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Clinton Boddicker

University of Northern Iowa

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The Network Newscast:  
A Matter of Style, Glitz, and Hype

by Clinton Boddicker

"Journalism is not a first hand report of raw material... [it is a] report of that material after it has been stylized."

Walter Lippman

After a long day of classes, I sat down in my favorite chair to relax and turn on the television. I was just in time for the network national news. "Oh brother," I thought to myself as I saw the horribly shocking pictures of the people who had been crushed by the collapse of the Bay Bridge, "not another story about the San Francisco earthquake." Then I saw CBS anchor Dan Rather ask a victim of the earthquake what it was like directly following the disaster. The victim remarked that the scene he had encountered upon climbing out of his car had been "quite graphic" (Laufer A8). However, Rather was not satisfied with the answer; he wanted to know how graphic. "There was blood all over the road as I got out of my car in front of me [sic.]; there was a brain of a person quivering on the ground by itself. You asked, that's it," the victim responded (Laufer A8). The exchange between Rather and the earthquake victim is one example of hype or sensationalism by the news networks.

According to Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, hype means "extravagant promotion or advertising," and news is defined as "a report of recent events." Thus, as the term relates to the world of network news reporting, it means the deliberate extravagant promotion or advertising of certain events by network editors, anchors, and reporters. Throughout U.S. history there has been a certain amount of error and exaggeration in the press; it was known as yellow journalism, defined by Webster's as "ordinary news sensationally distorted." Historically, yellow journalism has been roundly repudiated by many journalists as well as by the general public. Hype, therefore, is simply yellow journalism in television news programs rather than in the traditional print media. What are the causes and types of this increasingly-discussed aspect of the news, and how does sensationalism of the news jeopardize the ability of citizens to understand the issues that really have an impact on their lives? The source of news hype, the
different kinds of hype, and the negative impact of hype on our society are topics that need to be addressed.

**Why the Networks Hype the News**

Why do the networks use sensationalism in their broadcasts? The networks employ hype and sensationalism for both economic and political reasons. First, because television news programs are given ranks in the Nielsen ratings—just like all other television programs—the financial interest of the networks and not the search for truth are at the forefront of decisions that determine which stories do and do not make the evening newscast (Nimmo and Combs 7). When one network's newscast slips dramatically behind the other two in the ratings, the networks have been known to replace formats, editors, and even anchors in order to insure that they are competitive in the market for product sponsors. Indeed, if too large a gap in the Nielsens exists between any two networks, the network that receives the smaller percentage of the market share knows that, if it does not do something to make the news more entertaining and attractive for the viewer, it will lose an even larger share of the viewing audience. Hype is also partially a result of the networks' need to compete with the cable industry. Because of the growing popularity of cable television, the networks have to make their news programming interesting enough to keep the viewer from switching to a cable channel. Journalist-turned-talk-show-host Geraldo Rivera, known for his *National Enquirer* style of reporting, recently interviewed such off-the-wall guests as waitresses at a topless doughnut shop and neo-Nazi skinheads in order to bolster his show's ratings.

Political motivations, especially the attempt of some network producers and editors to change or influence public opinion, are a second cause of the networks' hype of the news. Television newspeople are in an especially powerful position because they know a large majority of Americans get most of its news from television. The chart on the following page reveals that not only does a majority of Americans (66 percent) gets its news from television, but 55 percent think the news on television is the most believable source of news. On the other hand, newspapers, radio, and magazines rank substantially lower in both categories.
Theoretically, journalists are supposed to cover the news objectively; however, in practice, the press sometimes tries to influence public opinion. In their attempts to affect public opinion, the producers and editors of the news do not necessarily try to change the existing views of the audience. Instead of telling the audience how to think, the producers and editors have the very powerful role of agenda setting, or "deciding which issues will be given attention and which will be ignored" (Dye and Zeigler 21). The networks can help to set the agenda of American governmental policy and public opinion by simply giving one issue more coverage than others. In 1987 and 1988, for example, the media eagerly covered the issue of homelessness in America. Many television stations, as well as newspapers and magazines, ran segments and sometimes even special reports on the subject and, before long, ordinary citizens became concerned about the issue. Citizens then informed the candidates for president, Congress, and other offices of their concern. Not wanting to be "left behind" on an important issue, candidates from both parties responded to the voters by making campaign promises to help fight the homeless problem. Thus, the networks had helped to put the problem of homelessness on the national agenda.

How the Networks Hype the News

After discovering why the networks hype the news, it is also important to know how they hype the news. What are the different kinds of sensationalism in the network newscasts? One kind of hype is the pseudo event. This event is one that certain groups of individuals pre-plan in order to get media attention (Pippert 9). These events are "pseudo" because they lack spontaneity or legitimate news value. When, for example, President George Bush appeared in front of a flag-draped Iwo Jima Memorial in order to announce his proposed constitutional amendment to prohibit burning of the U.S. Flag, the pseudo event was the category of hype being employed. Rather than following normal White House procedures of simply issuing a press release, the
President used the American flag and the Iwo Jima Memorial—two cherished American icons—to portray himself as more patriotic than his critics. And the television networks gave him full coverage. Another example of the pseudo event that we see every four years are the pre-planned political love fests at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. Although it is true that the political parties themselves plan the events, the networks choose to cover them. By refusing to “just say no” to manipulation at the hands of politicians and political parties, the networks are ultimately to blame for airing pseudo events.

The second recognizable category of sensationalism is the grabber. Usually the first and most important story of the broadcast, the grabber is the kind of story that reaches out and grabs the viewer by the shirt sleeve and makes him or her watch (Diamond 14-15). Sensationalized headlines such as MAN AND WIFE SHOT IN COLD BLOOD WHILE SLEEPING, or HURRICANE DEVASTATES FLORIDA COAST LEAVING BEHIND A MULTITUDE OF DEAD BODIES are two examples of grabbers.

Often, the newscast will be preceded by a newsbreak during the commercials of an earlier program when the grabber will be outlined and the audience will be “teased” into watching the later news program (Diamond 18). The teaser, a subdivision of the grabber, is stated in such a way as to attract the viewer to the actual news program. MAN AND WIFE SHOT IN COLD BLOOD WHILE SLEEPING: FILM AT ELEVEN is an example of the teaser.

A third variety of hype is hard fluff. “Hard fluff is entertainment masquerading as news” (Dye and Zeigler 97). Even though the stories that are considered hard fluff are true, they usually affect very few people and often play on the emotions of the audience. Television news/talk shows such as 60 Minutes and Geraldo are considered hard fluff because they regularly bring to the show everyday people who have been victimized by someone or something—usually by a criminal or “the system.” One episode of Geraldo, for example, centered on the broken lives of parents whose children had been murdered. The parents complained that they had been victimized by what they called an unfair judicial system although each murderer in question was behind bars. Since each murderer had been convicted, it seemed that justice had been served and that the parents’ calls for the executions of the criminals was an attempt at revenge, not justice.

In order to sensationalize a hard fluff show, the producer often schedules a highly controversial guest to counter the opinions of the victim and to defend the system and/or criminal. The producers of the
aforementioned *Geraldo* episode accomplished this tactic by inviting a well-known legal scholar and defender of criminal rights to antagonize both the audience and the other guests by calling for fairer treatment of criminals. Some might consider this “balanced reporting.” Others might question the merit of the whole program as a topic for public consideration.

Because the fourth type of sensationalism informs the viewer about the private lives of politicians and celebrities and is “practically all entertainment and zero news,” it is known as *disco news* (Diamond 4). *Disco news* frequently revolves around such stories as corruption in government and the private escapades of government officials or celebrities; thus, *disco news* also usually involves tales of morality or lack of morality on the part of the official or celebrity. The fall of figures such as former presidential candidate Gary Hart and television evangelist Jim Bakker is a perfect example of *disco news*.

Yet another category of news sensationalism is *glitzodrama*, a term newly coined by the author of this essay. Another term for this type of sensationalism is the *re-creation or re-enactment*. This type of news uses actors to re-enact certain events of a news story (“Chung Show Blasted” T1). Often, the details of the story—usually a story of someone’s personal life—are details that are known only to the person involved in that story and not to the people writing the script; thus, the audience may be watching a *fabricated* story that is not really news at all. For example, in one episode of *Saturday Night With Connie Chung* an actor was used to portray the final thoughts and suicide of famous civil rights protester Abbie Hoffman (“Chung Show Blasted” T1). Only Mr. Hoffman could have actually known his final thoughts.

*The Final Days*, a 1989 television production focusing on the last days of the Nixon White House, is another example of *re-creation*. “The show’s dramatic climax—Richard Nixon collapsing, in tears, in front of Henry Kissinger on the carpet of the Lincoln sitting room—is fiction” (Garment A9). Each man has denied that the scene ever happened. Because of the wave of criticism raised over this type of reporting, *recreations or glitzodrama* may well be a short-lived experiment.

Another way to sensationalize the news is to report a story that has the potential for the use of “pegging,” a term that means the editor can take yesterday’s story and make it into a good story today (Dye and Zeigler 97). For instance, the crash of United Flight 232 in the summer of 1989 was the hard fact or peg of the story whereas the stories that were draped onto the peg the following day—the pilot’s account, the accounts of the passengers, and how the lives of the residents of Sioux City were changed—were the hyped stories. Although the original
story of the crash and some of the “pegged” stories were legitimate news, side stories that dragged on for weeks and months became old, strained, and uninteresting.

The seventh and final category of news hype, the overplayed human interest story, is closely related to pegging and usually depicts an average person triumphing against odds. Human interest stories directly affect only a small number of people, such as the parents or relatives of the victim; however, the victim’s story frequently affects the entire nation emotionally. For example, the story of Jessica McClure, the little girl who was trapped in a Texas well for two or three days, captured the hearts of millions of Americans. Stories that ran for one or two weeks after Jessica had been rescued were literally pumping a dry well. Thus, like pegged stories, the overplayed human interest story becomes monotonous and lacks genuine news value.

The Negative Effects of News Hyping

The hyping of the network newscasts definitely has a negative impact on our culture. Some argue correctly, however, that without television news most citizens would know absolutely nothing about what is happening on the international and national scenes. Others, such as journalist Bill Moyers, suggest that the press plays an important role as the watchdog of our leaders, and without the press, “we’re at the mercy of politicians whose sole aim is to win and those corporations whose aim is profit only” (“Illusions of News”). Thomas Jefferson once said, “No government ought to be without censors; and where the press is free none ever will” (Bohle 325). Indeed, the Founding Fathers rightly believed that the press is vital to a free and democratic society.

Although one must acknowledge these positive influences of the news, one should also note that many other experts agree that negative aspects of the news, sensationalized news in particular, divert people’s attention from reality. These experts argue that the media distorts “reality” and instead sends the viewer a never ending parade of “images” that may or may not be true (“Consuming Images”). Thus, the viewer can have no basis from the news to make sound judgments about the major issues of the day. A survey taken in 1988 which revealed that “less than 10 percent of the campaign coverage in the Presidential race dealt with issues of substance” illustrates how difficult it is for average citizens to make informed judgments about political events and politicians because they rarely have the opportunity to hear important issues being discussed (“Illusions of News”).

According to Representative David Obey of Wisconsin:
If the public is encouraged to over-simplify its view of these issues because the main source of their information does the same thing, then I think that it's very difficult to expect that the public is ever going to be in a better position to understand some of the really tough issues that a democratic society has to understand if their leaders are going to be able to lead.

("Illusions of News")

The world of advertising and profit and not the search for truth often guides what the networks put in a newscast. Thus, the networks believe that they must please the viewers by hyping the news in order to gain more advertisers. As a result of hyping, many viewers cannot differentiate between facts and glitz. The fact that we, as a society, cannot take the news at face value and instead must rely on sensational news is a sad commentary on our culture. Unless we--the consumers of the news--pressure the networks to change, our society may never be as well-informed as it should be.

Works Cited


