: Crafting an 'Experience of Involvement' in the News', *Journalism* 12 (2011), no. 3, pp. 297-316; Peters, C., 'Even Better than being Informed: Media Literacy and The Daily Show', in: Peters, C. and Broersma,

tent network evening newscasts are changing as they adapt to this tumultuous journalism landscape. Specifically, it compares one of the bastions of broadcast journalism, the *CBS Evening News*, under what appears to be two vastly different stewardships – that of Walter Cronkite and that of Katie Couric. By counterpoising *CBS Evening News* under Cronkite with the same broadcast under Couric a few decades later, one gets a better sense whether this journalism mainstay has indeed begun to incorporate elements associated with its ‘softer’ counterparts, and if so, to what extent.

The apparent changes in broadcast news over the past few decades have met with much discussion and, at times, derision. For instance, the rise of cable, breakfast, and satirical news are just a few examples which correspond to what some commentators assert is a more generalized infotaining, personalizing, or conversationalizing tendency across the journalism industry.³ Michael Delli Carpini and Bruce Williams and Norman Fairclough note that this trend towards informalization is widespread, being increasingly evident in politics and other civic walks of life as well.⁴ Franklin speaks of tabloidization, derisively referring to what he terms the appearance of ‘newzak’ in broadcast journalism, while Bourdieu’s *On Television* offers a fairly scathing assessment of the ongoing trivialization of television news.⁵ While these assertions are persuasive, they oftentimes lack empirical depth in terms of outlining what, precisely, these changes entail. This chapter attempts to rectify this.

Drawing upon two weeks’ worth of episodes, from May 7th to 11th and May 14th to 18th, 2007, I provide a detailed textual analysis of the *CBS Evening News* under Katie Couric.⁶ This data set is part of a larger research project, which endeavored to understand the changes in form and style of American broadcast journalism in conjunction with the technological, economic and tonal shifts impacting the news industry over the past few dec-

M., eds, *Rethinking Journalism: Trust and Participation in a Transformed News Landscape* (London, 2012), pp. 171-188.

³ Kovach, B. and Rosenstiel, T., *Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media* (New York, 1999); MacDonald, M., ‘Rethinking Personalization in Current Affairs Journalism’, in: Sparks, C. and Tulloch, J., eds, *Tabloid Tales: Global Debates over Media Standards* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 251-266; Cameron, D., ‘Language. Truth or Dare?’, *Critical Quarterly* 46 (2004), no. 2, 124-127.

⁴ Delli Carpini, M. and B. Williams., ‘Let Us Infotain You: Politics in the New Media Environment’, in: Bennett, W. L. and Entman, R. M., eds, *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 160-181; Fairclough, N., *Media Discourse* (London 1985).

⁵ Franklin, B., *Newzak and the News Media* (London, 1997).

⁶ This falls during the Nielsen ratings’ May sweeps, one of four periods each year used to set advertising rates, which are thus associated with ‘branding’ in the television industry. In 2007, this period ran from April 26, 2007 to May 23, 2007.

ades. This reading is then contrasted with a similar textual analysis of a more limited number of *CBS Evening News* broadcasts in 1979. Through the Vanderbilt television news archive, four episodes were selected from this year: March 28th, May 14th, November 5th and November 21st, 1979. These choices were not random but were arrived at after consulting the detailed list of program descriptions for the years 1979-1980 (which note not only each topic covered in the nightly broadcast, but also the anchor, progression, length, and opening paragraphs for each segment's transcript). The rationale was not to analyze multiple weeks of broadcast but to select a diversity of story types that fit closely in terms of content to the 2007 period under study for comparative purpose. The November programs came during the height of the Iran hostage crisis and offered a potentially interesting parallel to the U.S. presence in Iraq in 2007. 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.

The Significance of Network Evening News

Studying what, if any, changes have occurred over the past few decades in network news is important if for no other reason than when one considers the state of the media as a whole, the network evening newscasts are still, far-and-away, the most consumed individual news products within American journalism.⁷ 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, by far, the largest audience, from 52 million in 1980, to 26 million when Couric was appointed in 2006, to 22.1 million in 2013.⁸ By association, one can identify an interpretive dis-

⁷ Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), *State of the News Media: An Annual Report on American Journalism*, 2006; 2007; 2008; 2013.

⁸ This despite the fact that the cumulative viewership for the evening news 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 when Couric was appointed – a consistent decline of about 1 million viewers per year that has since held relatively steady since this study was initially conducted. The most recent numbers for 2013 are an average of 22.1 million. A more 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 the 2007 PEJ report 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].’

course within the journalism industry and within the academic study of it, which places expectations on network news to act as a sort of litmus test for the state of the news media.⁹ Accordingly, the anchor is often looked to as more than simply an archetype; it is assumed that they will bear close affinity to the ideal type of the professional journalist and what we traditionally refer to as hard news.¹⁰

Walter Cronkite is often held up as a prototypical example of what we have come to expect from a professional news anchor, an approach still frequently imitated in terms of presentation, tone, emotive posture and so forth. His style of presentation emphasized information over involvement with the audience or subject matter at hand, and lent itself to a cool, detached persona; a manner that dovetails with what we might consider a very 'masculine' form of storytelling.¹¹ The complement – as opposed to counter – to this style of news is evidenced in many of the emerging broadcast news options to appear over the past few decades, such as cable magazine shows or breakfast television.¹² Such programs depart from the traditional objectivity regime by presenting journalism in an involved manner. The journalist does not merely read and recount information, they attempt 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 traditional newscasts – come to the fore of presentation and are considered alongside facts and expertise to represent 'reality' and get at the 'truth'.

When Couric was signed by CBS, this ability to 'connect' with audiences was often held up as one of the definitive rationales for her selection. As the host of NBC's popular *Today Show*, a breakfast newscast, Couric was noted for her friendly demeanor and ability to connect with interviewees. Her ascension to the anchor desk was widely considered a crucial moment in the transition of female journalists, 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.¹³ However, a change in gender was

Share, meanwhile, had fallen 60% since 1969, 55% since 1980, and 23% since 2000 [to 34].⁷

⁹ Cf. Zelizer, B., 'Journalists as Interpretive Communities', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10 (1993), pp. 219-237.

¹⁰ Weber, M., *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1949).

¹¹ Peters, 'Emotion Aside'; Van Zoonen, L., 'One of the Girls?: The Changing Gender of Journalism', in Carter, C., Branston, G. and Allan, S., eds, *News, Gender and Power* (London, 1998), pp. 33-46.

¹² Peters, 'No-Spin Zones'.

¹³ See Hagan, J., 'Alas, Poor Couric: But Pity Her Not', *New York Magazine*, available from: <http://nymag.com/news/features/34452/> (2007); cf. Carter, C. et al., "Set-

only one of many developments in how this mainstay of American broadcast went about rebranding its broadcast.

While it is one thing to say that the past few decades have seen the rise of emerging forms of journalism that redefine the style and tone of broadcast journalism – a rather trivial observation in light of the rapidity of cable and satellite expansion during this period – it is quite another to investigate what, if any, pressures this has placed on the networks to adapt. By getting a specific sense of exactly how the *CBS Evening News* has changed in the period spanning Cronkite to Couric, one can get a more substantive idea about how ‘traditional’ broadcast journalism goes about making the news in the increasingly mediated, technological, fragmented and commercialized landscape that helps define the state of the media in the 21st century. To sum, if a confluence of factors, including the decline or questioning of the notion of objectivity in media work, the rapid proliferation of news outlets, the increasing sophistication of news presentation, and the fragmentation of audiences has provided a fertile climate for many broadcast alternatives to flourish, one wonders to what extent these same transformations beget a shift in the style and form of the network evening newscasts.

CBS News Under Cronkite

The irony of the quote that leads this paper 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.¹⁴ As CBS news remembers it: ‘On that most frantic of days, the voice delivering the horrifying news was calm, measured. CBS newsmen Walter Cronkite’s composure wavered only once: at the moment when the unthinkable was confirmed’.¹⁵ This moment became etched in American journalistic lore not just for the magnitude of the event, but because it so evidently transcended the naturalized image Cronkite had crafted for the American public. Put otherwise, Cronkite’s ‘emotion’ momentarily shattered the myth of the professional journalist.¹⁶ His degree of involvement in reading the news was fleetingly ‘hot’, a deviation from the

ting New(s) Agendas: An Introduction’, in: Carter, C., Branston, C. and Allan, S., eds, *News, Gender and Power* (London, 1998), pp. 1-12.

¹⁴ The video is available online as part of the CBS news archives.

¹⁵ *CBS Early Show*, ‘Cronkite Remembers JFK: Newsmen Walter Cronkite’s Impressions on the Fallen President’, *Early Show* (2003).

¹⁶ Cf. Barthes, R., *Mythologies* (Paris, 1957).

traditional 'cool' posture one expected from the news.¹⁷ 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 also 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, it is generally agreed that during his tenure, Cronkite established the level of celebrity and status since afforded to the television news anchor.¹⁸ As Rich notes, 'It was in 1963 that the network anchors as we define them today were born: a 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.'¹⁹ 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.²⁰ This term, interestingly, bears close affinity to the semiotic sense of anchorage coined by Barthes in that the news anchor serves to stabilize the floating meanings, which swirl around news stories.²¹ Cronkite 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.²² Reflecting this, retrospectives invariably refer to him by his enduring legacy as 'the most trusted man in

¹⁷ Peters, 'Emotion Aside'; cf. Stearns, P., *American Cool: Constructing a 20th Century Emotional Style* (New York, 1994); cf. Barbalet, J., *Emotion, Social Theory, and Social Structure: A Macrosociological Approach* (Cambridge, 1998).

¹⁸ 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 his demeanour, which some have said was well-suited to calm the 'average' American during turbulent times. Socolow, 'Anchors Away'; *Ibidem.*

¹⁹ Rich, F., 'The Weight of an Anchor', *New York Times*, available from: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C06E5DC1439F93AA25756C0A9649C8B63#> (May 19, 2002).

²⁰ Ashton, B., 'The Anchorman', *The Quill* 92 (2004), no. 7.

²¹ Barthes, R., 'The Rhetoric of the Image', in: Heath, S., ed, *Image, Music, Text* (New York, 1977), pp. 32-51.

²² As Rich ('Weight of An Anchor') 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.

America,' a title which came to prominence during his tenure as anchor of the *CBS Evening News*. It is instructive to see how Cronkite forged this valued reputation; for if there is one constant in journalism, it is that trust is arguably the currency of the industry.

What is immediately evident from watching a Cronkite broadcast is the near unwavering constancy of his pace, delivery and tone.²³ This is why rare instances like his announcement of the Kennedy assassination, his awe in watching the moon landing in 1969, and an atypical moment of editorializing – 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.²⁴ These occasions are so notable in a career that spans the last half-century precisely because, especially during the 19 years Cronkite anchored the *CBS Evening News*, he so rarely broke from his measured and detached delivery. 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 recognize that something 'unnatural' is occurring.²⁵ And the fact that only a few circumstances witnessed this shift in performance 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 episode examined for this chapter 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 fig. 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

²³ A claim with some prevalence is that Cronkite trained himself to speak at 124 words per minute, below the average speed of most Americans, to facilitate understanding. While this is difficult to verify, there is little doubt that Cronkite's delivery is constant, measured, and slower than typical conversation.

²⁴ Ashton, 'The Anchorman'.

²⁵ Cf. Kress, G. and Van Leeuwen, T., *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London, 1996).

best be described as a sort of matter-of-fact gravitas.²⁶ For instance, a fairly dull story which led the news on March 28, 1979, about a non-confidence vote dissolving the James Callaghan government in the United Kingdom, is introduced with the exact same pitch, tone, and intonation as a 'horror story' in the Central African Republic 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'.²⁷ As Dahlgren 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.²⁸

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's 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ The second commercial break follows the next round of stories, which are generally field reports introduced by Cronkite. The third follows

²⁶ Dahlgren, P., 'TV News as a Social Relation', *Media, Culture and Society* 3 (1981), pp. 291-302.

²⁷ CBS Evening News, Newscast Aired on March 28th, 1979; CBS Evening News., Newscast Aired on May 14th, 1979.

²⁸ Dahlgren, 'TV News as a Social Relation', p. 294, p. 293.

²⁹ Cf. Helmers, M. and Hill, C., 'Introduction', in: Hall, C. and Helmers, M., eds, *Defining Visual Rhetorics* (Mahwah NJ, 2004), pp. 1-24.

³⁰ 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, November 5, 1979; November 21, 1979). 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, March 28, 1979), and after a summary of the weekend activities of the assumed frontrunners for the Democratic ticket in the 1980 Presidential race (CBS, May 14, 1979).

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. Consistency of format is a primary technique that helps establish the grammar of journalistic communication and the process through which we consume news.³¹

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'.³² The implication behind these transitions to commercial interruption is likely not lost on the audience. First, the absence of segueing, teasing, or 'happy talk', either going into the commercial break or returning from it, implies that airtime 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.³³ 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.³⁴ 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

³¹ Cf. Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*.

³² CBS, March 28, 1979.

³³ Ashton, 'The Anchorman'.

³⁴ Cf. Barthes, *Mythologies*.

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.³⁵ 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, the effect of their nightly broadcast was similarly ‘cool’.³⁶ 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.’³⁷ Many of the conventions forged by Cronkite live on today. However, a balancing act is simultaneously evident, as the *CBS Evening News* endeavors to remodel its style, not just in terms of technology, but also in terms of its tone.

CBS News Under Couric

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 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

³⁵ Peters, ‘Emotion Aside’; cf. Ward, S., *The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond* (Montreal, 2005).

³⁶ Rich, ‘The Weight of an Anchor’.

³⁷ O’Brien, M., ‘Lost Cause? Network Executives Say Evening News Shows Remain Viable’, *The Quill* 94 (2006), no. 1, pp. 24-31.

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.³⁸

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.³⁹

When CBS announced the hiring of Couric to become the new permanent anchor of their evening newscast, a sense of revitalization was evident in its press release. 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'.⁴⁰ This use of terminology such as 'fresh' and 'accessible' has echoes of the gendered descriptions of 'skills' often ascribed to female reporters.⁴¹ 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 vlog on 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.⁴² 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.

³⁸ Tim Goodman, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2005, quoted in O'Brien, 2006.

³⁹ *Ibidem*; Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), *State of the News Media 2007: An Annual Report on American Journalism*, available from: <http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2007/> (2007).

⁴⁰ CBS Evening News, 'Katie Couric is Joining CBS News: Couric Will Become Anchor and Managing Editor of The CBS Evening News', *CBS News*, available from: <http://www.cbcorporation.com/news/> (2006).

⁴¹ See Carter *et al.*, 'Setting New(s) Agendas'.

⁴² CBS Evening News, 'Katie Couric is Joining CBS News: Couric Will Become Anchor and Managing Editor of The CBS Evening News', *CBS News*, available from: <http://www.cbcorporation.com/news/> (2006).

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 thrive in journalism. 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.⁴³ 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 in today’s evening newscasts as opposed to the emerging broadcast alternatives appearing over the past decade. And one only needs a quick glance at an episode of the *CBS Evening News* under Couric to confirm this supposition. Many of the standardized frames and techniques deployed under Cronkite are still widely employed.⁴⁴

Standard storytelling archetypes from the *CBS Evening News* in 1979 have seen little change over the past 25 years in terms of a basic format. Additionally, such stories are still subject to a host of techniques, from relying on official sources, attribution, statistics, and other positivist indicators that do work in creating what Tuchman calls a ‘web of facticity’.⁴⁵ Simply put, the approach employed on many stories to make ‘objective’ reportage apparent to the journalist and visible to the audience often remains unchanged. 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 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

⁴³ Ericson et al., *Visualizing Deviance: A Study of News Organization* (Toronto, 1987); Schudson, M., ‘The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism’, *Journalism* 2 (2001), no. 2, pp. 149-170; Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*.

⁴⁴ Cf. Pan, Z. and Kosicki, G., ‘Framing Analysis: An Approach to News Discourse’, *Political Communication* 10 (1993), pp. 55-75.

⁴⁵ Tuchman, G., *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York, 1978).

the State Department pressroom, noting what to expect from the days ahead.⁴⁶

The 2007 Iraqi equivalent, a hostage taking of U.S. soldiers, is told in 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.⁴⁷ This is just one of many examples which illustrates how the basic frames, journalistic credentials, progression, sources, and formats relied upon to convey common narratives has remained relatively unchanged over the years (see fig. 2).

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. This is a fact not lost on critical theorists in the tradition of Herman and Chomsky who note that elite-engineered accounts are still overwhelmingly relied upon, which potentially co-opts journalism.⁴⁸ Additionally, graphics such as maps and charts, which aid in summarizing the factual elements of a story, are utilized 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 is emblematic of the sweeping panoramas used to set the scene for 'disaster' stories.⁴⁹ The 2007 equivalent, a segment on 'Nature's Fury', a series of damaging wildfires, floods, and tornadoes, is nearly identical.⁵⁰ The difference in modern broadcast news is thus not a desire for eye-catching graphics and highly visualized material (see fig. 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. There is a

⁴⁶ CBS Evening News., Newscast Aired on November 5th, 1979.

⁴⁷ CBS Evening News., Newscast Aired on May 14th, 2007.

⁴⁸ Herman, E. and Chomsky, N., *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York, 1988); Altheide, D., *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis* (New York, 2002); McChesney, R., 'September 11 and the Structural Limitations of U.S. Journalism', Zelizer, B. and Allan, S., eds, *Journalism After September 11: When Trauma Shapes the News* (London, 2002), pp. 91-100.

⁴⁹ CBS, March 28, 1979; Cf. Lule, J., *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (London, 2001).

⁵⁰ CBS Evening News., Newscast Aired on May 9th, 2007.

‘smoothness’ in their assimilation, not evident in earlier footage, which allows current graphics packages to do a better job ‘setting the tone’ for an individual story or entire broadcast.⁵¹ 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, 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.

Divergences from Cronkite

Each evening of Couric’s broadcast begins with a fast three-note ‘sunder’, ‘notes that function as a subliminal come-to-attention signal to viewers’.⁵² 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 many of the introductions seen leading into the top-rated programs on cable news. 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 – as in a report on Barack Obama’s potential Irish roots, ‘Barack O’Bama’ – but without the same degree of tongue-in-cheek as satirical news.⁵³ 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 color 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 fig. 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’.⁵⁴

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. This change, and many which I will subsequently describe, are

⁵¹ Cf. Helmers and Hill, *Defining Visual Rhetorics*.

⁵² Barnes, B., ‘CBS, Katie Couric Have Already Made Sweet Music Together,’ *Wall Street Journal*, September 5, 2006, A1.

⁵³ CBS, May 16, 2007.

⁵⁴ CBS, May 7, 2007 – May 18, 2007.

fairly telling indicators of the impact of the triumvirate of fragmentation, declining trust in mainstream news, and commercialization of the industry on traditional newscasts. 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'.⁵⁵ 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'.⁵⁶ 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'.⁵⁷ This trend is also mirrored in the headlines – such as 'Toxic trailers' or 'Terror plot' – which now adorn the over-the-shoulder graphics that announce each story.⁵⁸

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. Music was considered by network executives one of the most important elements in remodeling the tone of the show news consultants noting that many people often listen rather than watch the news.⁵⁹ 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'.⁶⁰ 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. Another consideration with an eye to inclusion was altering

⁵⁵ Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Warp Speed*.

⁵⁶ CBS, May 10, 2007.

⁵⁷ CBS, May 7, 2007.

⁵⁸ CBS, May 16, 2007; CBS, May 8, 2007.

⁵⁹ See also Bull, M., 'The World According to Sound', *New Media and Society* 3 (2001), no. 2, pp. 179-197.

⁶⁰ Barnes, 'CBS, Katie Couric'.

the colors in the studio to be ‘warmer’ on camera.⁶¹ These aesthetic considerations point to a re-branding designed to comfort the viewer by harnessing traits associated with the ‘feminine’; gaining trust not through the paternalistic style personified by Cronkite but in a maternal style associated with protecting the viewer.⁶²

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 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 mirrors 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.

Further trends such as personalization, conversationalization, and informalization 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 contextualize 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,’ the two-way conversation that followed spoke of what impact it would have on consumers who owned Chrysler vehicles or had vehicles under lease.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ 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’.⁶⁵ Her decision to switch the opening greeting, initially to ‘Hi everybody’ from ‘Good evening’, appears a conscious effort on the part of CBS news to give the viewer a greater sense of involvement and more ‘welcoming’ news watching experience.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

⁶² Cf. Van Zoonen, ‘One of the Girls?’; Dahlgren, ‘TV News as a Social Relation’; Rich, ‘The Weight of an Anchor’.

⁶³ CBS, May 14, 2007.

⁶⁴ CBS, May 14, 2007 – May 17, 2007.

⁶⁵ Hagan, J., ‘Alas, Poor Couric: But Pity Her Not’.

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.'⁶⁶

This move seems to be an evident informalization 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.⁶⁷ 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 is just part of a more extensive shift in language that attempts a familiar form of address.⁶⁸ 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 newscast faces when it tries to update its look.

Incorporating Interactivity into Network News

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. This is only one of many personae that we now witness on news-related programming, from the intelligent witty friend, Jon Stewart, to the righteous beat-cop, Bill O'Reilly, the full-throated populist, Glenn Beck, 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. The field of journalism increasingly comprises a diverse range of emotional spaces, accepted styles of journalistic involvement that mark a departure from the

⁶⁶ The Colbert Report., 'Interview with Katie Couric', *Comedy Central*, Episode Aired on March 22nd, 2007.

⁶⁷ Fairclough, *Media Discourse*; Delli Carpini and Williams, 'Let us Infotain You'.

⁶⁸ CBS, May 17, 2007.

cool style that defined most broadcast newscasts in the time of Cronkite.⁶⁹ 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’ demanded under the objectivity regime, there is evidence that one of the crucial elements seen under emerging newscasts – the need to generate a more accessible form of involvement – has crept into the evening news. From making a conscientious effort to personalize stories, to informalizing elements of discourse, and increasing the avenues for interaction, the current version of the *CBS Evening News* conveys 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 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.⁷⁰

As Hallin 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.’⁷¹ This is not to say that Couric has strayed too far from the cool demeanor, 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

⁶⁹ Peters, ‘Emotion Aside’.

⁷⁰ CBS Evening News., ‘Couric & Co’, *CBS News*, available from: <http://www.cbsnews.com/sections/couricandco/main500803.shtml> (2008).

⁷¹ Hallin, D., ‘The Passing of the “High Modernism” of American Journalism’, *Journal of Communication* 42 (1992), no. 3, p. 22.

certain segments, those which can 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. 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 notes, these moments are 'less formal in tone and style than the preceding parts of the item. It is essentially an informalizing or conversationalizing 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.'⁷² 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 popularized 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' and 'Hello Everyone', which are informal compared to 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.'⁷³ Again, this appears more attentive toward forging a connection with an audience and building a relationship as opposed to just promoting ritual viewership.

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.⁷⁴ An attention to narrative is nothing new; as Graber notes, in 1963, the executive producer for NBC's *Huntley-Brinkley Report* instructed his staff that,

⁷² Cameron, D., 'Language. Truth or Dare?', *Critical Quarterly* 46 (2004), no. 2, p. 125.

⁷³ 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, May 11, 2007; May 18, 2007.).

⁷⁴ Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), 2007.

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.⁷⁵

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 trivialized is an overall reduction in time devoted to the newscast magnified by the parallel introduction of a near nightly ‘kicker’.⁷⁶ While the final segment under Cronkite was often an in-depth consideration of a specific story, 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.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Graber, D., ‘The Infotainment Quotient in Routine Television News: A Director’s Perspective’, *Discourse & Society* 5 (1994), no. 4, p. 483.

⁷⁶ 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.

⁷⁷ 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, March 28, 1979); 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, May 14, 1979; November 5, 1979; November 21, 1979). A look over one year 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; CBS, May 17, 2007.

⁷⁸ Hagan, J., ‘Alas, Poor Couric: But Pity Her Not’.

The *CBS Evening News* even instituted a set 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-value of these reports is unclear, and certainly brings one in mind of Stephen Colbert's truthiness quip about trying to 'feel the news, at you.' By asking the audience to vote, this segment takes the one-way exchange of news and changes it to a (minimal) mutually constituted dialogue.

Yet while such stories are heavily laced with pathos, adversity and triumph, themes with a fictionalized 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' may seem like emotively infused language creeping into the newscast, but as we saw, such discourse was also present during Cronkite's tenure.⁷⁹ 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. 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, which we have come to expect from network news, still dominate the majority of each broadcast of the *CBS Evening News*.

That's The Way it Will Be?

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, 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 person-

⁷⁹ CBS, May 14, 2007.

al tone, when possible; and adding teasers that juxtapose the somber tone of many of the stories, either by attempting to amuse, entice or concern.

Demographics are an element of the drop-off in the audience levels for network news, as the median age of viewers was roughly 60 when Couric took over at CBS.⁸⁰ The problems with having such an elderly demographic were twofold. First, as audience members age and die off, younger viewers need to replace them to maintain ratings. Although exact numbers are imprecise, at the time of Couric's hiring it was accepted wisdom among network executives that this was not occurring.⁸¹ The second issue, which dovetails with the first, is that advertising revenue is primarily centered 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. 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 simultaneously antagonize core viewers.⁸²

While the current manifestation of the *CBS Evening News* is still very much a recounting of the day's events to an 'average' audience, 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 demonstrates how the *CBS Evening News* incorporated a number of shifts to craft a form of news that aims to generate a greater sense of involvement on behalf of its viewers.⁸³ However, as CBS adjusted to its new anchor and style, both Couric and CBS executives noted 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'.⁸⁴

When one considers this in relation to the über-consistent tone that defined Cronkite's *Evening News*, 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 divi-

⁸⁰ Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), 2006.

⁸¹ 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).

⁸² Hagan, J., 'Alas, Poor Couric: But Pity Her Not'.

⁸³ Peters, 'Even Better than Being Informed'.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*.

sion, but it now has hints of the light-hearted fare that its early morning relative, *The Early Show*, specializes in producing, while incorporating investigative segments and 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 demeanor 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 analyzed moment of the 2008 election campaign.

The foundation of how the *CBS Evening News* is produced under Couric's tenure marks it as obviously descended from Cronkite. At a sort of genetic level, the two are closely related, 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 altered. In terms of how the news is presented, the *CBS Evening News* now shares stylistic similarities to many of the emerging broadcast news alternatives that have come to prominence over the past few decades in an effort to replicate their success. In this period of increased competition, media fragmentation, dwindling audiences and shrinking revenues, that – to borrow the old signoff – is the way it is.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ See Peters and Broersma, *Rethinking Journalism*, especially Broersma and Peters 'Introduction: Rethinking Journalism'.



1. Opening Moments of the CBS Evening News in 1979.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ My appreciation to CBS for granting permission to use the screen captures which appear in this paper.



2. A Report on Hostage Taking in Iran, 1979, and its 2007 Iraqi Equivalent.



3. Common Stories, Common Images: Discussion on Fuel Prices and Auto Layoffs from 1979 and 2007.



4. New, Longer Opening of CBS Evening News in 2007.