

More than just images: the whole picture

News in the multi-channel universe

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From the very beginning of Norwegian television all national transmissions have been the responsibility of one single, publicly owned, broadcasting company – the NRK. But things are not the way they were. As we approach the turn of the century, one of the last public service monopolies in the world is coming to an end.

According to a bill passed by the Norwegian Parliament in 1990, a second national channel will be established in the fall of 1992. The new channel, TV2, will be a public institution, subject to the same kind of general regulation as the old monopoly, but unlike the NRK it will be allowed to carry commercials, and the consequences in terms of day-to-day programming policy are expected to be similar to those to be seen in the recently established second Danish national channel: the Norwegian TV2 will presumably concentrate its resources on the production of entertainment, sports, and news programmes, and its general output will be much less diversified than that of the NRK.

The days of the NRK monopoly are numbered: it has been crumbling for years, as the general deregulation of European television has also reached Norway. Inside the country, experiments with various forms of community television have led to the establishment of a number of smaller local stations in recent years. The most popular ones follow the pattern of international channels: they carry commercials and their output consists mainly of game shows, crime series, soaps, and sit-coms. Although this kind of programme policy is inconsistent with the terms of the original experiment, no decisive legal steps have as yet been taken to stop these stations.

From the outside, the NRK monopoly has been broken by

overspill from neighbouring Scandinavian public-service channels: in various regions of the country viewers have for decades been able to receive Swedish, and in some cases even Danish television. But more importantly, the number of households connected to cable networks increased dramatically during the 1980s, as did the number of privately owned satellite dishes.

At the end of the 1980s 27 per cent of the Norwegian population had access to non-Norwegian transmissions, and the figure is growing rapidly: according to an official survey, conducted by the NRK research unit in the Spring of 1991, the so-called Norwegian 'multi-channel universe' consists of 1,476,000 viewers, or approximately 40 per cent of the total population.

Most viewers who belong to this 'multi-channel universe' have access to Sweden's two public-service channels (Kanal 1 and TV2), one Swedish commercial channel (TV4), one Scandinavian commercial channel (TV3), and a Norwegian commercial channel (TVNorge – a 'local' Oslo-based channel whose programmes are transmitted to various other parts of the country as well). To these options can be added a selection of (or in the case of viewers owning satellite dishes: the whole range of) international channels like SKY, SKY News, SUPER, MTV, CNN, BBC Europe, TV5 Europe, RTL Plus, SAT1, and 3SAT.

CHOICE IN THE MULTI-CHANNEL UNIVERSE

Thus, access to a multitude of international TV channels has become an everyday phenomenon for large groups of Norwegian viewers – as it is for viewers all over Europe. For a fairly large section of the Norwegian population television has finally become what critics of the NRK have demanded for several years: a question of choice.

Old viewing habits are, however, hard to break: as indicated by a number of recent surveys, most viewers in the 'multi-channel universe' still list the NRK as their first priority. First and foremost they use the new choice to increase their daily supply of entertainment, fiction, and sports programmes: whenever the NRK is fulfilling its public-service obligations by screening programmes intended for special-interest groups, they wander off to other, more promising, pastures. And even when doing so, these Norwegian viewers seldom stray very far from home: after NRK their most common choices are TV3 and TVNorge, followed by

the two Swedish public-service channels. In other words, using the remote control, these viewers create their own, individual alternative to NRK, a kind of imaginary Scandinavian 'TV2' with a fixed menu consisting of a few popular types of programmes.

As far as the choice of *news programmes* is concerned, there is another consistent pattern. In this field viewers inhabiting the 'multi-channel universe' react like all other Norwegian viewers: they prefer to watch the daily news on NRK – just as viewers in the other Scandinavian countries stick to the news programmes transmitted by *their* national public-service channels.

The Scandinavian viewers' loyalty towards these programmes is not hard to understand. Unlike most of the other news services in the multi-channel universe, the national programmes are conducted in the viewers' native language, they give extensive coverage to national and even local events and issues which directly affect the social situation of the audience, and in most cases they also present and discuss major international events from a 'local' or 'national' point of view.

On the other hand the viewers' behaviour in this area is not totally unaffected by the possibilities offered by the recent expansion of the television universe. While news programmes in most international multi-channel environments are transmitted at regular intervals throughout the day – starting with extended breakfast news followed by shorter news updates each hour during daytime, and so forth – the Scandinavian channels have only recently begun to adjust themselves to this pattern, and the output is still quite limited, normally consisting of three daily news programmes: a short one in the late afternoon, a main programme in prime time, and another short one in the late evening. The differences in scheduling and extent are some of the reasons why the news coverage on various international channels has begun to attract the attention of some Scandinavian viewers, especially the younger ones.

This tendency is particularly evident in times of major international crises, as witnessed by the way in which Norwegian viewers reacted to the events in the Persian Gulf region in the early months of 1991. Many of the viewers in the multi-channel universe got into the habit of tuning in to CNN or SKY News several times during the day for quick 'updates', and even those who chose to stick with the Scandinavian commercial channels got an impression of how these international twenty-four-hour

news services operate: TV3 replaced its own, very short, news programmes with continuous transmissions of SKY News before and after normal transmission hours, while TVNorge and a number of affiliated local stations chose to transmit the CNN service at various times during the day.

'More than just images: it's the whole picture', promises one CNN slogan. Norwegian newcomers to the multi-channel universe use the international twenty-four-hour news services not as an alternative but as a supplement to the information supplied by their own national news programmes, as a means of getting, if not 'the whole picture', then at least a 'fuller picture'. Whether CNN or SKY News actually provides the viewers with 'more than just images' is an open question. But whatever the answer, at least the viewers get a new *experience* and a new perspective on the news genre. They discover that there are in fact other ways of organising and presenting the news than the one chosen by their national public-service television.

NORWEGIAN PUBLIC-SERVICE NEWS VERSUS CNN

It is almost 7.30 p.m. TV sets all over Norway are turned on. On the blue screen there is a clock, a logo showing that the sets are tuned in on NRK, and a text stating that the programme starting at 7.30 is *Dagrevyen*, the prime-time news. Precisely five seconds before 7.30 an energetic voice is heard saying: 'Dette er NRK. Klokken er 19.30. Vi får nyheter' – i.e. 'This is the NRK. The time is 7.30. Now we shall have the news.' Then follows the familiar title sequence accompanied by a brisk tune. And, finally, the real programme starts.

The formula is well known. National news programmes all over the world are introduced in the same way: a screen message states the name of the channel, the title of the news programme, the time – and is then followed by a short sequence in which these few initial bits of information are repeated in images, spoken words, and music.

In spite of all repetitions such introductory sequences are in no way superfluous. The music and the spoken messages have the quite practical function of calling absent viewers back to the TV set for the evening's main news programme. But first and foremost such sequences serve as a kind of ritual punctuation mark: establishing a brief break in the television schedule, they

emphasise the transition from one type of programme to another, and they prepare the viewers for the next programme – which, in turn, ends half an hour later with a shorter, similar sequence.

Viewers who choose to watch the news on a channel like CNN have a quite different experience. The CNN news does not 'begin' in any sense of the word, but is always there, twenty-four hours a day, regardless of whether the viewers are watching or not. The viewers are always breaking into the programme, so to speak, and on entry they usually find themselves *in medias res*, in that they are immediately thrown into the middle of a report, a series of headlines, or a sequence of commercials and trailers for coming events.

Although there is no formal, introductory sequence to 'open up' the CNN programme, there are various other types of 'guidance' at work. Normally a small logo in the corner of the screen will tell the viewers that they are tuned in to this particular channel, and at irregular intervals the continuous sequence of 'headlines' and news reports will be broken by short promos and trailers. To this should be added that the programme is constantly being interrupted by the anchorpersons, who in statements directly addressed to the viewers, stress the name of the channel, informing them what particular part of the total programme they are watching at the moment, and which parts will follow next.

Thus, compared to the practice of the national news programmes, the CNN guidance takes place 'inside' the programme, so to speak, and it has a different function: the intention is not to guide the viewers 'into' the programme but to help them find their bearings 'in' the programme. And the anchorperson's recurrent meta-statements also have another important function: like the promos and the trailers they are part of a constant negotiation between channel and audience, a negotiation aimed at persuading the viewers to *stay* with this particular channel.

The NRK daily news and the news provided by CNN represent two extremes in the present Norwegian multi-channel universe, two variations of one and the same television genre, an 'old' form versus a 'modern' one: on the one hand a traditional, and quite 'formal', national news programme produced by a public-service institution; on the other a relaxed, informal, continuous twenty-four-hour news service produced by a commercial, international media corporation.

To these differences could be added Raymond Williams' well-known dichotomy, *item* versus *flow*: the Norwegian news programme is constructed and presented as a self-contained entity, as an 'item', marked and separated from other major elements on the schedule of the national public-service channel. Like many of the other elements, this particular item consists of a series of smaller segments, but, in contrast to the general tendency in international television, these segments are highly organised, and appear in a predetermined sequence according to a fixed compositional pattern: 'headlines' are followed by 'stories', which in turn may be the subject of 'reports' and 'commentaries'; after the 'hard' news comes the 'soft' news; and everything is rounded off by the weather report.

The CNN programme, on the other hand, is an example of the never-ending 'flow' characteristic of most modern international commercial television systems. Most of the time, short segments, usually no more than two minutes long, follow after each other – 'headlines', 'updates', 'reports', and 'interviews' are mixed with commercials, promos, and trailers for coming attractions.

The immediate experience of the CNN flow is that of a fairly casual juxtaposition of interchangeable elements, but as new viewers are getting used to the format they discover that the various types of segments actually appear at fairly regular intervals in a relatively permanent order, and that even a few longer, more traditionally organised 'feature programmes' and special-interest 'magazines' are inserted into the flow from time to time. So, there is, after all, some kind of internal structure at work in the continuous flow, but it is fairly loose – merely a minimal, sketchy framework from which the actual programme can deviate at will. Furthermore, the importance and relevance of each flow segment is apparently constantly reconsidered during the broadcast: updates are suddenly interrupted by commercials, just as commercials and trailers are broken off by new updates, and so on.

MODES OF ADDRESS

The difference in formal organisation between the two types of news programmes discussed above is in itself an indication of some further differences, for instance differences with regard to general *mode of address* and presupposed *viewer position*. Obviously, the NRK programme is aimed at a stable position, at a viewer who is supposed to follow the whole sequence of segments, a viewer who has decided beforehand to watch a particular item appearing in a fixed time-slot on a fixed schedule; while, correspondingly, the implicit CNN-viewer is a person who is browsing through the channels, and who therefore has to be caught in passing, tempted to stay on.

Some further differences at this level may be explored by returning to the introductory sequence of the NRK daily news and more specifically to the spoken words: 'This is the NRK. Now we shall have the news.'

The statement is, undeniably, rather absurd – the NRK is, after all, still the only national television channel in Norway, and *Dagsrevyen* is one of the most popular of all its programmes: every day approximately 50 per cent of the potential Norwegian audience chooses to watch it – so there is really no need to stress either the channel identity or the nature of the programme to be shown.

However, the spoken statement has another, much more important, function: 'This is NRK' – certainly, but the word 'this' not only refers to the channel ('You are watching the NRK'), but is also a reflexive sign referring to the very voice that makes the statement: 'This [the voice you hear] is the NRK.' It is the institution itself which addresses its audience, or more precisely, this incorporeal voice speaks 'on behalf of' the institution, and 'represents' an immaterial, institutional 'subject' which is in fact unable to address the audience in any other way than in the form of a 'representation'.

With the phrase 'Vi får nyheter' – meaning something like 'Now we shall have the news' – the voice includes the viewers in the very institution it represents, or in other words, enacts a merging of the institution and the national community, and at the very same time delegates the institutional authority to somebody else, to yet another 'representation': for the next half hour 'we', the institution and the nation, will listen to somebody else,

to 'our' people in the newsroom – who from now on, acting on 'our' behalf, will tell 'us' all 'we' need to know about the state of affairs in the world today.

According to traditional public-service ideology, news transmissions are one of the core functions of institutions like the NRK: in order to participate in the democratic decision process, citizens should have access to all relevant information on all crucial events affecting their social life and, moreover, this information should be presented in an objective, impartial, and fair manner. However, the very authority and reliability of such institutions are always contested. There is always the possibility that some groups of viewers might react with suspicion and doubt, that they will question the way in which the news has been selected and presented, thereby questioning the independence and impartiality of the institution as a whole. While the NRK as an institution is based on the idea of a unified and homogeneous national audience, there is always the risk that its actual audience will fall apart and divide itself along the lines of social conflicts existing within the national community.

Therefore, the contract between the institution and the national audience must be ritually renewed each day, the viewers must be addressed as citizens, and the institutional subject must guarantee that the anchorperson and the reporters appearing on the screen are its and the nation's legitimate representatives.

When this is done, when the word has been ritually passed on from the institutional voice to the anchorperson, the real programme can begin: after having read the 'headlines' and greeted the audience with a friendly 'Good evening', the anchorperson passes the word on again to various reporters and commentators. Like these other narrators the anchorperson works at the centre of the national institution, but they are also *the narrative centre* of the programme. Looking at the world from an Olympian point of view, the anchorperson selects and introduces the stories which are in turn being told by the other narrators; from time to time the anchorperson reappears in order to close the stories and link them to new ones until the moment comes when it is time to say: 'That is all for tonight. Goodbye!'

If one makes a distinction between the content of a news narrative and the way in which it is narrated, i.e. between news as 'story' and news as 'discourse', the formal structure in the Norwegian news programme can be described as follows. In

terms of content the programme is a mere sequence of stories about the state of the world at the moment, but these stories are told by different narrators, mediated through different discourses which are in turn organised in a hierarchical structure. Within any single discourse other discourses may be inserted, for example in the form of 'quotations' from press statements, news conferences, interviews, and so on, but, more importantly, all discourses at this level are parts of the anchorperson's overarching discourse. Regardless of their internal relations, they are always in the last instance presented as 'quotations', subsumed and mediated by one single 'master discourse'.

The individual stories told during a given news programme are usually 'unfinished' reports on events in progress, and in many cases they are not related to each other at the level of content; but they always appear within one single closed and coherent discourse, mediated by one single narrational subject.

Watching the national news programme is a way of keeping oneself informed about the present state of the world, but for the NRK viewers it is also, and perhaps primarily, a way of participating in a daily ritual through which they reaffirm their position as members of the national community.

The relationship between viewers and a news programme like CNN News is not established by means of a ritual contract through which each individual viewer is subsumed under a national community. The CNN audience consists of individuals connected by the fact that they are television viewers tuned in to this particular channel, and as pointed out above, their relationship to the channel is subject to constant negotiation. Correspondingly, the anchorpersons occupy a different position from those of the NRK programme.

From one point of view, the CNN anchorpersons perform the same functions as their NRK counterparts. They are the central narrators in the programme, in charge of the general distribution of news stories within the never-ending flow; like their NRK colleagues they are constantly passing the word on, opening and closing other narrators' discourses, and so on. There is thus an evident narrational centre in the CNN flow, but this centre differs from the one described above in some important respects.

While the CNN anchorpersons clearly appear as the formal representatives of the channel, they are not endowed with any final institutional authority and consequently their discourse is

different from the NRK 'master-discourse'. They are, like all other narrators in the flow, constantly being overruled: their discourse is broken off by commercials or by new, more interesting, stories which are inserted into the flow from a position outside their realm. Apparently most major narrational decisions are taken elsewhere, in another centre which is not directly represented in the narrative.

To sum up: although the NRK news programme consists of many different stories it is, at the level of discourse, presented as a self-contained item, as a 'work', and, more precisely, as a fairly traditional 'work': it is a highly organised narrative, told from a central Olympian position by a 'strong' narrator in complete control of the story universe. The CNN programme represents another way of telling: it is a continuous flow of loosely connected stories, mediated through a series of decentred discourses.

If we leave the level of narration for a moment and look at the way in which the two channels more concretely handle the available news material, some further differences immediately spring to mind, differences related to the institutional organisation of the channels in question and to their position within the total media environment.

With the appearance of channels like CNN and SKY News – channels operating in a competitive multi-channel environment and specialising in continuous, twenty-four-hour news coverage – there has been a pronounced shift of emphasis in the way in which 'news' is conceptualised. To bring the audience 'up-to-date' on recent events is certainly a major ambition of any news service, but the new channels' fierce competition for audience shares seems to have made the practice of 'updating' more or less synonymous with 'news'. This is not to say that 'overviews', 'analyses', presentations of 'background material', and so forth are totally absent from the never-ending flow, but, compared to the practice of the national news services, the position of these more traditional, journalistic sub-genres is clearly weakened in favour of the myopic 'updates', with their concentration on minimal alterations and developments.

Another equally significant feature is the fact that the twenty-four-hour news services compete not only with each other but with the total number of programmes available within the multi-channel environment at any given time. In order to catch the

attention of distracted viewers zapping their way across the channels, the news flow must first of all be *entertaining*: consequently, special priority is given to stories with strong *visual* and/or *emotional* qualities. 'Raw', *live* transmissions of spectacular events are preferred to traditional, edited reports. Much energy is invested in producing *scoops*, in being the first to bring striking pictures from major events.

The practice of continual updating, the emphasis put upon live coverage, the search for images with strong emotional impact – all these features affect the more general, formal organisation of the flow. One example is the position of the anchorperson, discussed above.

While the anchorperson in a traditional national news programme addresses the viewers from a superior, controlled position, the CNN anchorperson operates from a position much closer to the audience, still representing the news service in question, but also just another viewer, a person who, like the viewers in front of the screen, attentively watches the images as they are transmitted live from the field.

At the lower levels of the narrational hierarchy, one important consequence is the development of a new relationship between the reporter's discourse and the accompanying images. While the verbal summary, the spoken story illustrated by available visual material, is still the preferred form in traditional news coverage, the CNN reporter's discourse is in many cases mere *interpretations of images*, commentaries subordinated to the demands of the visual material.

The twenty-four-hour news services are in constant need of material. And since there are usually a very limited number of spectacular, visually entertaining events in progress at any given time, 'updating' means *repetition*, as the same stories are told over and over again with only minor alterations. Another solution to this problem is the use of *padding*. The regular interruptions of news flow by commercials, trailers, promos, and the like are examples of this practice, as are the extensive live transmissions from political press conferences, committee hearings, and so on: such transmissions are inexpensive, they can be used to fill a substantial amount of programme time, and they can be interrupted at will the moment more interesting material is received from the crews in the field.

Even in this case the narrational coherence of the news pro-

gramme is affected. The viewers are given direct access to the 'raw' material of the situation, and are thereby placed in a position similar to that of the reporters present in conference room, i.e. they are confronted with an unstructured mass of information and statements.

SIMILARITY AMIDST DIFFERENCE

During the preceding discussion, I focused on a series of formal differences between two types of news programmes currently available to Norwegian viewers in the multi-channel universe. But there are also some evident similarities to be taken into consideration.

Viewers with access to many television channels soon discover that choice in the field of entertainment and fiction is really a choice between various versions of the same, between slightly different variations of familiar international genres and formulas. Viewers who in the days of the Gulf War returned to their national news programmes after having watched the updates on channels like CNN or SKY News made a similar discovery. Most of the main stories about the war were identical from channel to channel, but this was only what could be expected in a situation of this kind. More surprising was the discovery that the channels in most cases also used the same *visual material*.

In an interview with *Le Monde* (10 February 1991), the French media researcher Marc Ferro used this specific experience as a point of departure for a more general statement concerning the production of television news: 'everyone sees the same pictures. Instead of several national newsreels putting out their own material simultaneously, there is now something like a supra-national picture-producing system.'

As a description of contemporary news production this statement is not really to the point. It could at least be argued with some justification that there was nothing absolutely new about the way in which the events in the Gulf were covered by the various international and national news services. In the interview Marc Ferro is implicitly referring to the traditional production of cinema newsreels, but television news has from the very beginning been organised in a quite different way. 'National' production of visual material on major international events has never played any significant role in this area: national news institutions

all over Europe have for several decades been using the services provided by 'a supranational picture-producing system' - a system consisting of the Eurovision news pool and a few major Anglo-American distributors like Visnews and WTN. What viewers usually experience as specific 'national' coverages of international events is in the majority of cases merely national reports read to the accompaniment of images produced elsewhere.

The coverage of the Gulf War may serve as an example of how international news has been produced and distributed for decades. But from the perspective of viewers like the Norwegian newcomers to the multi-channel universe, it was *experienced* as an indication of a new situation - because for such viewers the Gulf War represented the first major opportunity to compare public-service news with other forms of news presentation.

One result of this was a heated public debate in Norwegian newspapers concerning the NRK's position. From one point of view this debate was a mere repetition of those debates that occur at regular intervals wherever television news is organised within the framework of a public-service monopoly: once again the critics accused the NRK of being biased, of uncritically subscribing to Western points of view, and so on.

This is not the place to discuss whether this critique was justified or not. In the present context another aspect of the debate is more interesting, i.e. the fact that much of the critique was based on comparisons between the NRK and the international news services and was focused on the NRK's use of international *visual material*. The fact that NRK reporters were seen commenting on the same images which many of the viewers had seen several times during the day on other channels was interpreted as lack of institutional autonomy and authority. And some critics further interpreted this practice as an indication of a general movement on the part of the NRK news in terms of programme structure, a movement towards the model of the international news services.

The NRK's news coverage is dependent on the way in which the general international news system is structured, and because of the evident changes in the immediate environment, the institution is trying to adjust its news service to the new situation. But although the NRK news uses the same visual material as most other news services in the world, and although some of its news transmissions during the Gulf War tended towards being

mere updates, there are still differences in the way in which this material is presented and interpreted.

In the concluding section I shall discuss some of these differences on the basis of a few examples.

COUNTDOWN TO GULF WAR: NRK VERSUS CNN

On 10 January 1991 the news services still talk about a 'crisis' in the Gulf and everybody hopes that a war can be prevented. It is one of the days 'in between', a day with no spectacular events. The day before, US Secretary of State James Baker has had unsuccessful talks with his Iraqi counterpart, Tariq Aziz, in Geneva. The UN deadline is still five days ahead.

The main stories on all major news programmes are (i) the debate in the US Congress on legislative approval for using US military force in the Gulf; (ii) an improvised press conference at Geneva airport with James Baker before his journey to Saudi Arabia; (iii) discussions about the kind of peace initiative UN Secretary Perez de Cuellar might suggest during his coming visit to Baghdad. Some channels added a few stories concerning various European peace initiatives.

On this day, a large part of CNN's *News Hour* from 6 to 7 p.m. CET consists of live transmission from the US Congress debate. At the beginning of the second half-hour a congressman is abruptly interrupted in mid-sentence and after a series of commercials and trailers for forthcoming programmes the anchor-man appears on the screen saying that the transmission will be resumed if interesting new developments should occur, but now it is time for a 'news update'.

The update unit lasts two minutes and consists of three segments. The newscaster starts with a summing up of the main positions presented in the Congress debate so far. In the transition from the live transmission to the news update segment the long Congress debate is being condensed into two ultra-short extracts from senators Mitchell's and Senator Warner's speeches, representing two opposed points-of-view. Next follows a clip showing James Baker entering a plane in Geneva and the information that he 'is in Saudia Arabia right now' and that he thinks there is 'still hope' for a peaceful solution to the crisis. The final clip shows UN secretary de Cuellar being interviewed by

reporters in the UN lobby while the newsreader reports de Cuellar's travel schedule for the weekend.

The news update unit is followed by another two minute-unit: a report by Charles Jaco on the 'mood' of the US troops in Saudi Arabia. While the update segments have the same formal structure as the introductory headlines in traditional news programmes, this new segment is organised like a traditional report, i.e. it consists mainly of a spoken text and a few short interviews 'illustrated' by a series of more or less relevant images.

After two minutes of commercials, trailers, and promos the Gulf section is rounded off with a six-minute interview with an English expert. And the programme continues with a weather report followed by other international news.

The Gulf crisis section of NRK's *Dagsrevyen* lasts fourteen minutes and is thus somewhat longer than the corresponding CNN section. After the headlines come three larger segments: (i) a summary of the general situation illustrated by clips from the US Congress debate, the Baker press conference, and the interview with de Cuellar; (ii) a report on the closing of the British embassy in Baghdad, illustrated by clips shown half an hour before on the BBC *Six O'Clock News*; and (iii) a report on British troops rehearsing at night in Saudi Arabia, illustrated by clips that have been shown in the CNN report and in a corresponding report on the BBC.

In the initial summary some emphasis is put on a French peace initiative, but as far as the selection of stories is concerned the most significant difference between the NRK programme and the news coverage on CNN and BBC lies in a final section in which some 'local' aspects of the crisis are discussed: the themes are the situation facing a few Norwegians in the Gulf region and the possibility of establishing an UN Peace Corps in the region with Norwegian participation.

Thus there are both similarities and differences between the news presentation on the two channels: they both have the same main stories and they both use the same or similar visual material, but while this material in the CNN version accompanies the reading of very brief headlines, it is used as illustrations of more comprehensive reports and summaries on the NRK. Thus, from a formal point of view the NRK programme is still quite different from the CNN news and much closer to a programme like the BBC *Six O'Clock News*.

This example may further be used to draw attention to some characteristic features of the visual material transmitted by all the various news services.

In the business section of the BBC's *Breakfast News* a clip from James Baker's press conference the day before is presented in order to show how the New York stock exchange reacted to the news of the failed negotiations. At the bottom of the screen a figure shows the movement of the Dow Jones index: at the start of Baker's formal statement it is showing +40, but the moment he says the word 'regrettably', it begins to drop and after a few seconds it is down to -11.

As speech-act theorists have pointed out, words are acts, and some spoken statements may lead to consequences just as dramatic and far-reaching as those of the most spectacular physical acts. In the BBC's presentation a consequence of one such statement was visualised very convincingly.

Most of the main stories on the news programmes on 10 January concerned political statements, interventions aimed at changing the situation in the Gulf, but none of them had any spectacular consequences, at least none that could be visualised in such an entertaining way as Baker's statement the day before. And this is, after all, the case with most political statements.

On such a day, when all important news stories concern various forms of political negotiations and interventions, it is quite difficult to produce visually entertaining news programmes, and even the CNN returns to the practice favoured by the national news services: the stories do not 'happen' in the images, but have to be 'told' - in spoken texts which in turn are being fairly casually 'illustrated' with whatever images are at hand - with clips showing politicians being interviewed or arriving at conference rooms, and so on. Both the twenty-four-hour services and the national news services feel the need for alternative visual material to break the monotony of talking heads - at least this seems to be the reason why most news services on 10 January spent considerable transmission time showing British Embassy employees engaged in moving their belongings into waiting cars.

In this connection, a comparison with the practice of *Aktuell*, the main news programme transmitted by one of the Swedish public-service channels, may be useful. Although the programme is clearly organised according to the model of the traditional

national news programmes, it differs in some important respects, as some examples from 10 January show.

First of all, the crisis in the Gulf has a low priority in the programme. The main story of the evening is local, and in the international news section the Gulf events are presented in a fairly short segment. Much emphasis is put upon the French peace initiative, and there are brief reports on the US Congress debate and de Cuellar's travel plans. These reports are illustrated with some of the same material used by the other channels, but the clips are much fewer and in many cases stills of leading politicians are used at points where other channels would bring in clips from interviews and similar material.

Corresponding to the low priority given to visual news presentation, there is in this programme a strong emphasis on background material relevant to the understanding of the present situation. The Swedish UN ambassador who has negotiated with the Iraqi leader during the Iraq-Iran War is interviewed and gives an evaluation of de Cuellar's possibilities for reaching a solution during his stay in Baghdad; there is a report on de Cuellar's and Saddam Hussein's personal backgrounds, and so on.

Obviously, the difference between this programme and the NRK news has to do with the fact that the Swedish programme operates within a national duopoly and that it is placed fairly late in the evening schedule: it starts at 9 o'clock and reaches its audience at a time when most of the viewers have watched the early news on the other national channel. In other words, it addresses an audience who know the major headlines of the day and are up-to-date with the latest developments, and consequently it is free to concentrate on providing the viewers with various forms of background material.

The point is, however, that as the schedules of the national Scandinavian news services are being transformed according to the international pattern, and as the number of Scandinavian viewers with access to the multi-channel universe rises, all these news services are catering for audiences similar to that of the Swedish programme.

In this situation, the most likely result is that in order to maintain the present high audience shares, the national news services will go one step further in adjusting themselves to the international pattern; that they will change even the way in which news is edited and presented, i.e. that the movement towards

more headline news, updates, visual entertainment, and so on which at the moment is only a tendency – and most pronounced in the short afternoon programmes – will be the dominant feature of the prime-time news.

Obviously, the national news services must accept that from now on they are operating in a multi-channel universe, and that an increasing number of their former loyal viewers will use the international twenty-four-hour services for updates and visual entertainment. But this new competition can be met in other ways than by transforming the national news services according to the international models and by competing with the twenty-four-hour news services in areas where they are quite clearly superior. As the Swedish programme suggests, a more reasonable solution would be to organise the national news services as *alternatives* to the other services, to meet the competition by concentrating on reports, background material, analyses, and so on, i.e. by emphasising precisely those forms of presentation which are the backbone of the traditional public-service programmes.

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