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Abstract

This paper analyzes the impact of television news upon political mobilization and awareness. In particular, it places a strong emphasis on the inherent inability of episodic news to form a cognitive framework through which to understand current events. The paper begins with preliminary statements on the significance of television news and describes the limits of the paper's scope. It then examines the correlation of episodic television news with political cynicism, the trivialization of news content, and the formation of a pro-establishment attitude among viewers. A greater stress is placed upon the way in which television news is presented than upon news content or on the paucity of social capital. In conclusion, an argument is made for the imposition of sound bite quotas, with the desire to counter the handicaps of the episodic medium.

KEYWORDS: Episodic, news, television, trivialization, political bias, pro-establishment, political cynicism, television medium, reporting, sound bite, post-structuralism

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Introduction

Television, as a channel for expression and public debate, is crucial to the health of a democratic state. In addition to its entertainment value, television has the capacity to distribute news, commentaries, and reports to a large cross-section of society. Moreover, television news is often said to empower voters, as it allows them to understand both the successes and the shortcomings of their government and to vote accordingly. This paper argues against this view of television news as a mobilizing agent. Though potentially a powerful tool for voter awareness, television news is handicapped less by the information which it presents than by the form through which it is presented: the current approach to television reporting itself. It is this method of reporting on particular events as they happen that fosters political cynicism, a trivialization of content, and an inherently pro-establishment attitude among viewers.

Definitions and Scope

Before the relation between television news and democratic apathy is explored, several definitions and limitations must be outlined. First, this paper differentiates between two different methods of television news reporting: episodic and thematic approaches. Episodic news is generally characterized by reports on specific occurrences, such as a bombing, the signing of a diplomatic agreement, or the passing of a new piece of legislation. Thematic news, on the other hand, is typified as an interpretative analysis of a series of events or trends. It will be argued that episodic news is inherently ineffective as an agent for political mobilization, and that more thematic news coverage is needed if democracies are to be sustained and enhanced.

Moreover, the importance of other news sources from the early 1990s until today cannot be overlooked. Even though television remains an integral medium to the news intake of most Americans, no single source is currently as dominant as television network news was during the early 1990s ("Media", 2005:41). If anything, the faithful and regular intake of television news is on the decline. In 1993, 60% of Americans watched television network news every night, while today only 34% of the American population continues this habit ("Media", 2005:42).

Finally, this paper does not adhere to a "manufacture of consent" view of television news, depicting it as the puppet of a corporate or political elite.[1] Privatized television news is compromised more by the need for advertisements, for viewers, and for higher ratings than it is by the whims of a powerful and hawkish oligarchy. Altheide's fear that governments may control the population by

episodic news, for example, may be more of an exaggerated perception than a perceptive exaggeration (1987:175).

The Significance of Televised News

Despite the increased use of the Internet as an alternative source of news communication, television continues to be a popular medium of news intake. The typical American household receives an average of twelve news broadcast stations, providing a plethora of political leanings and interests (Swanson et al., 1998:145). In 2004, 82% of Americans had watched televised news during the previous day, although that figure was 8% lower than the previous decade ("Media", 2005:44). Furthermore, the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 have greatly increased American interest in the news. In the same study, 19% of Americans surveyed claimed that they had followed the news "very closely" before the attacks occurred, whereas in the subsequent year 34% made the same claim ("Media", 2005:48). What is perhaps more interesting is the American perception of television as a trustworthy source of news communication. In 1994, 51% of Americans claimed that television was the "most believable" type of news dissemination, which was more than double the percentage of those who held newspapers in the same regard (Stanley, 1995:66). Even though these figures do not indicate that the American public places its full trust in the objectivity of television news, they do demonstrate its influence upon the general populace via its pervasive consumption.

Episodic Television News and Political Cynicism

The first area in which television news dilutes the democratic process is through the creation of political cynicism. This is especially true for the currently predominant method of episodic reportage. By virtue of the fact that news agencies must choose which actions and events they want to cover, episodic news is intrinsically selective. The result is that certain types of events may be excluded if a supposedly more prominent or important event occurs. Additionally, the speed at which episodic news is played leaves little time for the viewer to contemplate the significance of the event, for he or she is soon immersed in another story. The current format of television newscasts therefore "retards reflection and interpretation" (Altheide, 1987:174). Thus episodic news is flawed less by its content than by the very nature of its form: selective, speed driven, and conducive to confusion.

With the need to select and prioritize reported events, there is also a greater potential for political bias. The rise in popularity of Fox News among younger viewers coincides with its more opinionated approach, which is more engaging than the inclusive outlook of left-leaning channels towards minority groups and feminists (Mindich, 2005:55). In order to secure younger viewers, objectivity must be compromised.

Even if television news agencies claim to adhere to some code of objectivity, viewers remain extremely skeptical. One of the themes of the PEW Research Center's 2005 Trends Report was the difference between the preferred source of news information for both Republicans and Democrats. According to the study, 35% of Republicans and only 21% of Democrats watch Fox News ("Media", 2005:43). However, only 29% of Republicans believe "all or most" of Fox News' reportage to be accurate, while 45% of Democrats believe "all or most" of CNN's claims, despite the fact that these two cable news stations are the most watched by Republicans and Democrats respectively ("Media", 2005:43). Even if there is a great overlap and little absolute loyalty towards a

[1] See Chomsky, Noam. Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002.

particular station, political bias is greatly emphasized by both the allegiances and attitudes of American viewers.

Consequently, disillusionment may result from the selective, consecutive format and the biased nature of episodic television news. The evidence indicating widespread political apathy is extensive, with only 16.6% of those aged 18 to 24 voting in the 1998 American midterm elections (Mindich, 2005:2). It is difficult, though, to concretely establish the contingency between political apathy and the adverse effects of television news. In fact, some claim that television actually empowers voters instead of undermining their confidence and trust in the democratic process (Norris, 1996:479). The distrust of the media may be merely a spin-off effect from existing political malaise, not as much from inherent biases towards the media itself (Jones, 2004:71).

Additionally, those who live on a steady diet of television may grow cynical because television news only deals with the exceptional. As a result, "the exceptional becomes the expected and the expected perverse" (Hart, 1999:82). Yet there is a more subjective theme at play. Television blurs the distinction between the role of reporters in the representation of reality, and the role of viewers to choose their reality. Newton summarizes this succinctly in his description of "the tautological dilemma created by the fact that the media target their audiences, and audiences select themselves" (583). This blurring is extended to political actors, who find their objective identities replaced by the projection and interpretation of television viewers. Television viewers may construct artificial, arbitrary identities of those seen on television; as Postman observes, "on television the politician does not so much offer the audience an image of himself as an image of the audience" (1985:134). It is often difficult for viewers to fully distinguish between a politician's true identity and the persona constructed by television clips and quotes. Both are blended into a postmodern pool of reality and representation.

On the more concrete side, episodic television news has undermined public faith in the distinctive, true nature of a political candidate. Americans trust the decisions of their government much less now than in the middle of the twentieth century. In 1954, approximately three quarters of the American public believed that the government in Washington made the right decisions "just about always or most of the time" (Norris, 1996:474). Forty years later, despite preceding the Iraq war's watershed of confidence after 2003, that fraction had dropped to about one quarter of the entire population (Norris, 1996:474). The fact is that since the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, news media has become increasingly adversarial and skeptical towards the underlying intentions of political actors and institutions (Jones, 2004:62). For the viewer, this often translates into cynicism as opposed to mobilization.

Political apathy may therefore be correlated to the disillusioning effect of episodic television news upon the voter. The decline in voting can certainly be attributed to a host of other factors, with the amount of eligible ballots actually cast falling 25% from 1902 to 1992 (Stanley, 1995:77). The cynicism adopted in television news obscures the division between the image and the image-maker, even though both are accepted as the only remaining realities (Gitlin, 1990:18). In other words, viewers know that television news produces a packaged, selective, and incomplete picture of reality, and they resign themselves to the belief that objectivity is always elusive, regardless of the subject.

Episodic News and Trivialization

Interest in the political sphere has waned with the growing popularity of entertainment television. At the time of the second Bush-Gore debate in May 2003, 40 million people tuned in to watch the reality television show *American Idol,* whereas 37 million people watched the political debate (Mindich, 2005:2). The aggressive, right-wing reporting instilled by Fox News into their broadcasts

has attracted significantly more viewers, but at the same time has made these viewers unaware of basic news items. In one survey, 80% of Fox News viewers believed in at least one of three popular myths about the 2003 Iraq war, including the notions that Iraq was directly involved in the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, that world opinion favoured the war, and that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq (Kull et al., 2003;582). Only 23% of NPR or PBS listeners held one of these fallacies as true (Kull et al., 2003:582). As is evidenced, the attempt to make the form of television news more edgy has lead to an eschewing of factual content.

Research on the subject of television news is also replete with critiques of the "infotainment" movement within news channels. While many scholars claim that such a dilution of news programming is detrimental to political mobilization, not all agree. Newton, in an important study of British television trends, observed that the medium brings the news to "a far larger and more diverse section of the population than the good newspapers" (1999:593). Also, claims Newton, many people "fall" into the news instead of "jumping" into it (1999:596). Even if viewers do not consciously choose to watch the many news snippets which are interspersed among or between other entertainment programs, they may still be "informed, educated and mobilized" (Newton, 1999:596).

Nevertheless, although the ubiquity of television makes it a potentially powerful tool for news communication, it is compromised by its own form. The difficulty is that television's primary function is often to relax and entertain, as many individuals arguably use television as a means to 'unwind'. Most television advertisements, for example, attempt to appeal more to the "psychological" role of television than to provide authentic product information (Postman, 1985:136).

Postman extends his argument into the political realm by claiming that "image politics empties itself of authentic political substance for the same reason" (1985:136). Television news is therefore trivialized by the need for politicians to fit into the mold of the medium; that is, politicians must appear attractive and compatible with the dictates of episodic television. Political leadership now greatly depends on a politician's capacity for self-projection on the television screen (Seaton, 1998:117).

The increased conformity to episodic news is demonstrated in the shortening of the sound bite. In 1968, the average length of a sound bite in news programming was 40 seconds (Hallin, 1992:5). By the 1980s, that length had shrunk to less than 10 seconds (Hallin, 1992:9). Politicians must now speak more in pithy witticisms than in extended, analytical discourse if they are to appear on episodic television news, which is of particular importance to political candidates. Thus the cognitive context needed to fully interpret a news item – whether a grassroots movement or a political policy – is compromised by the desire for both political actors and television news technicians to present a rapid succession of short sound bites. In summary, "what we watch is a medium which presents information in a form that renders it simplistic, nonsubstantative, nonhistorical and noncontextual; that is to say, information packaged as entertainment" (Postman, 1985:141).

A further instance of news trivialization can be seen in the rise of comedy news programs. Due to the dilution of discourse, politicians inadvertently provide fodder for what may be considered 'trivialized' comedy news. For the 2000 and 2004 American presidential elections, the percentage of those aged 18 to 29 who claimed that they had learned about the campaign from comedy programs such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show* doubled between the two elections ("Media", 2005:47). During the Democratic primaries in 2004, *The Daily Show* reached a "symbolic milestone" when more young men watched it instead of an evening network broadcast ("Media", 2005:47). The effects of episodic news, including the conformity of political candidates to the medium and the selectivity of shorter sound bites, fail to prepare a voter to develop an accurate perception of broad structural issues and concerns.

Episodic News Sustains the Status Quo

One of the roles of television news is to critically assess political policies and to hold the government accountable for its actions. It is generally assumed that reporters have the right to investigate instances of governmental corruption, and that news stations should be permitted to openly debate the government's actions and policies. News coverage can influence the salience of events on the public's political agenda, and it can affect the way in which these events are commonly perceived (McCombs, 1997:246). Writing in 1976, Robinson predicted that television might come "to define politics as a byproduct of its own organizational and idiosyncratic needs" (1976:431).

As such, the very form of episodic news reporting acts as both a democratic impetus and a democratic impediment. Television news allows for the open debate of issues, including those which certain governmental parties may wish to conceal, but in doing so it is implied that these issues are the most important for the voter to consider.

When television news fosters concern over episodic issues to the exclusion of thematic, structural concerns, it inadvertently supports the current political establishment. For example, three "super-themes" predominant in the American individual's interpretation of the news have been identified, including the threat of powerful interests against the common people, the importance of fairness and personal freedom, and the display of human potential (Swanson, 1998:159-161). In all of these interpretative paradigms, the principal desire is for a strong and relatively static state, one which ensures control, meritocracy, and human safety. Furthermore, if this is how Americans interpret television news, then there is no emphasis on the contextualization necessary for a proper understanding of news events. Instead, the endless supply of news information via the television leaves the viewer unconcerned about the present, for the future will simply bring another surfeit of information (Hart, 1999:85). The viewer does not receive enough thematic information so as to give semantic meaning to the portrayed event. In other words, the overload of information on specific incidents, when combined with the fact that news episodes are rarely presented as the result of overarching social or economic trends, creates a viewer who does not understand the thematic reasons behind the news. It is therefore difficult for a viewer to counter or vote against trends which he or she cannot fully perceive in the regular intake of television news. As expressed by Hart, "television makes us atheoretical, just as it makes us ahistorical. It invites us to dwell in the moment and nowhere else. And that is where cynicism resides as well" (1999:85).

In a similar vein, even though episodic television news helps to set the political agenda, it only assigns responsibility to individual persons and groups. It does so through the very nature of its medium, for episodic news is necessarily short and relatively sensationalist. Episodic news reports on topics such as hurricanes, train bombings, and treaties list the chronology and effects of these events – thereby assigning blame to the event's immediate, direct cause – but they do not blame the overall socio-political framework which may have fostered or encouraged the direct cause itself. Consequently, the dominant ideology or overall structure of a government remains relatively free from criticism, as opposed to the constant critique leveled at specific individuals or policies.

One of the main exponents of the inadvertent pro-establishment tone of episodic news is Shanto Iyengar. According to Iyengar, "by repeatedly defining the problem in terms of specific perpetrators, people become more concerned with measures to capture and punish terrorists rather [sic] with measures designed to address the more deep-seated social and economic issues that prompt the formation of terrorist organizations" (1991:140). In episodic news, the attribution of political responsibility to societal factors is lessened. Episodic news therefore favours the political status quo; "hence the ultimate political impact of framing is pro-establishment" (Iyengar, 1991:16). The role of television news as a channel for political awareness is funneled down to the end results, while the catalyst or underlying problem behind the end result remains unobserved.

The Need for Sound Bite Quotas

With the cynicism, triviality, and complacency engendered by episodic news towards formal political structures, the impetus for change seems clear. In fact, the public has grown tired of the media's obsession with political scandal and the private lives of politicians (Jones, 2004:62). Several suggestions regarding the political mobilization of those under forty have already been proposed, including the creation of more television news programs, the diversification of media ownership, and political involvement as a prerequisite for entrance into the National Honor Society (Mindich, 2005:115-120). However, these ideas do not address the deep-seated problems of episodic news, for they do not propose to alter the method of television news reportage itself.

Another option may be to impose quotas on the major television news networks for thematic news. Although this will still leave room for subjective analysis, it will at least aid in the construction of a cognitive framework within which episodic events may be placed and blame assigned to both individuals and political structures. Even though television reports that rely on an image-based depiction of an event are more entertaining, they do not provide sufficient "narrative interpretation" to understand the broader issue (Altheide, 1987:174). Regrettably, the enforcement of thematic news quotas may prove to be too idealistic, for the distinction between episodic and thematic news is easily obscured, and the definition of thematic news as an interpretative analysis of a series of events is too vague to be enforced. Even if the definition was expanded and qualified, the tone of the thematic news program might still be subject to comedy, sarcasm, and any other attitude which may immobilize the voter.

There does remain, however, one aspect of television news upon which quantitative standards can be imposed. As previously cited, the length of sound bites used in news reports has shrunk dramatically from over 40 seconds during the late 1960s to less than 10 seconds in the 1980s (Hallin, 1992:5). The shortening of the sound bite makes it easier for television technicians to piece together a politician's identity, providing less context and tone for a voter to adequately interpret the politician's intentions. In the interest of both awareness and accountability, western democratic governments must legislate for a minimum sound bite length of 15 seconds on all television news networks within their territorial or legal jurisdiction. Although it is a relatively small increment, the very act of imposing such legislation will make voters more attentive to the framing effect of episodic news.

Conclusion

The concept of television as a completely accurate mode of news communication is illusory. This is due more to the restrictions of the episodic medium than by the content of the news reports themselves. Modern episodic news promotes cynicism through its selectivity and its speed; it trivializes and obscures the true nature of its content and it sustains the status quo. As suggested, one of the few methods that may encourage democratic participation is to lobby for sound bite quotas in television news programs. Yet the main responsibility of accurate interpretation rests as much on those who watch television news as on those who report the events. Ultimately, television news can only be improved by the demands of its viewers, not by the restrictions of its form.

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