

CONCLUSION

Public confidence in social institutions including Congress, the presidency, the news media, and the federal government has reached new lows. Healthy skepticism about politics has become pervasive cynicism. The presumption of trust and cooperation has been replaced by that of mistrust and exploitation.

The causes of political cynicism are unclear. Some search for their origins in the mismatch between promise and delivery, or the failure of incumbents to solve social problems, or the failure of the major parties to provide real alternatives in governance. A few have blamed the news media.

The role of media content in affecting cynicism has implications not only for the way media cover campaigns, governance, and policy but also for the public's cynicism about the press as an institution. It is not clear why public confidence in the media should have exhibited such sharp declines in the past two years, nor is it clear whether political cynicism causes media cynicism. What is clear from our research is that political cynics are also media cynics who believe that journalists distort the political process.

In her 1994 Theodore White lecture at Harvard's Joan Shorenstein Center, ABC's Cokie Roberts recalled the belief of some that "the press won Watergate." She added, "My question now is, what have we won lately? And have we made it harder for the system to work? And is that clash, between politicians and the press, undermining our institutions so fundamentally that their very survival is called into question."⁴³ After four years of research that included extensive content analysis and several controlled field experiments, we answer the question, "Has the press made it harder for the system to work?" in the affirmative.

We do not believe that the news media are the only or even the primary source of public cynicism about institutions. Yet our data show—in ways that could only be suggested by previous commentators—that the way in which the news media frame political events stimulates cynicism. When reporters persistently focus on self-interest as the motivation for political decisions, they may be helping create the mistrust that feeds their own reporting and ultimately feeds back on the institution they represent.

43. Transcript from audiotape.

Say It with Pictures

By DORIS A. GRABER

ABSTRACT: The visual information presented in televised news constitutes an important underused and underestimated information resource. After pointing out that human brains extract valuable information from audiovisuals more quickly and more easily than from purely verbal information, the author discusses the advantages of audiovisual processing. They include a more comprehensive and error-free grasp of information, better recall, and greater emotional involvement. Attention then turns to research findings about the content and format of current television news. It is richer than generally believed in significant visually conveyed information that is not covered by the words. It falls far short, however, of taking full advantage of the medium's potential to serve as a vicarious political experience and to offer benefit from the intimacy of the involvement. The article ends with a plea to focus television news on information that citizens in the post-Gutenberg era really need to know in order to carry out the civic functions that they actually perform.

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HOW do pictures function in the news to shape the public's understanding of political events? Are they really worth 1000 words? We pay lip service to this aphorism but, when it comes to televising our political world, journalists still entrust the main story line to words, using the pictures as illustrations for the verbal themes. This holds true even when they select stories largely because gripping pictures are available.

In this article, I shall argue that the potential of pictures to carry information has been both underused and underestimated. I shall begin with a discussion of the many ways in which pictures, combined with words, enhance information transmission, focusing on the information-processing capabilities of the human brain. An analysis of the visual information content of current television news and its impact on viewers will follow. My concluding comments will point to the need to adapt our thinking about knowledge acquisition to the technological revolution that has overtaken the Gutenberg Age of Print

HOW PEOPLE LEARN FROM AUDIOVISUAL INFORMATION

Visual and verbal processing compared

The human brain is far more adept at extracting information from audiovisual stimuli than from purely verbal information. Whether spoken or printed, verbal stimuli are processed serially, one verbal unit at a time. By contrast, visual stimuli are

processed simultaneously.¹ In a matter of milliseconds, we can see a president taking the oath of office or the launching of a space shuttle while also observing multiple spectators and the details of the physical setting. One quick glance at complex visual scenes suffices to identify situations that words would describe with far less fidelity in information transmission.²

Unlike the ability to process verbal messages, the ability to process visual information develops early in life so that even very young children and illiterate adults can learn from visual information.³ By contrast, skill in processing verbal information, particularly when it is printed and deals with complex matters, often requires formal schooling. Audiovisual information transmission, therefore, can potentially reach much larger audiences, starting at a much younger age.

Early in life, most people master the standardized picture codes through which television simulates reality. For instance, television viewers routinely experience videotaped images as three-dimensional even though tape is only two-dimensional.⁴

1. Allen Paivio, *Imagery and Verbal Processes* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1979).

2. Judee K. Burgoon, "Nonverbal Communication Research in the 1970s: An Overview," in *Communication Yearbook IV*, ed. Dan Nimmo (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1980), pp. 179-97.

3. Patricia Marks Greenfield, *Mind and Media: The Effects of Television, Video Games, and Computers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Paul Messaris, "Visual 'Literacy': A Theoretical Synthesis," *Communication Theory*, 3:277-94 (Nov. 1993).

They are not troubled by the fact that edited videotape shows them the same scene from multiple perspectives, even when their own position has not shifted. They can recognize that tiny real-life or even stick figures on the screen, or partially obscured black and white images of humans, are representations of the three-dimensional, multihued human beings visible through direct eye contact.⁵ In fact, our minds routinely transform what we see so that it corresponds to our preconceptions and experiences. Since our eyes record all images upside down, we must turn upright everything we see.

Because words and pictures are merely building blocks from which different meanings are constructed, cues about the context are essential. In television news, a story's verbal lead-in or pictures that clearly depict familiar persons, locations, or situations are used to contextualize the story. Audiences interpret subsequent audiovisual cues within the gestalt provided for them by the newscast in question and by the flow of previous experiences stored in memory.⁶

Memory enhancement

Combining pictures with words makes messages more memorable than purely verbal texts, particularly

4. Jerry Lee Salvaggio, *A Theory of Film Language* (New York: Arno Press, 1980).

5. Robert N. Kraft, Phillip Canto, and Charles Gottdiener, "The Coherence of Visual Narratives," *Communication Research*, 18:601-16 (1991); Messaris, "Visual 'Literacy'."

6. Glasgow University Media Group, *Bad News* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976); Glasgow University Media Group, *More Bad News* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

when the pictures contain substantial amounts of dramatic information previously unknown to the viewer and not mentioned verbally. The human brain also absorbs larger amounts of information with greater fidelity when the messages are visual or audiovisual. Two types of explanations have been offered by scholars. One relates to the fact that pictures arouse viewers' interest and attention to a greater extent because they give the viewer a sense of participating in an event or, at least, witnessing it personally. This makes it easier to identify with people and situations and to become emotionally involved. The perceived realism of visuals lends them credibility. Seeing is, indeed, believing. When audio and visual messages conflict, powerful visuals prevail in people's minds over equally powerful verbal messages.⁷

The second explanation is that pictures make it easier to retrieve stored information from memory. Allen Paivio believes that this happens because audiovisuals are encoded "in terms of both their picture content and their verbal content. . . . The presence of an additional memory code for picture items would enhance their probability of being recalled because if one code was forgotten or simply unavailable for retrieval, the other could be used instead."⁸ Research corroborates that pictures generally aid recall.⁹

7. Burgoon, "Nonverbal Communication Research"; Harold Stanley and Richard Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics*, 2d ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1990).

8. Paivio, *Imagery and Verbal Processes*, p. 387.

9. Elihu Katz, Hanna Adoni, and Prina Parness, "Remembering the News: What Pic-

When I compared the verbal themes recalled spontaneously by listeners to a news broadcast with memory of these themes when the audience both heard and saw the newscast, the power of the visual images was clear. More than a third of the scenes (34 percent) were recalled by more than half the audience in the audiovisual mode. This was more than twice the recall rate (16 percent) for the verbal themes.¹⁰

Pictures also improve detail retention. For purely verbal themes, high detail recall—which meant that the viewer remembered at least three details about verbal or visual news story themes—occurred for an average of 12 percent of the themes in each news story. The comparable figure for audiovisual themes was 26 percent.¹¹ More important from a

son of the accuracy with which viewers spontaneously reported television news stories to which they had listened, with or without viewing the pictures, showed that 32 percent of the audience who had been deprived of the pictures misreported parts of the story. With exposure to the audiovisuals, the error rate dropped to 15 percent.¹⁴ Calvin Pryluck believes that this phenomenon occurs because visuals present more detail than words do and provide a better grasp of relationships. These clarifications allow viewers to form accurate visual memories of unfamiliar people and events and to revise flawed impressions.¹⁵ Carolyn Lewis attributes greater visual accuracy to the fact that pictures supply data that, in their absence, would be mentally constructed by viewers based on related past experiences.¹⁶

Attractiveness

The fact that most people prefer audiovisual messages to nonvisual information has major implications as well. Televised news has become the most widely used source of political information. Surveys indicate that Americans find audiovisual news more appealing, interesting, and believable than other forms.¹⁷ Audiences also claim to learn more from it than from other media because of the real-

14. Graber, "Saeing Is Remembering."

15. Calvin Pryluck, *Sources of Meaning in Motion Pictures and Television* (New York: Arno Press, 1976).

16. Carolyn D. Lewis, *Reporting for Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

17. Roper Organization, *America's Watching: Public Attitudes Towards Television* (New York: Roper Organization, 1991).

ism of audiovisual presentations. Most situations in life have visual dimensions, making experiences that lack visuals seem unrealistic. Even when listeners are able to compensate for the missing pictures by drawing on visual memories, these are rarely as vivid and accurate as the images people are able to construct from watching audiovisuals. Imagining what a presidential inauguration or the inside of a spacecraft might look like is not nearly as realistic as seeing televised views of the real ceremony or vehicle.

Once stored in memory, visual images tend to be believed even when they are later proven inaccurate. During the 1991 Persian Gulf war, for example, Americans who watched high-precision bombing concluded that it represented the state of the art. When informed later that only 7 percent of the bombs dropped hit their targets, they found it hard to discard their previous eyewitness-to-history images.¹⁸

When scholars asked a group of ordinary citizens to compare the appeal of television with newspapers, newsmagazines, and radio, the citizens ranked television highest in human interest, soundness of contextual information, and aiding understanding.¹⁹ Audiences found it easier to extract meaning from televised news stories than from radio and

18. Hamid Mowlana, Herbert Schiller, and George Gerbner, *Triumph of the Image: The Media's War in the Persian Gulf* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

19. Television received a 5.5 ranking on a 7-point scale. W. Russell Neuman, Marion P. Just, and Ann N. Crigler, *Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

learning perspective, for more than two-thirds of the verbal themes (69 percent), the attentive audience was minuscule, ranging from zero to 33 percent. Attentiveness rates for audiovisual information, though not good, were substantially better. Half (50 percent) of the audiovisuals, compared to one-third (31 percent) of the verbal themes, attracted the attention of more than a third of the audience.

The impact of audiovisuals on recall is variable, however. Several scholars have noted exceptions to the memory enhancement produced through visuals. For example, memory tends to suffer when audio and video messages offer discrepant information.¹² Emotional visuals may interfere with accurate storage of factual verbal information in a news story, and visuals that enhance memory for negative emotional messages may fail to do so for positive ones.¹³

Audiovisual memories tend to be more error free than memories of purely verbal messages. A compar-

the verbal themes, compared to 39 percent of the audiovisual themes. Doris A. Graber, "What You See Is What You Get" (Paper delivered at the convention of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, 1991).

12. Paul R. Warshaw, "Application of Selective Attention Theory to Television Advertising Displays," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 63:366-72 (1978); Mickie Edwardson, Kurt Kent, and Maevae McConnell, "Television News Information Gain from Videotex vs. a Talking Head" (Paper delivered at the meeting of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, 1984); Edwardson et al., "Audio Recall."

13. Annie Lang and Marian Friestad, "Emotion, Hemispheric Specialization, and Visual Search Verbal Memory for Television Messages," *Communication Research*, 20:647-70 (1993).

10. An audiovisual theme was defined as "a shot or shots of the same subject, bounded by adjacent scenes of different subjects. A new scene meant cutting to a completely new subject, not merely motion within a scene" or a change in photographic techniques. Verbal themes were similarly defined, with one or several statements about the same subject composing a theme. Doris A. Graber, "Seeing Is Remembering: How Visuals Contribute to Learning from Television News," *Journal of Communication*, 40:135-36 (1990).

11. The top memory scores for individual news stories were high recall of 19 percent of

print forms largely because visuals present the essential story facts and context more clearly without overwhelming details that may be tedious and often difficult to grasp. For instance, visuals in the news can provide information about the extent of the injuries suffered by the victims of a bombing attack, as well as their age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. They can show the condition of a dilapidated bridge or a decaying highway. They can reveal the expression of defiance or fear on a terrorist's face.

When important stories lack drama, they are likely to be ignored by most people because they seem boring. In fact, to create dramatic impact, print stories often try to draw on exciting visuals stored in the audience's memory. Visual stimuli excel in creating a sense of drama. Drama enhances learning because it attracts and holds attention by engaging the viewers' emotions and producing identification between the viewer and the story subjects.²⁰ Drama also inspires political action, for good or ill. The television pictures showing Caucasian policemen brutally beating Rodney King, an African American, enraged millions and ultimately led to large-scale rioting in Los Angeles in 1992. Words alone would be unlikely to produce an equivalent emotional impact.²¹ Seeing the hor-

20. Frederike Heuer and Daniel Reisberg, "Vivid Memories of Emotional Events: The Accuracy of Remembered Minutiae," *Memory & Cognition*, 18:496-506 (1990).

21. John Robinson and Mark Levy, *The Main Source: Learning from Television News* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1986); Sharon Lynn Sperry, "Television News as Narrative," *Understanding Television*, ed. Richard P. Adler (New York: Praeger, 1981), pp. 295-312.

rors of civil strife in Bosnia or Somalia or watching the plight of flood-stricken communities in the United States arouses empathy and spurs the will to help.²² Some researchers, however, contend that viewers caught up in the dramatic aspects of a story tend to lose sight of important complexities of the situation spelled out in the narrative.²³

Interpretations and inferences

Much learning springs from the human capacity to use reasoning powers to expand knowledge beyond observable phenomena by drawing inferences and engaging in interpretation. Inferences drawn from close-ups of human faces are particularly common and useful. Even without formal training, average observers, including children, can interpret the meanings conveyed through facial and body positions and movements in their particular culture.²⁴ Widely

22. Diana Owen, *Media Messages in American Presidential Elections* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); Samuel L. Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

23. Michael A. Milburn and Anne B. McGrail, "The Dramatic Presentation of News and Its Effects on Cognitive Complexity," *Political Psychology*, 13:613-33 (1992).

24. Paul Ekman and Harriet Oster, "Facial Expressions of Emotion," *Annual Review of Psychology*, 30:527-54 (1979); Warren Lamb and Elizabeth Watson, *Body Code: The Meaning in Movement* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979); Denis G. Sullivan and Roger D. Masters, "Happy Warriors: Leaders' Facial Displays, Viewers' Emotions and Political Support," *American Journal of Political Science*, 32:345-68 (1988); Cynthia Hoffner and Joanne Cantor, "Perceiving and Responding to Mass Media Characters," in *Responding to the*

comprehensible facial and body cues exist for mental states such as pain, happiness, sadness, curiosity, doubt, fear, or embarrassment.²⁵ When emotional states, such as anger or joy, are shown as part of the message, subsequent actions are interpreted in light of them. When candidates for political office are shown on television, an audience uses their facial expressions and body language to infer personality traits such as competence, integrity, leadership, and empathy with a fair degree of accuracy.²⁶

Despite audiences' extensive use of facial cues and body language, some scholars dismiss their value, contending that close-up views of people, including political leaders, are politically insignificant at best and, at worst, distract from truly important information. A more valid concern is the fact that inferences often are stereotypical. Everything else being equal, physically attractive people tend to be perceived as possessing more socially desirable personality traits than homely people do.²⁷ The

Screen: Reception and Reaction Processes, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991), pp. 63-101.

25. Paul Ekman, ed., *Emotion in the Human Face*, 2d ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

26. Larry M. Bartels, "Messages Received: The Political Impact of Media Exposure," *American Political Science Review*, 87:267-85 (1993); David J. Schneider, Albert H. Hastorf, and Phoebe C. Ellsworth, *Person Perception* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Sullivan and Masters, "Happy Warriors"; idem, "Non-verbal Behavior, Emotions, and Democratic Leadership," in *Reconsidering the Democratic Public*, ed. George Marcus and Russell Hanson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), pp. 307-32.

27. Hoffner and Cantor, "Perceiving and Responding."

quality, styliness, and cleanliness of clothing is routinely interpreted as a reflection of lifestyle. Character is also inferred from the activities in which an individual engages on screen. Kissing babies presumably is the mark of a caring, empathetic person, while kicking an animal reveals insensitivity.

HOW ADEQUATE ARE AUDIOVISUAL NEWS MESSAGES?

Let us turn now to the audiovisual information content of current television news. Television's detractors have argued that the visual components of the story are trivial, adding very little to the substantive content. In particular, they argue that audiovisual rhetoric carries little political meaning. They are wrong.

Substance versus trivia

Analysis of their visual content shows that pictures do enhance the story line and add new information. My research shows that approximately two-thirds of the audiovisuals in average newscasts amplify the verbal information or add completely new information. Only one-third correspond directly to the verbal text, adding nothing new.²⁸

If not redundant with the verbal content of the news story, do the audiovisuals duplicate what viewers already know from images stored in memory? It would be reasonable to expect a "yes" answer because television video crews use audiovisual rhetoric in stereotypical ways to con-

28. Graber, "What You See Is What You Get."

vey familiar meanings.²⁹ Emaciated babies with bloated bellies and withered arms and legs remain the common symbol for starvation. Moving tanks or gun-toting foot soldiers epitomize wars. The destruction of a bridge in war-torn Bosnia may show the actual bridge—an icon—or vehicles piling up at water's edge where a road breaks off—an index. Or the cameras may depict a road sign that is a symbol for an impassable highway. Repetition of a limited vocabulary of audiovisual clichés ensures that audiences will be able to grasp the meanings quickly and accurately. Why should audiences not respond to such repetitive symbols with the dismissive comment made famous by former vice-president Spiro Agnew, "If you have seen one slum, you have seen them all?" Why take a second look?

The answer, of course, is that there are sufficient differences to make a second look worthwhile. If one is willing to concede that showing tanks in Moscow's Red Square during an uprising is dissimilar enough from corresponding scenes in Beijing's Tiananmen Square to call it a new visual message, then television news audiovisuals contain substantial amounts of new, often unfamiliar information. Audience studies indicate that viewers regard such scenes as new and readily distinguish them from previous depictions of similar events. If one interprets novelty in this broader sense, fully 59 percent of audiovisual themes are not redundant.

29. Teun van Dijk, *News as Discourse* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1988); Doris A. Graber, *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide*, 2d ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), pp. 50-77.

Political effects

Joshua Meyrowitz has pointed out the democratizing impact of political television.³⁰ By showing close-ups focusing on personal appearances, body language, and indices of emotions, audiovisuals demystify world leaders. Their personal and emotional dimensions may become so paramount that these obscure other elements of their character and professional performance. Besides permitting ordinary people to know about places and events beyond direct observation, television also allows them to vicariously experience these places and events. Public spaces are transported into the living rooms of average people, obliterating barriers of distance and time.

Television also allows various political groups and leaders to gain direct access to average Americans in ways that come close to personal contact. Interest groups and their leaders use their appearances on television to reach out to potentially sympathetic audiences. Television thus changes the way in which politics is conducted and the way in which it is perceived. This is particularly true for election campaigns. Planning and timing campaign events revolve largely around efforts to gain favorable audiovisual exposure.

The sense of actual participation in events that television conveys to viewers encourages them to reduce

30. Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); idem, "Medium Theory," in *Communication Theory Today*, ed. David Crowley and David Mitchell (New York: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 50-77.

their reliance on guidance by experts when it comes to election and policy choices. In fact, television news often alerts average people and the political leadership to policy issues at the same time. In this manner, television becomes a great equalizer. People feel that they have seen for themselves what is happening, permitting them to make decisions. Yet, like the prisoners in Plato's cave, they may have only seen the shadows of events, and distorted shadows at that.³¹ The claim that the shadows are distorted is common among European scholars who condemn television news messages as tools of power elites who wish to perpetuate their control over ordinary people.³²

Built-in barriers to learning

Given all its positive features, why has television been derided as a

31. Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); James F. Larson and Heung-Soo Park, *Global Television and the Politics of the Seoul Olympics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

32. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: American Library, 1964); Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967); Edmund Carpenter, *Oh! What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!* (New York: Bantam, 1973); Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), pp. 128-38; Sol Worth, *Studying Visual Communication* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); George Gerbner et al., "Living with Television: The Dynamics of the Cultivation Process," in *Perspectives on Media Effects*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dorf Zillmann (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986); Mike Budd, Robert Entman, and Clay Steinman, "The Affirmative Character of U.S. Cultural Studies Critique

source of political information, and why do audiences remember so little of the information available in televised news?³³ Content and format share the major blame. When it comes to substantive political content, the brevity of most political newscasts makes it impossible to present much political information overall and militates against telling stories in depth. Television news and advertisements, the genres that have received the most scholarly attention, are little more than headline services. In the case of advertisements, moreover, the information may be tainted by efforts to skew the argument to benefit the advertisers. Audiovisual stories are also berated for problems encountered in dealing with abstract ideas that are not easily conveyed visually.

The method of presentation of political stories on television generally is not conducive to learning. The producers of network evening news programs must structure the presentation to fit into a rigid time format, with interruptions for commercial messages timed precisely. Typical television newscasts therefore present most information in unconnected, decontextualized snippets, often with insufficient intervening time for reflection. Beyond a general grouping of domestic and international events, there is little order in the way the materials are sequenced. No wonder

Studies in Mass Communication, 7:169-84 (1990).

33. Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, "The Public's Knowledge of Politics," in *Public Opinion, the Press, and Public Policy*, ed. J. David Kennamer (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), pp. 19-40; Robinson and Levy, *Main Source*.

that one observer concluded, "For the five million hours of programming broadcast annually, to an audience of 250 million people viewing several hours daily, the amount of learning is undeniably minuscule."³⁴

Deception potential

The fact that audiovisuals are uniquely successful in creating a sense of reality and a sense of actually witnessing an event makes them potent tools for manipulating media audiences. Media scholar Roderick Hart charges that television pictures, which bring the centers of power into America's living rooms, are seducing Americans into the false belief that they are sharing power when, in fact, passive television viewing saps their will to engage in political action. Ultimately, Hart claims, such illusory beliefs lead to disenchantment and cynicism.³⁵

Myth-laden images and clichés such as the American flag, the White House, or the Statue of Liberty can be used as condensation symbols to evoke emotions and entice audiences to associate these symbols consciously or subliminally with particular individuals and their causes. Images and events from different times and places can be juxtaposed with one another to leave favorable or unfavorable impressions with viewers. "The themes, which reflect American values such as work, family, patriotism, and defense, are linked through

34. Jib Fowles, *Why Viewers Watch: A Reappraisal of Television's Effects*, rev. ed. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992), p. 107.

35. Roderick P. Hart, *How Television Charms the Modern Voter* (New York: Oxford

ried out by Kurt and Gladys Lang. The Langs filmed a parade honoring General Douglas MacArthur in Chicago in 1951 in order to compare the record of the full event with subsequent television coverage.⁴¹ They stationed observers along the parade route who reported fairly small crowds and limited enthusiasm for the general, who had recently been relieved of his duties by President Truman. By contrast, the television version of the event, relying on selected audiovisuals, presented the parade as a triumphal march. MacArthur looked like a celebrated hero, welcomed by enthusiastic crowds. The Langs concluded that the story had been structured to make it dramatic and crowd pleasing. Each of the pictures was accurate, but the story as a whole was not.

Are viewers of television news deceived by what they see on the screen? Sometimes they are. Most viewers, however, are used to political hype and are sophisticated enough to discount it when it appears under familiar circumstances, such as in election campaigns. Politicians may design their messages to be manipulative and deceptive, but that does not mean that people are necessarily fooled.⁴² In fact, there is a general consensus that it is far more difficult, in the long run, to keep up false impressions in front of the un-

41. Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, "The Unique Perspective of Television and Its Effects: A Pilot Study," *American Sociological Review*, 18:3-12 (1953).

42. Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of American Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

relenting gaze of cameras than to fool audiences by words alone.⁴³

RESTRUCTURING TELEVISION NEWS CONTENT

Many of the current weaknesses of television as an information provider could be at least partially alleviated by making newscasts more substantive and embedding them into a richer context, as is done in many documentaries. Audiences absorb and retain more when the news becomes a nuanced story rather than a data-packed report. To be user-friendly, news also should be more precisely tailored to the needs of specific audiences. Currently, network political telecasts are designed to attract mass audiences so that ratings and profits are high. Consequently, audiences are diverse, and customized formatting is impossible.

Television news also suffers from being produced under a "theory of anticomunication, which abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction."⁴⁴ Television journalists use pictures mostly to support and embellish the verbal report, which carries the gist of the story; "reports tend to be dominated by talk about the event rather than images of the event. Pictures are corroborating 'representative' images, rather than visual 'documentaries' of ongoing activity."⁴⁵ They provide visual

43. Jib Fowles, *Why Viewers Watch: A Reappraisal of Television's Effects*, rev. ed. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992).

44. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 163.

45. Griffin, "Looking at TV News."

montage rather than the linear logic of formal argument."³⁶ Additionally, digital videotape technology has now made it easy to fabricate events entirely or present them in versions that diverge widely from the actual occurrence.³⁷

The process of news production, by its very nature, leads to distortion.³⁸ Visual imagery "unavoidably alters the spatial and temporal dimensions of reality, creating mediated versions of people, places and events that are fundamentally different from unmediated experience."³⁹ When cameras are in place, people routinely change their body language and behavior.⁴⁰

The classic study to demonstrate the distortions that come from normal news editing practices was car-

36. Joanne Morreale, "The Political Campaign Film: Epideictic Rhetoric in a Documentary Frame," in *Television and Political Advertising: Signs, Codes, and Images*, ed. Frank Biocca (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991), 2:191; Kathleen H. Jamieson and Kathryn Kohrs Campbell, *The Interplay of Influence: Mass Media and Their Publics in News Advertising*, *Politics*, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988).

37. Don E. Tomlinson, *Computer Manipulation and Creation of Images and Sounds: Assessing the Impact* (Washington, DC: Annenberg Washington Program, 1993).

38. Greg Philo, *Seeing and Believing: The Influence of Television* (London: Routledge, 1990); Wolfgang Donsbach, Hans-Bernd Brosius, and Axel Mattenklott, "How Unique Is the Perspective of Television? A Field Experiment on the Perception of a Campaign Event by Participants and Television Viewers," *Political Communication*, 10:37-53 (1993).

39. Michael Griffin, "Looking at TV News: Strategies for Research," *Communication*, 13:127 (1992).

40. Hans-Martin Kepplinger, "The Impact of Presentation Techniques: Theoretical Aspects and Empirical Findings," in *Television*

backdrops for the verbal story; the shots used are often little more than highly condensed symbolizations of the events that they are intended to illustrate. One starving child, one collapsed house, or one applause scene in a campaign rally symbolizes the entire event. Rarely are other vistas included that could lend balance to such symbols, such as showing parts of the community that are unscathed by disaster or varied audience reactions during a rally. The memorable views that are offered may well be the truth, but they usually are only a tiny slice of the evidence that needs airing.

To transform televised newscasts into material that provides citizens with richer political insights, all aspects of audiovisual transmission must be improved, including the manner of presentation, the framing that puts content into perspective, and the content, which should be geared to the tasks that citizens actually perform in contemporary democratic societies. Such reforms are essential because televised news now bears the main burden of keeping ordinary Americans abreast of their political world.

Unfortunately, major controversies remain unresolved about the breadth, depth, and even the focus of

knowledge that best equips ordinary Americans for performing the duties of citizenship. The news surfeits with factual accounts, full of details and numbers that not only have little meaning for average people but also often detract from the visual experiences. America's mass media provide an enormous amount of political information, while the audience's capacity and time to process it are limited. Audiovisual messages offer the best hope for mitigating the problem because they expeditiously convey usable information to average people. Additionally, they can simulate real life, allowing viewers to reap some of the learning benefits that ordinarily flow only from direct experiences.

In the past, our society has designated printed messages as the primary medium for conveying sophisticated information. To be literate has meant to be able to learn and communicate via the written word. The notion of building knowledge and achieving wisdom through audiovisual literacy has been an unfamiliar concept. Considering the unique capability of audiovisuals to inform average people, the time is ripe for changing that badly outdated view of human learning.

Bad News, Bad Governance

By THOMAS E. PATTERSON

ABSTRACT. There has been a quiet revolution in news reporting during the past few decades. The traditional descriptive style of reporting has given way to an interpretive style that empowers journalists by giving them more control over content. One consequence is a form of news coverage that focuses on the negative aspects of politics. This development contributes to the public's dissatisfaction with its political leaders and institutions and makes it more difficult for officials to govern effectively. The news media's version of reality is exceedingly narrow and cannot be justified by either the journalists' knowledge of political relationships or their position in the political system. The problem would be lessened by a model of reporting that subordinates the voice of the journalist and aims for a more balanced portrayal of the workings of the political system.

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