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satellite news gathering,

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Stuart Hall

/   signified   (1991, p. 93)   message

form

Raymond Williams

1975   Williams

programming

Williams

Ellis, 1984; Altman, 1987

glance

gaze

John T. Caldwell 1991

televisuality

Caldwell

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"Truth and time in television news: A critique of live

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Truth and Time in Television News

A Critique of Live Reporting

presented at

The Hawaii International Conference on Social Sciences

Journalism Division

Abstract

The essay problematizes live reporting in television in an attempt to deconstruct the myth of meaningful communication in electronic journalism. Analyzing live reporting of Taiwan's cable TV channels, it argues that the institution of television exploits the semantic ambiguity of "liveness" to construct viewing interest for news, as well as for the institution to engage in a work of self distinction. In live reporting, the representation of space and time through visual technology prevails over the concern for content to become what spells out the facticity of news. Rather than justifying liveness as the essential quality of the audio and the visual, live reporting should be grasped for its economic implication of the entire apparatus of televisual representation

Key words: television, live reporting, space and time, information

"Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories." (Benjamin, 1968, p. 89) In "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin remarks on the vast social stockpiling of information in the modern world that represents the deliberate sabotage of meaningful experience. Information, replacing story telling, has become the source from which we communicate and in which our experience is stored. The value of information lies in its novelty, its prompt verifiability. It "does not survive the moment in which it was new." The prevalence of information in the modern society is a crisis, because it exposes our inability to communicate experience in other than the most shallow and truncated fashion.

A world where the flimsy information reigns is a world of ours. Whereas Benjamin's complaint was issued against newspaper some sixty years ago, it does not sound archaic for today's electronic journalism. With TV, satellite, and the internet, information is literally "with us" around the clock and despite geographical distance. Although we know more about everything, yet the knowledge is mediated to an extent that nothing we know really happens to us. Television, of course, is one of the major mediator.

In this article, what I seek to problematize is television news. The subject of my study is live reporting produced via

satellite newsgathering technology. The reason why live reporting comes to my attention in this article is not because of its lingering myth in television industrial practice and theory, for which plenty of studies have sought to deconstruct and on which I have no intention to elaborate or complicate. The reason why I look into live reporting is, rather, the economic implication of it for the entire apparatus of televisual representation. What I seek to argue, from the case of live reporting in Taiwan's three major cable news channels, is that live broadcasting is shot through with ambiguity. Such ambiguity benefits television institution to exploit it to construct value for news, as well as for the institution to distinguish itself from a sea of information outlets. Rather than accepting "liveness" for what it is, that is, the simultaneity of production, transmission, and reception, and associating live reporting with "relaying" reality in ways more honest than taped and edited news, live reporting should be grasped for its spatial and temporal manipulations of the visual. Such manipulations index reality rather than representing it. A discursive look of "the live" does not only help to illuminate how Benjamin sees in information--its prompt verifiability—is rhetoricized through the visual, the audio, and the programming unique to television, it also helps us to interpret what factual reportage of our time stands for.

The chaotic Live

In Taiwan, live television in recent years has become a deliberate self-referential discursive construct by the television industry. Capitalized on the audience's habit of "checking up on" television to see what's happening, non-stop cable news channels use live reports as attention grabber to create instant rating hikes. With eight such channels producing scandals, fights, political conflicts, traffic accidents, robbery, fire, stock reports, underwear fashion show, and health improvement tips around the clock, live coverage relay these and promises instant gratification. Information overload is an industrial reality, as desperate news institutions keep an eye on one another, seeking to make a difference out of sameness through the formality of presentation.

A glance of these channels at any time of the day, one found the screen space jammed with constantly changing digital graphics, chromakeyed words predicting upcoming news headlines, flashy sets, and background music. Yet more prevalent than this excessive tendency of exhibitionism is live reporting. Adopting a head-line news format similar to CNN, the daily menu provided by these cable channels is studded with live reports among hourly recycled news materials. They are produced as a stimulant to increase the weight of "noteworthiness" in the flimsy flow of televised information cultivating planned obsolescence.

For the past years, the three leading cable news channels

of Taiwan, TVBS-N, CTTV, and SETN, have placed particular emphasis on their capacity for live coverage. Assigning reporters and cinematographers to remote locations to do live report, plus backup satellite vehicles as makeshift editing and transmission center, the three news channels are known for their sensational treatment of news events. "Live as scoop" is the most common measure, in which anchorperson breaks up the regular programming rundown in a higher pitch of voice announcing, "The next is a scoop from a live location…" Embellished with the chomakeyed word "Live," the corporate logo, and the digital clock time, "live coverage" has been carved out as a segment in the flow of taped news advising the audience, "stick with us, something is happening."

Yet its overuse has also subjected it to much critique. With its frequent assignment for all types of news, from airplane crash to press conference, from typhoon update to the opening of a supermarket, unrestrained use of live coverage has been charged with downgrading the general quality of news report. Mounting charges against the performance of live reporting also include the lack of in-depth of coverage, under-trained and stuttered journalist, intrusion of privacy, tedious shots, and mishaps created by the inaccuracy of verbal narration. Critics suggest that the use of the technology itself, rather than news editorial judgment, is what drives the news gathering process (Suei, 1998; Chang, 1998; Hu, 1999;

News Mirror, Oct. 25, 1999*,* p. 25). Going live for live's sake, some say, cannot cover the fact that most of such news are produced when nothing compelling is happening at the scene.

The abuse of this technology is also witnessed in its service for the increasing commercialization in the process of news production. Some cable news institutions utilize live coverage for events such as underwear fashion show, supermarket opening, and pop concert tour as a trade-off for corporates' long-term advertising contracts. These reports, with their timing to create sales pitch, characterize "pseudo-events" that American historian Daniel Boorstin pinpoints. *The Commonwealth*, a widely-circulated magazine in Taiwan with an overtone of bourgeois elitism, went so far as using "retarded media" to describe the profusion of sensational and pointless live reporting that filled the screen (*The Commonwealth*, June, 2002). As a technology of production and transmission that supposedly benefits the coverage of crisis, satellite newsgathering produces its own crisis. It is stigmatized with a pun —super no good. (Suei, 1998; *The News Mirror Weekly*, Oct. 25, 1999, p. 23).

The problem that satellite newsgathering poses for the representation of television begs the questions of what constitutes a live reporting and how do we evaluate its performance. Jerome Bourdon suggests that media technological history at least partly reflects an effort to reduce the gap between events and media users. Today's electronic media

annihilate temporal and spatial distances. In live broadcasting, television produces pictures that not only level the difference between the event and the receiver, it also renders the news control process obsolete. In Gaye Tuchman's *Making News* (1978), the "facticity" of news film in the American television of the 1970s was still attained through a scrupulous procedure of standardizing shots and perspectives for different subjects, and assembling fragmented film footage into a logical visual narrative. The structure of news film seeks to maintain neutrality and credibility precisely through the calculating measures of newsroom gate keeping that seeks to make sure that news "looks objective" and "looks right." For Tuchman, these technical requirements are why news becomes ideological because they ensure that what gets presented as news falls into the dominant category of the society.

Whereas the production value of the 70s' American TV still matched the objectivity of reports against the standard of producing meaningful narrative and comments, live reports of today's television news in Taiwan values speed above everything else. Skipping the elaborating post-production process, a live report is often produced with the reporter improvising a narration according to what they see on the spot. And the cinematographer no longer has the privilege to walk around the scene of the event taking shots from different angles. As the shooting takes place at the same time with the

transmission, the camera is often fixed at one place throughout the coverage in order to capture the scene as it is happening. Both oral and visual accounts are reduced to mere narration. Although live coverage gives freer reign to the journalists as they are exempt from the censorship of the newsroom, they are also deprived of the capacity to reflect and comment on the event. Live coverage via satellite transmission consummates television's capacity for the instantaneous with virtually no room for artificial manipulation.

The beauty and ambiguity of Live television

Live television, for the industry as well as some of the critics, has been equated with "the televisual," however equivocal the term is used for divergent practices. In the early 1950s, American broadcasting industry has essentialized television as an institution with live telecast, which effectively distinguished television from the formulaic Hollywood genre film. Gilbert Seldes, for instance, argues that film and television belong to different "temporalities." Whereas films annihilate ordinary time with flashback and parallel cutting and therefore perpetuate a sense of the past, live television's unpretentious pictures deliver "the instantaneous" that is akin to the viewer's sense of duration of the real time (1952, p.32).

Although American broadcast historians deconstruct the

golden age of live television as a myth--an ideology that masked the power politics of the networks to consolidate their oligopoly (Vianello, 1985; Baughman, 1985; Boddy, 1993), the obsession with liveness does not recede with the passing of time. Moreover, its appeal is universalized. In the 1980s, the use of satellite transmission by the American local television stations to facilitate news gathering process has redefined the economy of American television news production. As Lacy, Atwater and Power show (1988; also see Tuggle & Huffman, 2001), SNG technologies permitted local stations to increase the productivity of news and, through regional linkage, share news with each other. Its prevalent use challenged the three national networks as the dominant purveyor of information. Stephanie Mariott's studies show that televised live events such as election coverage and sportscast are still attached by the British audience with great significance, comparing to video and film (1996, 2000). In France, *En direct de* (live from) was the name for a series of programmes in the 1950s. And in 1980s, a popular talk show hosted by anchorwoman Christine Ockrent was simply called *Direct*. Similar format of shows emphasizing live talk could also be found in televisions of Israel and Italy (see Bourdon, 2000).

However significant that liveness poses for television, criticism has difficulty taming the giant of its semantic ambiguity. It is generally agreed that live, in its most literal sense, is *immediate.* In live, information is

transmitted and received in the same moment as it is produced. Yet this definition can be applied to many aspects of television's performance. Technically, live broadcast is a mode of transmission that links the audience to a specific place, person, or event without delay. It promises to overcome temporal and spatial limitations between the event and the audience. Yet this technical definition hardly covers the entire semantic property of live presentation. Live can signify a mode of production and transmission, a format of presentation, the scheduling, or a conscious perception of the audience concerning the visual and audio quality. And not all of them combined can explicate the complete meaning properties of live television.

Heath and Skirrow argue from a technical point that television image is effectively "live" because it is electronic, unlike film, which is photographic. "Whereas the latter depends on the immobility of the frame, the former, electronic and not photographic, is an image in perpetual motion, the movement of a scanning beam; whatever the status of the material transmitted, the image as series of electric impulses is necessarily "as it happens." (Heath and Skirrow, 1977, p. 53)

John Ellis interprets the meaning of live television in terms of its scheduling. He observes that even a recorded program is assigned a sense of spatial co-presence and temporal simultaneity because its airing in the scheduled

time-slot is itself a unique experience that can not be repeated. (Ellis, 1983) Television programming thus takes on the attributes of irreversible reality as the experience of this medium is often sensed as live by the home viewing audience (Altman, 1992).

The "liveness" of television also represents a "psychological reality" of the audience, as Marriott suggests that the audience identify it as a predominant entity of experiencing television as a medium (Marriott, 1996). Jerome Bourdon argues on the same ground that more than a technical performance, live broadcasting often appears as a possibility, a spectatorial belief in what the audience can see on television. Although fully live programs are rare, "liveness" can still be experienced by inference. The specific genres (such as news and documentary), visualized voices (voice-over commentary), and non-stop talking —audio and visual qualities in the flow of television welcome the audience to associate its presence with now and here.

Rather than an innate textual quality, the inferential effect of liveness is often reinforced through television's conventionalized coding of reality. Jane Feuer argues that television's self-referential discourse plays upon the connotative richness of the term "live." From an opposition between live and recorded broadcasts, one can expand to an equation of "the live" with "the real." "From asserting its reality to asserting its vitality, television's metadiscourse

generates a circuit of meanings from a single term 'live.'
The very lack of precision in the meaning thus generated helps
rather than hinders the process" (Feuer, 1983, p. 14).

To Feuer, the ideology of "liveness" acts to suppress the
contradiction between flow and fragmentation, both innate in
the practice of television. Among several genres of television
programs, news can be identified as the quintessential form
of live broadcasting. News report combines diverse elements
of crimes, politics, human interests, and weather forecast
into a sequence of discontinuous information. Rather than to
inform, news report threatens to disinform because each bit
of information destructs itself in order to make room for the
next. But television compensates for its own tendency toward
banalization and nondifferentiation through live
presentation. Live news "updates" the most recent version of
reality. It rhetoricizes time and space most deliberately
through language, editing, visuals, and sometimes music. From
the newsanchor's direct and personalized address to the
chromakeyed newsbriefs nestled beneath the screen that
constantly flow in and out of the screen space, "live" newscast
seeks to create an impression that things are always happening
"now" and time is running out. News flash intervenes in the
regular flow of programming by announcing a crisis, or a
catastrophe. Even though the footage might be recorded—a
delayed live—it still is felt "new."

As live is not representable, the "liveness" of news is

also strewn with ambiguity. Although news is produced in order
to signify presentness, in the following section I seek to
show, through analyzing live report, that television news
today is engaged in a process of self-distinction, for which
technology plays a great part in visualizing liveness and
constructing the realness of the event.

The apparatus of presenting events in live

As John Hartley speaks of television news, the social
function of journalism has nothing to do with the reality or
truth of pre-discursive events in themselves, but the diegetic
world imagined inside reporting, a world verified by constant
and militant reference to the real. Truth in television news
does not exist without it being shot through with techniques
of visualization. Televisual presentation is "plausible" in
a sense that it is packed with "diegetic visual
verisimilitude." (Hartley, 1992, p. 141-142).

Hartley's manifestation of this diegetic world inside
reporting provides a great cutting point for us to talk about
the relationship between news and visual technology within
the world of live reporting. As mentioned earlier, satellite
news gathering has become a visual technology that helps to
construct an imagery of factual reportage for the cable news
channels in Taiwan. Its use and abuse have made us conscious
of a diegetic world of narrative construction that is

television's own. Roand Barthes reminded us that camera is far from neutral in representing every fabric of the reality. The angle, the distance, and the way objects in the frame are arranged all affect our way of seeing and perception. As far as cable's SNG-generated news is in concern, its verification of the real, besides image, is further complicated by television's unique temporal and spatial construction. As programming appears as flow, rather than a unique item, as Raymond Williams observes, the diegetic world of television that weaves truth is also a consequence of the programming effect. "Liveness" in news has spatial, as well as temporal, connotations. The following close analysis of two items of news exemplifies the self-referential discursive construction of "liveness."

Spatial copresence

In cable channel's format of reporting, spaces are often strategically woven into the report as a part of the discursive construction. In the coverage of major events featuring reports from multiple locations, such as TVBS-G's coverage on the outbreak of the SARS disease in different cities, the simultaneous presence of reporters on the screen, each occupying a small cell, connotes the capacity of the news institution to break free the physical boundary and to bring together remote locations into the studio, as well as into people's living room. In presenting the event of crisis,

the anchorperson's verbal lead mediates his/her relationship with these cells. As a reporter's name is called, the reporter shares the equal screenspace with the anchorperson, with each in a separate frame. In this brief moment of copresence, the anchorperson and the on-site reporter are simultaneously present and are engaged in a dialogue with each other, before the anchorperson passes on the narrative authority from him/her to the on-site reporter.

The digitally inscribed cells that fill the screenspace with multiple "locations," each an ongoing event to be unfolded, manifest television's ability to articulate event from interconnecting a multitude of spatially dispersed sites. In reality, these sites are different places that do not interact with each other. Yet when they are coordinated by television to present an event or an issue in concern, these places are woven together dialogically into a synthetic space.

As Stephanie Marriott notes on the case of BBC's election coverage, spatial juxtaposition through such co-presence on screen is significant in marking the "liveness" of the event (2000). Television mediates events not simply by representing some diegetic event which is occurring independently in the "real" world. Instead, the ability of electronic communication to bring spatially dispersed sites into a dialectical relationship with each other is also constitutive of the dynamic of live television event. Through the anchorperson's weaving, interactive locations are mediated

in a way which makes it evident that the studio is the place

from which broadcasting speaks: "if the broadcast is 'in' or

'at' a multiplicity of places, then those places are also 'in'

or 'at' the studio, penetrating into its space in a manner

that makes it manifest that it is only through the mediation

of the broadcast that the world is there to be seen." (p. 134)

The "spaces in dialogue" appears that the sheer connectivity

of things can itself create viewing interests.

The stretch of time in live coverage

Christopher Metz suggests that one of the functions of

narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another

time scheme. As the meaning of "liveness" is embedded in the

apparatus of television both aesthetically and technically,

lacking semantic specificity, the time scheme of liveness

often insinuates itself into the programming flow to create

climaxes. Steve Connor argues that the live is always produced

as an artificial category of immediacy, and is always a

quotation of itself, never the live, always the "live."

(Connor 134, from Wurtzler, 1996, p. 89). The insertion of

live coverage into a sequence of taped, edited news items

functions as a self reference of television as an institution

to be more alive than live.

For cable television's all-time schedule, items of news

are often in short supply to fill in the superfluous time.

As an hour represents a cycle of report, a significant

proportion of news items are reused taped news to produce a complete rundown of news to make up for an hour's need. In this regard, live coverage is used as the "filler" to reduce the frequency of repetition. The duration of coverage and the number of times that an event is covered can be strategically manipulated to create a perception that something is always happening.

In Sarah Kozloff's theorization of the temporal discourse in television, the reordering of the sequence of story events can alter the way these events are perceived by the audience. To make the discourse time seems longer than the story-time, slow motion enables the narration take longer to relate the events than the events originally lasted in the story. Kozloff terms the strategy of temporal alternation "stretch" (Kozloff, 1992, p. 87-88). Unlike fictional genres, television news cannot alter the duration of event in likely fashion. Yet it can create a similar effect by multiplying the number of times that an event is covered. In reality, an accident happens "once" and nothing left to be seen about its happening unless in the recollection of the observed. Yet on television, the "happening" can further spawn several diegetic events in "live" at different points of the programming.

SETN's coverage of a traffic incident exemplifies such an effect: an ambulence on duty tipped off the road and collided into a house on its way to the hospital, causing injuries to the driver, the patient, and the house owner's wife—the

rescuer becomes the rescued. Shortly after the incident, the reporter arrived at the scene and provided a "first-hand" live coverage of the hows and whys of the incident. Lacking the footage of the scene of crash, the reporter showed the audience the aftermath of the scene, indicating how fierce the collision must have been and speculating on whether the ambulence was speeding. Towards the end of the coverage, rather than concluding the report with a narrative closure, the reporter left a cliffhanger by asking the audience "keep posted" on further development in the next hour of news report. An hour later, when another cycle of news report unfolded, the reporter "returned" to provide another round of live update on whether the incident has claimed any life.

As Kozloff notes that few television narratives are self-contained, SETN serialized the event as if the event itself is an ongoing process in the real life. Rather than experiencing the incident as a complete narrative, the audience is left picking up fragments of the event as each fragment predates more to come. However short-lived the duration of the event is in the real time, live television strategically extends its lifespan in time as different presentations of "the present" refer to the same moment of happening.

Both spatial and temporal exploitation in producing live reporting exposes the artificiality of news making. As the above sections of analysis have shown, television

conceptualizes the event by heavily depending on a particular organization of space and time in order to produce the specific mode of apprehending the event. Television's specific apparatus of representation obviously manifests the ideal of immediacy by producing its referent: the space and time of the event. The simultaneous presence of spaces validates the capacity of the live in breaking through spatial confines. And the strategic stretch of the diegetic time of an event in live through serialization is a conscious attempt of the news institution to interpellate a loyal television viewer. Mary Ann Doane suggests that television fills time by ensuring that something happens—it organizes itself around the event. "There is often a certain slippage between the notion that television covers important events in order to validate itself as a medium an the idea that because an event is covered by television—because it is, in effect, deemed televisual—it is important. (Doane, 1992, p. 222). The employment of satellite transmission technology and the digital gadget of visualization has certainly skewed the meaning of a televised live reporting toward the latter.

Ellen Seiter (1992) notes that many television images are produced in ways that encourage the viewers to understand them only as indexical signs. Indexical signs rely on a *material connection* between signifier and signified, and such a connection is established through social convention. Just as pawprints became a sign only when people began to use them

for tracking, indexical signs operate each time when a human group decides to use and recognize something as the vehicle for something else (p. 37). Live reporting can be understood as television's specific way of being indexical. Rather than orienting the audience's viewing to the substance of the event, the cable news channels in Taiwan operate a viewing economy that seeks to use the visual formalities to index the viewer to a self-contained diegetic world of televisual significance. The liveness of presentation, with its persistence in referring to "now," "this moment," "here," and "this is going on," thus characterizes information of our time.

Towards a critique of informationalization: "Live" as an industrial discourse

Yet how do we make sense of the informationalization of content in electronic journalism?

In her *Desperately seeking the audience* (1991), Ang illuminates how the American television industry has been engaging in a progressive sophistication of measurement methods and technologies over the years. New rating techniques aimed at more detailed and accurate determination of not only size and demographic composition of the audience, but also viewing at any particular moment. To Ang, these techniques are desperate means of the television industry to grab hold of increasingly volatile and fickle experiences of the audience. (Ang, 2000: 374-375) Ang's diagnosis of the

confidential crisis of the television industry facing a

multichannel mediascape provides a perspective for us to make

sense of the exploitation of the discourse of liveness in the

news production of Taiwanese cable television industry. For

a television economy that constantly lives in the crisis of

"not being watched" due to competition, live reporting should

been seen as what Steve Connor calls a "strategic category

of the semiotic." Its function of creating viewing bonus

through a discursive construct of "high technology drives high

presentation" symbolizes a crisis of our experience in the

informationalization of our society, wherein the increase of

the quantity of sensual excitement through visual technology

remains forever incapable of compensating for the decrease

in the quality of meaningful presentation.

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