# Broadcast Journalism
# A critical introduction

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For the stunning documentary *In the Shadow of the Moon* about the Apollo missions, co-producer Chris Riley researched at NASA and unearthed extraordinary, previously unseen archive moon footage for a very early one-minute trailer. The movie-length feature documentary is remarkable for its outstanding archive footage, and the way it creates a moving narrative using originally composed music and interviews with the astronauts. A movie trailer was released in cinemas using such codes and conventions of cinema trailers as awe, archive realism and revelation.

Codes and conventions of trailers also include the classic enigma tease – pictures and sounds that make the audience wonder what the film is about. Broadcasting trailer codes tend towards information and content, while the best also have style and surprise. A broadcast trailer must persuade the audience that to miss this journalistic exposé would be to miss out on a life-changing and life-enhancing experience.

## Audience and the afterlife

Documentaries should have as much exposure as possible – from the Internet to DVD/CD distribution and special video screenings. Audience discussion and feedback provide learning points for the future, while festivals provide opportunities for promotion and for interaction with the wider production community. Distributors can help to enhance the life of a documentary, which is probably more important than any money that it makes. Most people make documentaries because they are passionate about a subject that merits wider communication. The world is your oyster – use documentary to raise awareness and change it, if only in a small way!

## Note

1   Interview with the author, 15 June 2005.

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# Conflicting pressures

## News and representation

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## Introduction

In 1955, the newly launched Independent Television News (ITN) daringly featured visible 'newscasters' instead of the invisible 'newsreaders' favoured by the BBC; in 1975, Angela Rippon became the first woman to read the news on a regular basis; in 1997, Five's Kirsty Young stood in front of a studio desk instead of sitting respectfully behind it; in 1999, ITV shifted its flagship late evening news from ten o'clock where it had been firmly held in place by the 'bongs' of Big Ben for decades. Each of these challenges to the patterned regularity of broadcast news caused a public sensation.

But, as the new millennium approached, the security of a predictable schedule, in which a small change could precipitate an outrage, was rapidly disappearing. As they struggled to adjust, television news and current affairs became the focus of intense and conflicting pressures. Changing technologies were bringing to a head a number of economic, political and ideological pressures which had been simmering for many years. Against this background, the transitional years between the Communications Act of 2003 and the inauguration of an all-digital television service in 2012 have seen unprecedented innovation in news delivery and an explosion of new styles and formats. But they have also brought uncertainty and a great deal of anxiety. Long-established institutions appear to be under threat, and long-established values must be managed and negotiated. There has been an outpouring of policy statements, research reports, 'stakeholder' consultations, innovatory proposals and much agonising over the nature of the media in the new, all-digital environment (see, among many other publications, BBC, 2007; Ofcom, 2005 and 2007; DCMS, 2004 and 2006; CMSC, 2007).

I shall be arguing that questions of representation and portrayal should be placed firmly within this context of the politics, economics and shifting technologies of the contemporary media landscape. Pressures affect the *ways* in which news and current affairs programmes communicate, as well as the substance of the communication; and the style of a broadcast has significant consequences for its content.

## Conflicting pressures in the transitional decade

With the technological upheaval of the move to digital, journalist-led programmes have been pulled in several different directions. Most importantly, news and current affairs has become a political pivot point. It is the final stop in the contest between those who argue for the continuation of an inclusive, public service system and an institutional framework secured by regulation and legislation, and those who assert that, in a completely digitised environment, any form of restriction on the broadcasting market will be hopelessly out of date.

On the one hand, it is argued that broadcast news has earned the public's trust through its legal commitment to objectivity and impartiality; this requirement is the source of its authority and should continue to be enforced. On the other, it is

claimed, there is no reason why broadcast news, just like the press, should not be free to have an editorial line, to indulge in advocacy or abuse, to follow the whims of its proprietor, and generally to throw off regulatory restrictions. These restrictions, it is argued, made sense only when access to the airwaves was limited. When hundreds of television channels and a wealth of converged digital platforms are equally available, even the sober ITN should be 'freed' to compete with channels like Rupert Murdoch's tub-thumping Fox News, of which it is written: 'Where television news once only presumed to cover political warfare, it now feeds it' (Collins, 2004: 4).

Ofcom, the influential Office of Communications, set up in 2003 to regulate commercial broadcasting and supervise the transition to digital, is itself committed to conflicting, if not positively schizophrenic, aims. In one respect it is a *de*-regulatory body, aiming to 'free the market' and relieve the commercial broadcasters of the 'burden' of regulation. In another it is committed to support public service broadcasting into the digital age and beyond (Harvey, 2006). In an attempt to solve this dilemma, Ofcom has designated the terrestrial channels – the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, S4C and Five – as 'public service broadcasters' (PSBs) with specific purposes and characteristics, and has set out to define and monitor the various levels of 'public service content' they are expected to carry. News is at the heart of this commitment, with its obligation to be reliable and impartial (Ofcom, 2005 and 2007).

The BBC, the powerful, licence-fee-funded chief PSB, has renewed its commitment to traditional news values. Its recent document which explored the nature of impartiality in the new environment says:

> Impartiality is and should remain the hallmark of the BBC as the leading provider of information and entertainment in the United Kingdom and as a pre-eminent broadcaster internationally. It is a legal requirement, but it should also be a source of pride.
>
> (BBC, 2007: 6)

However, at the same time, Ofcom has warned: 'Universal impartiality may become less enforceable in a digital environment, where regulated and unregulated services exist side by side on the same platform' (Ofcom, 2007: 71). For the BBC, its impartiality may become a 'haven – a clearing reachable only through dense, unregulated forest. And clearings can be quickly overtaken by undergrowth if the ground is not staked out' (BBC, 2007: 14). In other words, the reliability of 'the news' may no longer be securely underpinned by public policy, and even its institutional base in the BBC is not safe.

Hence the conflicting pressures in the transitional environment. On the one hand, the BBC may be pressured to retreat into a worthy 'public service' ghetto, with its licence fee drastically reduced or even abolished. On the other, political, technological and economic pressures are pushing all the broadcasters, including the BBC, towards a more populist approach. As the age of television scarcity finally gives way to the age of plenty (Ellis, 1999) competition for audiences is intense and the place of any genre which does not attract a big audience is insecure. News and other journalist-led programmes need to draw attention to themselves within an ever-louder cacophony of competing claims. In the words of *Newsnight* presenter Jeremy Paxman (2007):

the problem is that all news programmes need to make a noise. The need has got worse, the more crowded the market has become. We clamour for the viewers' attention: 'Don't switch over. Watch us! You won't be disappointed!' . . . The problem is that a sort of expectation inflation sets in.

Competition for audiences has brought a further set of contradictory pressures which have changed the ways in which broadcast journalism communicates. The news programmes themselves have moved towards an increasingly informal approach; meanwhile, across the schedules, there has been an explosion of material on the margins of journalism, involving popular formats, light-hearted, innovative styles and an embrace of celebrity. Precisely at the time when 'public service content' is expected to distinguish itself, the boundaries between 'serious' programmes and the rest of the output are becoming ever more blurred.

Even as it is argued that the authority and reliability of journalist-led programmes must be protected, the nature and professional values of journalism are being challenged; its special claims disputed. The figure of the journalist is now demystified and dispersed across the schedules and across the platforms. In myriad new hybrid forms, reporters become celebrities and celebrities become reporters; entertainment, 'reality' shows and social issues converge; ordinary people and 'citizen journalists' demand space on the airwaves; while online bloggers, campaigners and mischief-makers claim their role as a 'bulwark against the one dimensional view of events and the world that characterise Big Media' (Katz, 2001, in Zelizer and Allan, 2002: 136). Broadband websites deliver their own brand of audio-visual news, which may be created by newspapers, political parties, businesses and others for whom impartiality and even accuracy may be an irrelevance. One example is 18 Doughty St Talk TV, established by Conservative Party supporters in 2005.

Several writers have argued that the 1990s and 2000s have brought radical changes which have shaken the security of news programming. There is the expansion of the public relations industry and the increasing 'mediatisation' of news sources themselves (Cottle, 2003; Franklin, 1994; Corner and Pels, 2003; de Zengotita, 2005; Miller and Dinan, 2008); there is the inexorable move towards tabloidisation (Langer, 1998); and there is the heightened global visibility of major international traumas, such as the 11 September attacks. Indeed, it has been argued that following the attacks and the subsequent 'war on terror', journalism can never be the same (Zelizer and Allan, 2002). It is now subject to greater scrutiny and potential control both from governments and from extremist groups with international scope. As low-level wars and local conflicts spread across the globe, reporting is ever more dangerous; and the possibility of impartiality is reduced as numerous journalists are targeted, kidnapped and killed. Meanwhile, broadcast news is scrutinised, monitored, supplemented – and frequently contradicted – by myriad Internet sources. All of these things have shaken a simple expectation of authority and reliability.

Against the background of these multiple pressures, I will be looking first at the structure and form of news programmes, and then at the presentation of journalists themselves. These two factors, structure and mediation, are being seriously challenged; yet, arguably, together with their institutional grounding, they constitute the main guarantors of broadcast journalistic authority.

## Changing media, changing structure

The very structure of 'the news' has come under scrutiny during the transitional decade. By '*the* news' I mean a recognised, discrete programme, produced and assembled by a specialist team working under an editor. It is produced by dedicated organisations staffed by producers, reporters, researchers and others who usually work exclusively in the genre and share its culture, its assumptions and its approach (Tunstall, 1993). The authority of 'the news' is guaranteed by them, backed by the authority of the broadcaster and the regulatory regime.

News programmes continue to mark out the day with a measured tread: breakfast, midday, early evening, late evening; dividing the news-rich weekdays from the leisured weekends, when shorter bulletins alternate with lunchtime discussion (*Any Questions* on Radio 4) and political analysis (BBC1's *The Politics Show*). Indeed, ITV thought this pattern so important that, in January 2008, it brought back *News at Ten*, together with Big Ben and the venerable presenter Sir Trevor McDonald. The pattern says much about the expectations of a regular lifestyle among the viewing audience. It underpins the address of 'the news' to the nation as a whole: an *equal* address, assuming in its viewers shared judgements about news values and the relative importance of the reports it contains. At the same time it works to renew and sustain those values.

Since 1989, with the launch of Sky, these discrete programmes have been paralleled by twenty-four-hour rolling news on an increasing number of channels, and from the late 1990s a positive flood of innovations has meant that structured and edited news programmes have been supplemented by 'on demand' viewing on multiple platforms and by millions of sources accessed via the Internet (Allan, 2006). The BBC's iPlayer 'makes the unmissable unmissable', declares its promo. As control over the selection and ordering of information moves from the news editors to the viewers, the authority of the broadcasters seems less secure. Against this background it is worth considering how news broadcasts have traditionally indicated their trustworthiness and authority through their structure and presentation.

Every broadcast genre has its own distinct conventions which establish the audience's expectations (Creeber, 2001): to laugh at comedy, to be absorbed by the narrative in drama, to react to the reality of documentary, to savour the style of a familiar chat-show host, to cheer on the favourites – and, as interactivity demands, to vote them in or out – in a game show.

As news and current affairs genres evolved on television, the style, structure and very 'look' of the programmes needed to underpin their reliability and impartiality. Consequently, on the main terrestrial channels, 'the news' is marked off from the flow of the broadcast schedule. Its introductory fanfares, titles and headlines seek both to entice the audience and to make it immediately clear that the following half-hour or so is not to be treated as fiction, comedy or, unless signalled as such, mere light-hearted chatter; that any shocking material it may contain is not for titillation; that spectacular imagery is for information, not effect. The shape of a news programme is itself a performance, a well-established ritual, with a job of work to do.

A news broadcast is a mélange but its structure is tightly controlled. Each programme is carefully paced and ordered, balancing within its allotted space political and social items, both overseas and domestic, with precedence given to

those which will affect viewers directly (cancelled trains may take priority over foreign elections). There are dramatic changes in pace, topic and mood, as well as in degrees of importance. Each item is self-contained, linked to the next by a return to the studio. Only at moments of extreme emergency (terrorist attacks; major ecological disasters) will any one topic dominate. The programme is brought to an end with lighter items (introduced by the much-quoted 'And finally . . .'), sports reports and the weather forecast. The ritual is complete.

'The news' is distinguished by its status as a live broadcast. The presenters in the studio share a co-temporality with the audience as they visibly manage and relay the different inputs. The imagery is global in scope, but it is clear that this is the *national* news, grounded in the secure cocoon of the well-lit studio (even if areas of the studio are actually immaterial, created by computer-generated imagery).

Each of the accessed elements has its own visual style: the hasty, *vérité* movement of the camera at the war front; the figure of a reporter standing in the rain, addressing the audience from the pavement outside a government department; the low-quality blur of the urgent mobile phone footage capturing a disaster, whether a flood or a terrorist bomb. This repertoire of images characterises the genre and has itself been used in trailers and promotions for news broadcasts. As it moves between the different registers, the rich visual drama of 'the news' is no less structured and formal than a costume serial or a hosted game show, delivering what Simon Cottle (2006) has described as its 'communicative architecture' (Cottle with Rai, 2006). This carefully edited, balanced and sequenced format in itself asserts a reliable, knowledgeable, structuring presence, securing the authority and universal address of the format.

But the innovations of the digital era mean that the tight structure of a news programme can no longer claim to be self contained; its surface is no longer impenetrable. Mainstream broadcasts constantly point beyond themselves to other parts of the mediasphere. 'The news' and other factual programmes are now embedded in a network of websites and background information, much of it provided by the broadcasters themselves. Questions of representation are made more complex by this constant reference elsewhere, to material which could potentially flesh out, or even contradict, the information immediately on the screen. Every 'story' is reflected back and forth between an increasing number of different media.

The visuals of a news broadcast have themselves become more complex, no longer delivering a single image. Particularly on the rolling news channels, strap lines with moving text deliver headlines and 'breaking news'; they invite viewers to post their comments on the website and to 'press red' for more information. News broadcasts solicit contributions from the public: *Five News* declares, 'If you've got a story, make us a video,' and creates spaces for 'Your News on Five', including material taken from social networking websites, such as YouTube. Viewers are now accustomed to split screens, multiple actions, text and graphics. Many different messages are displayed within a single screen, which may contain a restless movement between locations, topics and voices. The impression is that so much is happening in so many parts of the world that the medium itself is struggling to keep up – as, of course, it always has. If the medium is the message, the message is multiplicity.

For Stuart Allan, analysing the response to the 11 September attacks, informal material transmitted via the Internet got closer to the 'real story': 'In stretching the boundaries of what counted as journalism "amateur newsies" and their webloggers

together threw into sharp relief the reportorial conventions of mainstream journalism' (Zelizer and Allan, 2002: 128). However, despite the myth of authenticity which still surrounds much Internet use, few sources deliver the sort of raw, unmediated material and instantaneous reactions which may blossom at times of war and conflict. Instead, much of what is available has been edited and structured according to its own principles, which are likely to be different from the established regularity of traditional broadcast news. The assemblage of sources escapes the control of traditional editorial structures and of the regulatory system. The authority of 'the news' is shaken. In Ofcom's words, 'consumers [*sic*] who place a high level of importance on impartiality will find it harder to discover channels they can trust' (Ofcom, 2007: 71). At the same time, for the BBC, 'This much greater audience involvement has become a major factor in determining impartiality' (BBC, 2007: 5).

## The image of the journalist: blurring the boundaries

Questions of the authority and legitimacy of the journalists who manage the rawness of public events on behalf of the viewing public are linked to questions of the trustworthiness of 'the news'. The figures of reporters and newsreaders are central to news iconography. As its mediators they anchor its reliability. In television and the visual media, there have long been anxieties about the presence of journalists on the screen, and the move to digital has renewed some long-standing questions about the nature of professionalism and the possibility of impartiality (Allan, 2008). Journalists, too, are caught between conflicting pressures.

Reporters and newsreaders have a double presence on the broadcast media. On the one hand, they must express/perform/act out the neutrality and impartiality which underpin the authority of a news broadcast; on the other, they are individuals with their own diverse characters, emotions and opinions. The two aspects may well be in tension. Their physical presence on screen will draw attention to their individuality; the nature of their performance will affect the content of the news they report. On the one hand, they may be accused of insufficient detachment; on the other, their manner and professionalism may be seen as a mask for bias or partiality. Hence the visibility of those who deliver the news has been an issue from the early days of television: 'If a newsreader were seen while giving the news, any change in his [*sic*] visual manner, a smile or a lift of an eyebrow might, however little this was intended, be interpreted as comment', wrote Grace Wyndham Goldie, the influential head of television 'talks' in the 1950s (Goldie, 1977: 194–5).

But changes to the figure of the main newsreader reflect changes in the ways in which news authority has been conceptualised and managed. There have been two compelling trends: a move towards informality and a move towards plurality. These have sometimes developed separately and sometimes together, but both have been influenced by the changing institutional structures of UK television. It was the coming of ITN, promising American-style 'newscasters', that forced the BBC to allow the audience to see its newsreaders. The figure of a woman reading the news seemed to throw the dilemmas into sharp focus. Could authority be combined with femininity? And what kind of authority would it be? When it was finally accepted that women could bear the weight of hosting a news broadcast, it was a step towards both plurality and informality, effectively a recognition that authority could take

more than one form (Holland, 1987). The coming of Channel 4 in 1982 marked a decisive step towards plurality. Set up in response to critiques of the narrow social representation which had characterised the BBC and ITV, journalists and presenters across the channel were drawn from a diverse range of backgrounds, races and regions. Channel 4's first current affairs series was produced and presented by women, some from a feminist perspective (Baehr, 1987).

A year later, in 1983, the move to informality was hastened by a different development, the arrival of early morning television with the BBC's *Breakfast Time* and TVam on ITV. Instead of the segmented audiences addressed by Channel 4, breakfast television aimed at a broad 'family' audience. After some uncertain starts, early morning television settled down with a loose mixture of news and celebrity chat. Symbolically, the sofa replaced the formal desk, and the manner of the presenters became more relaxed. Conventional 'news' packages were interleaved with jokes, lifestyle and promotional interviews and low-key chatter. Politicians, redesigned as celebrities, could rub shoulders with comics, actors and pop stars. At this point the codes of familiarity had decisively invaded the space of 'the news'.

From the anonymous voice of authority favoured by the 1950s BBC, news presenters gradually moved towards a celebrity status. When Angela Rippon did a high-kicking dance routine on the *Morecambe and Wise Christmas Show* in 1976 – partly in response to endless tabloid scoffing at a woman in a serious role – there was a real sense of shock. Thirty years later presenters are ever more relaxed, more informal, more prepared to drop the mask of responsibility. They appear across the schedules in events ranging from *Children in Need* to *Strictly Come Dancing*, and sometimes struggle to keep their entertainment personas separate from the authority which must return as they resume their professional role. A continuum of perform-ance has been created, requiring the audience to exercise discrimination and judgement.

Yet mediated news remains a global witness to extreme situations, and the figure of the journalist visibly reporting from a location – whether from the scene of a crime, the Prime Minister's office or a war zone – plays a significant role in securing the status of a news broadcast. The reporter stands in for the eyes of the viewer, observing a situation, seeking out witnesses, adding explanation. The presence of a known reporter, sometimes putting themself at risk ('*our* Africa correspondent', '*our* science editor') anchors a report in the expertise, experience and judgement of the journalist backed by the institution. In John Corner's words, it provides 'an imaging of the *process of reporting itself* . . . linking the viewer to a seen source of information and allowing a personalised investment of a trust in the visible processes of inquiry, the search for truth' (Corner, 1995: 67).

Since the 1980s, non-professional journalists have had an intermittent presence on UK television, with series such as ITV's *Your Shout*, the BBC's *Video Diaries*, and many Channel 4 programmes which gave 'ordinary people' the opportunity to investigate, report and voice their opinions. By the 2000s, the boundaries between journalists and non-professional or celebrity presenters was becoming well and truly blurred. Helped by the easy accessibility of very small cameras and recording equipment, the 'video diary' mode had become standard. The role of the journalist has expanded, mutated and dissipated.

When the journalist Sean Langan took a concealed camera through the fundamentalist Islamic states for *Langan behind the Lines* (BBC2, 2001) – sharing with

the audience his horrified fascination for the football stadium in Saudi Arabia where beheadings regularly take place, or snatching a glimpse of Taliban in Afghanistan beating up a woman who was not, according to them, properly dressed – his intimate personal style as he shared thoughts, impressions and feelings with the camera pushed at the boundaries of conventional, detached journalism. Many other programmes have involved the use of covert filming, with the reporter literally acting a role. In the first *MacIntyre Undercover* series (BBC1, 1999) Donal MacIntyre became, among other things, a football hooligan, a fashion photographer and a care worker.

Although reporters are still expected to restrain their emotions and to conceal their political preferences (however, the BBC's Martin Bell made powerful arguments for 'a journalism of attachment' at the time of the Bosnian war), there is increasing space for professional journalists to speak in a variety of different registers, both on the mainstream channels and on blogs and websites. A variety of formats offers greater personal scope. Although these may sometimes exploit the politics of emotion and outrage, they also recognise that the personality of the journalist and their own commitment to a story may add the type of authority valued by those who have long suspected that 'neutrality' is a mask (Holland, 2001a and 2001b).

At the same time, celebrity reporters and new formats have meant the dispersal of news-related material across the television genres. A glance at recent output reveals, among many other formats: veteran political pundit Peter Snow reviewing the state of the nation with his son Dan (e.g., *What Britain Earns*, BBC2, 2008); the eccentric Conservative politician Ann Widdecombe tracking down wayward teenagers ('hoodies' and truants) and pursuing them with a hectoring tone which verges on self-parody (*Anne Widdecombe versus . . .*, ITV, 2007); celebrity chef Jamie Oliver revealing, and setting out to improve, the state of nutrition in schools (*Jamie's School Dinners*, Channel 4, 2006); businessman Gerry Robinson investigating and proposing improvements to a local hospital (*Can Gerry Robinson Fix the NHS?*, BBC2 with the Open University, 2007).

Condemned in the 1990s as 'infotainment' (Brants, 1998) and in the 2000s as 'reality television' (Biressi and Nunn, 2005) these hybrid genres are searching for innovative ways to attract an audience as they face the challenge of a changing political and economic environment. They reveal news and current affairs-related programmes negotiating and managing changes and pressures; balancing demands for populism with traditional journalistic values; seeking, in Stuart Allan's (2004: 77) phrase, 'a cultural politics of legitimacy' with varying degrees of success. These are *cultural* responses to commercial, political and ideological pressures, and they defy a narrow definition of 'public service content'. Arguably, by supplementing mainstream journalism, they could effectively strengthen rather than replace it.

## Conclusion

The double challenge to the structure of 'the news' and to the role of journalist as authoritative mediator has shifted broadcast journalism decisively towards a looser, less formal approach. But 'the news' has long been part of a complex web of broadcast output. Even before the coming of the Internet, interested members of the public were able to follow a 'story' across the media – though documentaries, rival news items on various channels, current affairs programmes, archive, biographical and

reminiscence programmes, as well as programmes of comment and discussion. 'News' has always involved an interweaving of 'stories' across the days, weeks and years, and across sources.

As this complexity multiplies with the digital media, the commitment to maintain the status and authority of broadcast journalism as the guarantor of public trust and the core of public service broadcasting has become more problematic. However, it is clear that technological changes may be managed and utilised in many different ways. Ultimately the outcomes of the move to digital, as the transitional decade gives way to a fully digitised environment, will be determined by political as much as technological pressures.

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