MEDIA LITERACY AND TELEVISION NEWS

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Mary sits in front of the television to do her homework, but her mother is worried because she watches too much TV.

One community has all its members swear off television for one week.

At a parent-teachers meeting, teachers complain because television with all its glitz makes it hard for them to compete for students' attention in the classroom.

With all the concern about television, few of us who are educators really understand enough about how television works or about how it affects our lives to make intelligent decisions about how to use it.

Some would even like to pretend television doesn't exist. Others would like to change television; make it over into a more educationally-sound medium. Whatever our opinion on television may be, we as educators would be wise to admit that television is here to stay, and we would be much better off if we would recognize it as part of our culture and educational system.

Conversations about culture and literacy are now familiar to most educators. Recently nearly all discussion of education has resulted in some reference to the now-familiar topic "Cultural Literacy." Much has been said about what it means to be culturally literate, including the necessity to know one's history, literature, philosophy, to be able to read and write effectively, and even to know the stories and traditions of one's cultural group. One area of culture, though, has been overlooked in the discussion.

Probably no other part of our culture affects the lives of students more than the mass media, yet little is ever said about the impact of television on making our students "culturally literate."

Four television journalists faced these issues head on at the fall Indiana Teachers of Writing conference in an open forum on

television and its impact on education. They represented four areas of television news and information: Tom Cochrun, investigative reporter and news anchor for the NBC Indianapolis affiliate; Susan Conner, editorial writer and editor for the ABC affiliate; Jim Scott, news assignment editor for the CBS affiliate; and Dick Wolfsie, information and discussion show host for an independent station, and also a freelance writer and teacher of writing.

The concept of mass media is so broad that no discussion can be constructive unless the term is clarified. Television can mean everything from the local cable talk show to the broadcast of the Olympic Games. No aspect of television influences culture more, however, than its information gathering and processing activity. The panel of television journalists emphasized this news and information function of television in their discussion. Although most people depend on television for most of the news and information they receive each day, television isn't perfect in its information gathering. A better understanding of how the process of gathering and processing information works in television can provide the basis for more critical analysis of the medium. The panel began by addressing these basic issues.

What is television news?

Jim Scott: One definition would be that television news is a reflection of our lives, our communities, the things that affect us: health, education, economy, government, sports, weather, entertainment, leisure. Television news addresses issues, not just events. Television visually takes you to the front row seat of important events in your neighborhood, city hall, statehouse, the nation's capital, and around the world. Television news is also a friend that tries to help solve some problems when all you get is the brush off.

Where does the news come from?

Scott: A television news department relies heavily on its reporters, producers, and assignment editors to collectively come up with the news of the day that will be covered. News reporters on a specific beat draw upon contacts to let them know when developments are occurring, scores of phone calls are made, mail is carefully reviewed, personal visits are made, police and fire scanners are monitored for spot news, and broadcast news wire services are carefully scanned for ideas and information. It must be remembered, though, that all this is going on every day, sometimes with only minutes before air time. The job is hectic and noisy, and important decisions have to be made instantly under pressure of deadlines.

What determines what gets covered?

Scott: The goal of any newscast is to present stories that people will want to watch. Questions are asked such as: How many people are affected by this? Does this story contain human interest? How can we visualize this story?

A producer is looking for a lead story to grasp his audience's

attention. It is not just bad news that finds itself in the lead segment, but often tragedy, disasters, and human drama have the highest viewer interest. The news department is committed to presenting good news stories as well as the bad.

As rapidly as the seconds tick on a clock the news is changing at a similar pace. Decisions are made, but never set in concrete, and then directions are changed in split-second fashion. There is a constant search, a constant hunger for the better story; there is also a constant vigil kept on updating ongoing stories.

Susan Conner: We also must remember that television is a visual medium. It's not just information, but pictures that help tell the story, and that affects whether a story will be selected. The "talking heads" stories are sometimes avoided, and the stories about fires may sometimes receive better news play than deserved because they are visual.

What do television journalists do?

Tom Cochrun: We tell stories. We weave tales about people, systems, and events that affect and/or move us. Television news and broadcast journalism help to establish our sense of what is real, but we tamper with reality. We cover news by means of a process--gather, edit, and convey it. Each step requires critical judgments, and each critical judgment affects the product, in this case the way we portray reality. We mirror and, at times, nudge society. Generally, we do it fairly well. We do it remarkably well when you consider it is done under deadline.

Dick Wolfsie: The television journalist is also often the source of information about continuing public issues. We shouldn't forget that the news analysis programs, the discussion programs about public issues, the editorials, and the documentaries are also a big part of the news and information function of television.

What are some of the differences in television news and news that is read in newspapers?

Conner: First, it is important to remember that television is perceived by the industry and public as an entertainment medium. Television is caught in the cult of personality where people get excited about meeting anchors. Personality, not credibility, may be the key to success. Second, television must live with the constraint of time. An early evening newscast has only a 25-30 minute news slot, so producers usually won't let any story exceed two minutes. Therefore, comprehensive coverage gives way to compact, headline coverage--and the follow-up is not always good.

Third, television news is put together differently than newspaper news. The staffs are smaller and more generalized, reporters learn to "visualize" stories before writing them, and they have to write quickly. Finally, television is more caught up in technology than newspapers. Television stations have a whole staff of engineers besides "insta-cams," microwave beams, helicopters,

weather satelites, zoom lenses, and so on. Technology can be a great help to telling the story, but sometimes it gets in the way of telling a story and creates an unhealthy competition with other stations.

What kind of role does television play in shaping our culture?

Cochrun: Television in general has a tremendous impact, from the presentation of role models to the fragmentation of attention span, but from the point of view of television news, one of our greatest shaping effects is the establishment of agendas, sometimes without apparent restraint. If we all get on a story, as a pack, we have an effect. For example, how many of you concerned yourself with AIDS until recently? In this role of establishing a national data base, a national consciousness, a national agenda, television sometimes motivates, and it sometimes reacts.

Once television news gets onto something, the learning curve should go up, sometimes to the point of overload, and sometimes the qualilty of information must be called into question.

What are your criticisms of television news?

Cochrun: In our effort to function as a vacuum cleaner, we sweep up vast amounts of information, compress and compact it, and give it back. Sometimes that process can lead to a trivialization. A story on the specifics of a budget or the details of nuclear arms treaty appear in the same dimension as videotape of babies being carried out of the rubble of a Mexico City hospital, and those pictures could appear within the same ten minutes as a story about a band concert or punk hairdos. They are in essence all the same on the surface--pictures, sound, words.

How does television shape and change our language use?

Cochrun: Too often we write in a kind of journalese, a style of jargon, but most of the time the language of television is direct, concise, and clear. We can't afford to be too complex. Yet, some of the best writing around comes from television. Read these poetic words of Charles Osgood, one of the most literate of television journalists, after an interview with a noted astronomer: "The wonder is that all those stars and all that space can fit into so small a place as the mind of man."

Another excellent example of the quality writing of television journalists, often writing under deadline, is this 14-second statement on Northern Ireland by John Hart of NBC News: "In Northern Ireland, a 17-year-old girl was cut by men wearing hoods and carrying razors. She's Catholic. Her boyfriend is Protestant. She's alive, and she has a cross carved in her forehead."

Wolfsie: Tom is right. Some of the best use of language is on television. We need to recognize that television, out of necessity, does for writing what every good writer needs to do and that is use clear prose, direct declarative sentences, and tight editing. Television may not bring us the broadest vocabulary, but it does teach us how to use language effectively.

How can we learn to be better media consumers?

Scott: We need to recognize what television news is. It is really just a reflection of our lives. But, it is important to remember that television news is issues, not just events. Television news raises the questions we need to be asking.

Wolfsie: It is also important to learn to be an active television watcher. We should recognize that television news and information is from many sources and is of varying quality. We should question what we see and hear and begin to use more critical judgment.

Conner: We should be more aware of the limitations of television news and television journalists. Television uses its strengths as a visual medium, but it also is extremely limited by constraints of time. Audiences should not look to television news as the authoritative source of all information.

Cochrun: There is a serial learning that can occur with television. The real value of television news may be in the way it provides us with a surveillance of our environment over the long haul.

How can we teach students to be more intelligent media consumers and to use television more wisely?

Conner: Students can study television news critically. In particular, they can look at story placement and decide why a story was given the lead slot or saved until the end of a broadcast. They can measure how much time was given to a story and discuss whether the story was important enough to be given the time it was allotted. They can compare different stories with the newspaper coverage of those same events to help them determine what the complete story was and how fair the coverage was. They can also question why television treated a story differently than newspapers did. This kind of comparative analysis helps students better understand how news is determined and how news coverage changes. At the same time they are learning more about their community environment.

Cochrun: Students can also use the videotape to copy down the words of newscasters and measure the quality of writing against other writers. By looking at the script and comparing it to the printed word of the newspaper, students can get a better sense of the fairness and balance of news coverage.

Scott: The videotape can also allow students to tape the news coverage of several news broadcasts and compare the coverage.

Conner: The comparing of two or three broadcasts of the same news day can help students see how technology, competition, and news judgment determine what gets covered. They can also get a better sense of what really is on the national and local agenda. When they find that all stations gave the same story the lead, they can begin to discover how television does expose us to the important events of our world and community.

Wolfsie: Students can also observe television news to explore

the depth of coverage of an event. They can begin to ask the basic who, what, when, where, why questions, and then explore how these questions get answered in continuing depth by newspapers and news magazines.

Conner: The key here is to get students actively involved in critical thinking about television.

Wolfsie: Television can't do everything, but it does do some things very well. Speaking as a teacher as well as a television personality, I think that we can better educate our students about television by accepting television as a reality of our culture and by applying the same critical thinking skills we teach in so many other areas to the world of television.

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