Doing Less with More


by Gordon M. Pradl

Turning on the tube at seven o’clock each weekday evening may be the most massive act of collective delusion ever practiced by a culture. Lusting after this goddess of immediacy, aptly called the news, viewers sit glazed and numbed each and every night before their screens. The networks are aware of this situation, so they increasingly program up-to-the-minute on-the-spot newsbreaking reporting. And with cable television, one at last can never not be without the soothing libations of interpreted events. Naturally, we want to find out what’s going on around us. There is, perhaps, an inborn curiosity related directly to our earliest strategies for survival. Events out in the world affect ourselves and others make up the fabric of our lives. But we have no experience until we actively participate in the telling of these events, put them into our own words, commit acts of interpretation. As long as we maintain primary control over these speech acts, are responsible for their style and integrity, our daily decisions foster freedom. But not surprisingly, forces “wiser” than ourselves prefer to make these decisions for us, prefer not to have to deal with the complexities and contradictions and common sense that might arise were we left alone to act for ourselves. And so the flood of predigested news swells ever more menacingly.

Although people want to assert their independence by establishing unique interpretations of events, they also desire to share in the powerful repetitions of the group, to acquiesce in world-building not their own. They want, in other words, to be assertive and docile at the same time. News gatherers, have pounced on this conflict and offer up an illusion that appears to fulfill both needs simultaneously. This is the fiction of mass “participation” in the evening news. There are no individual interpretations, just a predigested menu offered by the networks. As this is not easily discerned, the locus of our society’s interpretative control moves from the inner resources of its citizens to the outer manipulations of lib culture.

The history of this trend is both long and varied; it effectively began when the programs established to report the news inverted their original purpose, that of being a conduit. The night watchman, the press, the radio, television, all were mediums designed to make events available to the public. Although these sources contained their biases, the event remained to be interpreted in black and white. But the situation changed, and the conduit function shifted to one of consumption. Subsequently, every event becomes news and since the thirst of the media can never be fully quenched, events are generated just in order that there be something to convey to a demanding public. Once this occurs, whatever distinction existed between news and entertainment (and the distinction remains dubious in the first place) ceases to exist.

And now Barbara Matusow appears with yet more “news”—in fact, the inside scoop by an honest-to-goodness insider—about the news. In The Evening Stars: The Making of the Network News Anchor she traces the evolution of television news since World War II. Not only does she explain, for instance, how Edward R. Murrow created a tradition of integrity within the fourth estate, but also how he signaled its eventual demise by “ushering in a peculiarly American part of the protagonist.” Once begun, this trend inevitably leads to a “news” establishment whose first concern is gaining an audience; trying to deliver the news takes second place. This isn’t a particularly shocking sense of priorities: Dan Rather’s audience lead over his competitors means that a 30-second spot can be sold for $44,000, as compared to $35,000 for the team in third place. Such an advantage could add up to over $10,000,000 a year—no small sum when all you are doing is serving up the news to an adoring public.

Ms. Matusow feigns alarm at such “business” figures and the slide toward overt entertainment that continues to mark the national network broadcasts, but because her way of viewing the world is so constrained by her own news-gathering affiliations, she fails to see the larger dimensions of the problem. Assorted homilies about the potential abuses of power are her idea of a thoughtful analysis of the absorption of news by entertainment. But such criticism belies her real purpose in writing the book: to serve as gossip columnist for the network news stars. Simply everyone is there—from John Cameron Swayze, Howard K. Smith, John Daly, Peter Jennings, Tom Brokaw, and Ted Koppel. Scurrying both in front of and in back of the camera’s eye, Ms. Matusow tells us why Tom Snyder failed to make the number-one seat in New York City; how Roger Mudd, during the final competition for the top spot at CBS, stayed above the fray, assuming the network owed him the job; how Barbara Walters was quietly sabotaged by Harry Reasoner, who, before going on the air, liked to hang around bars with his old cronies. And she reassuringly divulges the facts that Dan Rather, despite his aggressive qualities, is really a top-flight newscaster and that although he has a $10,000,000 salary, he lives a very unpretentious life.

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The power of the network anchor is directly related to the direction of the cash flow. Today, the anchor is not unlike a sports "star." The economics of sports entertainment has totally inverted the direction of satisfaction in competition. With eyes always on the fan, not the opponent, the success of sports business is measured in terms of the relative hysteria whipped up among the spectators, not in terms of the inherent accomplishments of the participants. So in a sense, Dan Rather and Dave Winfield are similar, just professionals doing their jobs.

The participation illusion must be maintained at all costs in the fantasy world created on the nightly newscasts. The audience must never become aware of how it is passively massaged and its perceptions externally controlled. One brilliant technique is the on-the-spot eyewitness interview with the person in the street. "Yes viewer, you are there and your voice is being heard." It doesn't matter that it is just another meaningless grunt that will be fairly balanced out in the best American tradition of objectivity and neutrality—two voices yea, two voices nay. Such surrogate presences supposedly validate the openness and unbiased nature of what is being reported. But this format dictates that there will never be time for serious interpretation and commentary.

Why has the conventional polarity between news and entertainment dissolved? In a society where citizens act, not merely react, the news functions in two ways: it provides data about events that genuinely affect life in the body politic; it provides a wide array of interpretations of these events consonant with a citizen's need to transform indirect events into useful direct experience. The citizen, in a real news environment remains free to choose from among competing interpretations. He is free to create his own experience, though this experience will be compatible with others to the extent that citizens share certain fundamental and consciously agreed upon social meanings. But it is precisely in the area of these social meanings that a free people are potentially vulnerable when the traditional news processes are consumed by the need to entertain. Entertainment quickly seizes the advantage of external regimentation and control and so it seeks ways of implanting needs in the audience which it can then predictably satisfy. But as risk is decreased so is the viewer's interpretative autonomy.

Television is packed with information; more flashes by in a week than one could ever hope to process critically in a lifetime. The critical function which makes the democratic way of life possible is under attack. When things are examined critically, people remain in charge. Yet despite all its participation gimmickry, the real content of television and thus of television "news" is feeling, not thinking. Thus television executives conspire to keep the audience properly stroked on a daily basis. They are in the business of enchainment, not engaging them. The values of print news as opposed to image news parallel the difference between the values of individual responsibility and the values of mass subjugation. Concensus of feeling is the key to the entertainment approach to the news. Keep the images, however, disturbing, flowing past the viewer: never provide time for reflection. Reflection might cause the viewer to assume real ownership over the images, transform them into their proper meanings, and in turn cast them out of his mind. But as long as the viewer is dependent, he moves in trancelike servitude to those who would control the culture.

Of course, as news has become indistinguishable from entertainment, there has been a stepped-up campaign of respectability on its behalf. The less television news works as traditional news, the more insistent is the line that a station's news team is honest, accurate, comprehensive, and totally professional. All this powerful array of talent is merely caught in the wheels of a technology serving an invisible system of social meanings that support collective values and the impotency of the individual.

The problem finally is that television is not to be reformed, for that is beyond its very nature. We may, of course, applaud the rise of families apparently switching their televisions off and this may indeed be one way of dealing with the arrogance of television news—let them fight ever more fiercely for a declining audience. It would be naive to expect a vast reduction of programming overtly labeled "news"; if anything is happening, the reverse is true. When all entertainment is news, and vice versa, then we need no longer worry about the existence of our own experience, or is that when we will finally begin worrying but it will be too late?